STRENGTHENING GENDER MEASURES AND DATA IN THE COVID-19 ERA: AN URGENT NEED FOR CHANGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COVID-19 may be gender blind, but it is not gender neutral. Emerging evidence shows tremendous gender disparities in the health and socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic, with a disproportionately negative impact on women's livelihoods, unpaid care work burden, mental health, and subjection to gender-based violence. However, a lack of gender data impedes our ability to measure, preempt, and respond. Understanding the extent of these impacts is the first step toward reversing course. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing gender data gaps—particularly around health, education, and economic opportunity—that undermine our ability to intentionally craft gender-responsive policies and programs. Filling these data gaps poses a significant challenge as many data collection efforts have been disrupted due to COVID-19 control measures, impacting everything from data production to subsequent data management, analysis, use, and communication.

There is no time to waste. Without addressing these gender data gaps and collection obstacles, we cannot fully understand or mitigate the gendered impacts of the pandemic. The collection and use of timely, quality gender data by all data sources, official or non-official, is critical to recognizing and addressing gender inequalities. More and better data is needed to identify the most urgent needs of populations that have been most harmed by the pandemic and to formulate gender-responsive policies to effectively spur an equitable recovery. By committing to increased gender data collection and use now, we can build a foundation that is better prepared for future shocks.

This brief calls on National Statistical Systems and survey managers, funders, multilateral agencies, researchers, and policymakers to act in five key areas:

1. Disaggregate all COVID-19 data at a minimum by sex and, ideally, by other key sociodemographic characteristics.
This must be done consistently to effectively analyze and address the differential health and socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. Only one in three countries reports sex-disaggregated COVID-19 case and death data, and this trend is worsening over time; gaps in testing and hospitalization data are even greater.

Key actions:
- Design, develop, and support coordinated statistical infrastructures, capacities, and practices to consistently sex-disaggregate COVID-19 related data, and
- Normalize and enable regular reporting of COVID-19 epidemiologic data by sex and other key sociodemographic characteristics such as age, race, and occupation.

**2. Beyond disaggregation:
Collect standardized, comparable gender data in areas where women's and girls' lives are disproportionately affected by COVID-19.**
Our understanding of the pandemic's disproportionate gendered impacts on women and girls was hindered by a lack of gender-intentional measures in early waves of data collection, as well as a delay in pivoting to alternative data collection modes when traditional, in-person modes of data collection stopped. These early gaps are gradually being filled. As data collection operations resume, more gender measures are being included in data collection processes and alternative data collection methodologies are being deployed. Yet available data indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities through gender-unintentional or more gender ❯

Cover Image: A PMA Resident Enumerator administering the women's questionnaire to a resident of the Ngilima neighborhood of Kinshasa, DRC, during data collection.

Photo credit: Gloria Mbuya, Communications Officer for the Kinshasa School of Public Health, University of Kinshasa.

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❯ restrictive and discriminatory responses toward women and girls. Collecting policy data that tracks government responses, and the ways in which they address women, will be crucial.

Key actions:
- Support the coordinated inclusion and prioritization of standardized, comparable gender measures in all surveys, including in surveys to assess COVID-19 impacts;
- Prioritize the development, validation, dissemination, and coordinated use of standardized and comparable COVID-19 related gender measures on constructs that are not currently being assessed; and,
- Create survey sampling frames that are representative of women and girls at all privilege, marginalization, and vulnerability levels.

3. Increase the use of non-traditional gender data to fill critical gender data gaps.

Data from non-traditional sources—such as social media activity, news media, mobile device-generated geospatial and other data, internet use, and private sector data—may provide complementary and rapid insights alongside, or in the absence of, traditional data sources. Non-traditional gender data may be harnessed and assembled in shorter time horizons than more traditional modes such as surveys and administrative records and may be produced even when traditional data collection is unfeasible. Gender data has been absent in many non-traditional analyses to date, and there is an opportunity to thoughtfully leverage innovations and non-traditional approaches to data collection and analysis. Ensuring safeguards and ethical governance of the data, of course, will be critical.

Key actions:
- Develop a framework for responsible and ethical governance of gender data, and
- Expand efforts to link traditional and non-traditional gender data and modalities.

4. Rapidly expand COVID-19 related gender data availability, access, and use.

Pandemic policy responses to date have been largely gender unintentional. For example, a mere eight percent of social protection and labor market measures have directly addressed unpaid care—the majority of which falls on women. Open-access COVID-19 related data is largely limited to surveys; there is a gap in open, regular dissemination of administrative and non-traditional gender data. For policy measures to be effective, they must reflect what the data shows, yet global progress is hindered by data silos and suboptimal, inconsistent data sharing. When and where reliable and timely gender data exists, it should be shared and used. Such a bridge between data production and use can improve both data responsiveness and build public trust.

Key actions:
- Create bidirectional engagement across gender data production and use;
- Expand access to and use of existing gender data that is not being used to its full potential; and,
- Mainstream gender data production and use in national data systems.

5. Resource and support coordinated data infrastructures to produce gender data during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has placed a significant strain on overstressed and underfunded data systems, limiting gender data production and diverting resources to directly support COVID-19 responses. Even in a time of fiscal constraint, these budget cuts are shortsighted. Investing in the expertise and resources to gain deeper data on women's realities is a smart long-term investment. Modernizing data collection and strengthening data infrastructures will serve us now and also prepare our systems to better respond to future shocks. ❯

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❯ Key actions:

- Increase funding to support statistical systems' capacities to produce and use gender data and provide financial support to modernize administrative data collection and strengthen national survey systems, and
- Support and adequately resource gender data production and use across the entire National Statistical System (NSS) in order to fulfill national, regional, and international commitments to gender data and create responsive and robust data infrastructures.

This moment presents both a choice and an opportunity. Policy responses are not prioritizing women's needs and rights—or taking into account the gendered health and socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. There is an urgent need to invest in a gender-equitable recovery by prioritizing and funding the collection and use of gender data that gives a true picture of the challenges women face. Now is the time to invest in the foundation of a robust data system that integrates gender—a system that will empower smart, targeted policies that achieve real impact. ●