

ISSUE BRIEF



MAKING WOMEN AND GIRLS VISIBLE: GENDER DATA GAPS AND WHY THEY MATTER

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Summary

Gaps in gender data and the lack of trend data make it difficult to monitor progress for women and girls. Unless gender is mainstreamed into national statistical strategies and prioritized in data collection, gender data scarcity and gaps will persist. Investment in national statistical capacity is central to improving the coverage, quality and timeliness of data for monitoring gender equality and the SDGs. But beyond this, making sure that data represent the lived reality of women and girls in all their diversity by addressing deep-seated biases in concepts, definitions, classifications and methodologies, is essential to making women and girls visible.

Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a landmark agreement negotiated and signed by the 193 Member States of the United Nations. Comprised of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 169 targets and 232 indicators, it aims to address the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.² The SDGs global indicator framework is far more ambitious and comprehensive than its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework. It includes 54 gender-specific indicators³ that are integrated across different goals and covers areas that are new to global monitoring efforts such as unpaid care and domestic work and violence against women and girls. The expanded scope and mainstreaming of gender-specific indicators across the SDGs is a big accomplishment, but large hurdles remain.

This issue brief reviews the global indicators framework from a gender perspective, showing how gender statistics is central to monitoring and accountability. It argues for further gender mainstreaming throughout the framework, and for advancing data disaggregation to identify and monitor progress for groups facing multiple inequalities and deprivations. It calls for greater investments in and support to national statistical systems, and more collaboration between producers of official statistics and other producers and users of gender data.

Issue

Monitoring the SDGs from a gender equality perspective is constrained by three main challenges: first, uneven coverage of gender-specific indicators, with some goals lacking indicators to capture gender equality outcomes; second, gaps in gender data, including on women and girls experiencing multiple and intersecting inequalities; and third, quality and comparability of available data across countries and time.

Uneven coverage of gender-specific indicators

Over one quarter of the gender-specific indicators (14 of the 54) can be found in SDG 5. An additional 40 gender-specific indicators can be found under other goals and targets of the

54 Gender-specific Indicators Across the 17 Sustainable Development Goals

5 GENDER EQUALITY 5.1.1, 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 5.4.1, 5.5.1, 5.5.2, 5.6.1, 5.6.2, 5.A.1, 5.A.2, 5.B.1, 5.C.1	4 QUALITY EDUCATION 4.1.1, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.3.1, 4.5.1, 4.6.1, 4.7.1, 4.A.1
1 NO POVERTY 1.1.1, 1.2.1, 1.2.2, 1.3.1, 1.4.2, 1.B.1	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 3.1.1, 3.1.2, 3.3.1, 3.7.1, 3.7.2, 3.8.1
2 ZERO HUNGER 10.2.1	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 10.2.1
11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES 11.2.1, 11.7.1, 11.7.2	13 CLIMATE ACTION 13.B.1
16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS 16.1.1, 16.1.2, 16.2.2, 16.2.3, 16.7.1, 16.7.2	17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS 17.18.1

GOALS LACKING GENDER-SPECIFIC INDICATORS: 6, 7, 9, 12, 14, 15

Notes: For full indicator names and descriptions, see Annex 1 in UN Women, 2018.¹

2030 Agenda. Together, they can be used to monitor varying dimensions of gender equality but not all of them.

Six of the 17 SDGs lack gender-specific indicators altogether. This is the case for the goals on water and sanitation, industry and innovation, sustainable consumption, energy and the environment (oceans and terrestrial ecosystems). Target 6.2 on access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene, for example, calls for “special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations”, but the indicator to monitor this target (proportion of population using safely managed sanitation services) does not explicitly refer to the specific needs of women and girls. This exclusion might mislead data producers and users into believing that certain SDG areas are not gender-relevant. However, issues of environmental management and degradation, as well as those related to drivers such as industry and innovation, are critical to women’s livelihoods, particularly for those who lack other economic assets.

Gender data gaps

Monitoring progress on gender equality in the SDGs requires access to quality gender data that are collected frequently and regularly. But an assessment of gender data availability suggests there is a long way to go. Many of the gender-specific indicators cover ‘emerging statistical areas’ where measurement methodology is not well developed or emerging. For many areas, emerging or established, official statistics are often missing. Country-level data gaps impede not only national monitoring of progress on the SDGs but also regional and global monitoring as these aggregates are ultimately derived from country-level data. Only 12 (22 per cent) of the 54 gender-specific indicators are produced with enough regularity to be classified as Tier I by the IAEG-SDGs⁴, meaning that enough data is available to monitor progress across all regions. The mismatch between data availability and data demand is a shared concern for rich and poor countries alike. Other limitations include technical capacity and financial constraints within national statistical systems, inconsistent disaggregation, lack of timely reporting to the international statistical system, limited data dissemination, and lack of coordination between data producers within countries.

