GENDER EQUALITY AND BIG DATA

GLOBAL PULSE

UN WOMEN

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This report provides background context on how big data can be used to facilitate and assess progress towards SDG 5 "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls". It examines successes and challenges in the use of big data to improve the lives of women and girls, and identifies concrete data innovation projects that have considered the gender dimension from across the development sector.

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Gender Equality and Big Data

MAKING GENDER DATA VISIBLE

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INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly evolving world, global challenges are becoming increasingly complex and interlinked. Innovative approaches are needed in order to improve the way the United Nations system responds and adapts to this changing environment, where established methods are not always sufficient to ensure progress towards goals in sustainable development and humanitarian response.

Data and information gaps are often impediments to achieving these goals. The 2030 Agenda explicitly calls for a data revolution for sustainable development (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2015). The Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data was launched on 15th January 2017 at the inaugural United Nations World Data Forum, and it calls for a commitment by governments, policy leaders, and the international community to undertake key actions under six strategic areas of data for sustainable development: its dissemination and use; coordination and strategic leadership; innovation and modernization of national statistical systems; strengthening of basic statistical activities and programmes; multi-stakeholder partnerships; and mobilizing resources and coordinating efforts for capacity building.

The UN plays a very important role in ensuring that the data revolution for sustainable development is inclusive, not only by incorporating big data[1] and analytics into planning and decision making, but also by working with governments, policy leaders, and the broader international community to address the gaps in women's access to ICT and other tools and activities that generate new sources of data. Several pilot projects have demonstrated the feasibility of using big data analytics for sustainable development. For example, insights regarding mobility patterns, social interactions, sentiments and attitudes, economic activity, early warning, and community well-being can be derived from aggregated, privacy-protected datasets.

UN Women – the agency leading the UN's work on women's empowerment and gender equality – recognizes the potential of integrating big data and analytics into programmes and policies, and aims to identify applications of big data that could lead to impactful solutions in its areas of work. Global Pulse is a UN innovation initiative that works to implement and enable data science for development and humanitarian action in a responsible way, protecting individual privacy. Therefore, it is natural for these organizations to collaborate to ensure that the data revolution for sustainable development responds to women's needs and issues of data inclusion.

The objective of this collaboration is to identify strategic options in order to establish a joint programme of work around the use of big data and analytics to improve the lives of women and girls. UN Women and UN Global Pulse will work together to: (i) make programmatic recommendations that harness big data and analytics, including both "quick wins" and impactful long-term projects on gender; and (ii) identify potential advocacy projects and policy-oriented interventions to improve the lives of women and girls.

1. For the purposes of this report, big data refer to data sources that require new tools or methods to capture, curate, manage and process them in an efficient way.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The potential of big data for sustainable development lies primarily in the application of insights from new data sources to inform policy interventions on the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. There is still progress to be made in this area. Although pilot projects have shown the feasibility of using big data to assess and facilitate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there remains a dearth of examples that have scaled or become sustainable. Also, the methodological and technical expertise required to implement big data projects is not evenly distributed across geographies and organizations.

This report provides background context on how big data can be used to facilitate and assess progress towards the SDGs, and focuses in particular on SDG 5 – "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls". It examines successes and challenges in the use of big data to improve the lives of women and girls, and identifies concrete data innovation projects from across the development sector that have considered the gender dimension.

This report is the result of a literature review focused on big data and gender, interviews with colleagues from UN Women and UN Global Pulse, interviews with individuals and organizations working in the field of big data (LIRNEAsia, IDRC, World Wide Web Foundation, and the University of Southern California), and answers to a short questionnaire posed to six UN Women country offices.

A "gendered" DATA REVOLUTION

The data revolution has been driven by explosions in the volume of data, the speed with which data suggests the integration of these new sources of data with traditional data in order to produce high-quality information that is more detailed, timely, and relevant. These shifts also create opportunities for greater openness and transparency, which must be leveraged in a way that protects privacy and human rights, taking into account data "inclusivity."

Big data presents opportunities for improved programme planning and implementation based on real-time feedback (Laney, 2001). Big data analytics can facilitate:

- real-time situational awareness;
- the ability to "shine a light on the invisible," by improving information on the lives of women and girls;
- new information on mobility, social interactions; sentiment and cultural beliefs, and economic activity;
- early warning of emerging issues and crises;
- improved understanding of community well-being;
- understanding of both local impacts and larger geographic patterns;

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