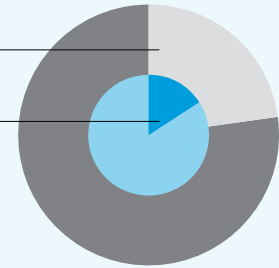
Data quality and comparability

Gender biases are embedded in the concepts, definitions and classifications used, in the way questions are asked, in how the samples are drawn for population surveys and in how data are collected. These flaws and biases affect the accuracy and reliability of the data collected, undermining the quality of gender statistics. Labour force surveys that ask only about

We need more and better gender data

Only 23% of the available data is from 2010 or later

Only 16% is available for two or more points in time



Source: UN Women, 2018.

the respondent’s ‘primary economic activity’, for example, will leave out the contributions of women who perceive paid work as secondary to their unpaid care and domestic work. In Uganda, asking about secondary activity increased women’s labour force participation from 78 per cent (when only primary activity was recorded) to 87 per cent.⁵ International statistical standards and classifications can help overcome some biases and improve the international comparability of the data. However, particularly in the case of emerging areas, such standards are not readily available, fully understood nor consistently adhered to for gender data production.

Solutions

How can the above challenges be addressed? What is needed to track progress on gender equality in a comprehensive and cross-cutting way across the 2030 Agenda?

The 2017 Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data calls for a “data revolution” to boost the volume, speed and types of data produced are expanded, increase support for statistical systems and foster greater engagement between citizens, governments and the private sector.⁶ A central tenet of the data revolution is that greater use, integration and dissemination of different sources of data will ultimately improve policy formulation, empower people by making reliable information available, and lead to better outcomes for people and the planet.

Solutions for better gender statistics need to be part of the data revolution. Data that accurately reflect women’s lives, including in undervalued areas such as time spent on care, are woefully inadequate. In some cases, data on entire groups of women and girls are missing. Addressing these gaps requires strengthening conventional data collection and dissemination capacities within national statistical systems; and harnessing the potential of non-conventional data sources while upholding human rights standards.

Mainstreaming gender into data production

Gender must be mainstreamed into national statistical strategies and prioritized in data collection and dissemination. The data revolution means that national decision makers must recognize the importance of utilizing gender statistics, and in turn greater political, technical and financial support must be provided to producers of official statistics. It also requires strengthening the three main sources of data at the country level:

- **Administrative records and registries** can be a cost-effective source of data, including on vital registration and maternal mortality, but in many countries the quality and coverage of these data are often low.⁷ Expanding the scope of registry data to consistently capture information such as cause of death or sex of victims and perpetrators, for instance, could also render these data sources suitable to inform key SDG indicators such as maternal mortality ratios or rates of homicide, among others. Building robust civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems requires long-term financial and technical investment, which can result in both better data and better service delivery.
- **Household surveys** are often the primary source of social statistics, including on poverty, harmful practices, violence against women and sexual and reproductive health. Yet, in many countries, specialized surveys such as those on violence against women are a one-off exercise, and where data are available they are not collected from older women, resulting in knowledge gaps. These surveys can be costly to implement but are an incredibly valuable source of information on key areas of gender equality. Financial constraints, however, often limit the size and scope of household surveys, which have implications on how much the survey data can be disaggregated. Despite sample limitations, re-processing of existing data can yield new insights on sub-groups and about who is being left behind.
- **Population censuses** are an essential source of country-level information. Given their universal coverage, they can be especially useful for analysing vulnerable and marginalized groups. In many countries, census data are the only option for indicators that call for disaggregation by migration status, disability and race/ethnicity. But because they tend to be conducted only every 10 years, the timeliness of data remains an issue. The upcoming 2020 census is an excellent opportunity to collect baselines on groups poorly captured in household surveys.

Weak policy space, limited resources and a lack of coordination are further obstacles which impede production of gender data. A 2012 review of 126 countries indicated only 37 per cent had a coordinating body for gender statistics, and only 13 per cent

had a regular dedicated budget for gender statistics.⁸ National statistical systems often also face legal and political restrictions. In some countries, without a political directive, data collection cannot extend to some forms of gender statistics, particularly on sensitive topics such as violence against women. Political will is a necessary precursor to making gender data available for SDG monitoring.

UN Women's flagship programme, Making Every Woman and Girl Count, aims to address some of these gaps and bring about a radical shift in how gender statistics are created, used and promoted, see Box 1.

BOX 1

Making Every Woman and Girl Count

Launched in 2016, Making Every Woman and Girl Count (MEWGC) aims to address the challenges impeding the production and use of gender statistics to monitor the SDGs.⁹ As part of this five-year, US\$65 million programme, UN Women works with a range of partners to support countries to improve the production, accessibility and use of gender statistics. It focuses on three areas: (i) Creating an enabling environment to prioritize gender data and effective SDG monitoring; (ii) Filling gender data gaps by ensuring that quality and comparable gender statistics are produced regularly; and (iii) Ensuring that data are accessible and used to inform policy and advocacy. This global programme provides technical and financial capacity to countries across all regions, with a particular focus on a set of pathfinder countries. The types of interventions range from supporting the development of gender-sensitive national strategies for the development of statistics, building technical capacity for gender data production in countries and financially supporting specialized surveys and other forms of data collection, to training data producers on disseminating gender data, building capacity for designing gender data communication strategies and enhancing dialogue with users.

New data sources: possibilities and pitfalls

National Statistical Offices (NSOs), traditionally wary of data produced outside the official statistical system, are now experimenting with new forms of data to meet the growing demand for more data and for real-time information. These new data sources are not only being added to the tools used by NSOs but are also being combined with traditional data sources to provide new insights.

At the same time, many more actors are entering the fray, rapidly collecting vast amounts of 'big data'—often with

limited oversight. 'Big data' refers to extremely large data sets that are generated automatically as by-products of daily activities, including social media and mobile phone usage, credit card transactions and GPS location trackers, to name a few. Other new forms of data, such as aerial photography coupled with image recognition, or geospatial data, can be combined with big data to identify environmental changes, population movements or other patterns. From a gender perspective, big data can provide useful insights into issues of gender differences in daily purchases, access to credit, use of public transit, population movements and vulnerability to disasters and climate change, among others.

Despite the potential benefits, there are also some serious concerns with the proliferation of new data sources. The expansion of big data, for example, has raised concerns about government and corporate surveillance, privacy and data ownership.¹⁰ The 'datafication' of people's everyday lives, where personal information is transformed into computerized data sold for profit, poses serious ethical questions.¹¹ Are the data collected through informed consent? How are the data being used and how might individuals or groups be harmed by their misuse? A rights-based approach to data is essential to safeguard people from these risks.

Big data offers an opportunity to collect data quickly and cheaply, but it cannot substitute for high-quality statistics produced by national statistical systems. In a fast-changing data landscape, producers of official statistics must uphold data collection standards that protect the rights of individuals and promote these standards in emerging forms of data collection.

Democratizing data: Participation and data literacy

The explosion of data outside official statistics risks increasing the asymmetry of information between citizens and data producers. Unchecked, it can lead to knowledge and power concentrated among the few—and a new layer

ensuring that gender statistics reflects the concerns and priorities of the people it serves. In the Philippines, for example, 11 multi-stakeholder consultations have taken place since 2012, aimed at incorporating diverse voices in the mapping of SDG indicators for national monitoring.¹²

Data literacy, which refers to the ability to read, understand, create and communicate data, is key to greater citizen engagement, but is not widespread. Engagement and open access are important first steps, but concerted efforts are also needed to reach a broad spectrum of social groups. The civil society and private sector-led partnership, Equal Measures 2030, aims to ensure that women's movements and other rights advocates are equipped with easy-to-use data and evidence to guide efforts to reach the SDGs by 2030. Working in six focus countries—Colombia, El Salvador, India, Indonesia, Kenya and Senegal—the programme aims to support grassroots girls' and women's groups to identify key national and regional influencing opportunities, create and use data tracking and tools, and build capacity through data literacy curriculums to help connect data and evidence with advocacy for action.¹³

Conclusion

Without timely and reliable information about gender equality and the status of women, it is impossible to know whether women and girls are benefiting from the measures taken to implement the 2030 Agenda, particularly from the measures that address gender equality directly. Investing in national statistical capacity to produce quality and timely gender statistics, particularly in developing countries, is central to monitoring gender equality and the SDGs.

Beyond financial support, statistical systems need to be independent and agile to adapt quickly to a dynamic data landscape. The gender data revolution calls for all stakeholders to come together, including gender equality advocates and other civil society groups, not only as data users and producers

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