Mind the Gap: How Better Data Can Unlock Gender Equality in India

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Gender inequalities remain a pervasive global issue, seeping into every corner of life—workplaces, homes, politics, and societal norms—hindering progress on multiple fronts. These disparities are not just ingrained; they are systematically perpetuated, creating barriers that we cannot afford to ignore. Tackling them head-on is not just a matter of justice but a necessity for sustainable development. Gender equality and women's empowerment sit at the heart of the UN's Agenda 2030, with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 laser-focused on these ambitions. Yet, progress toward this goal is frustratingly slow, and one of the biggest roadblocks? A severe lack of comprehensive gender data.

Shockingly, less than half of the data needed to monitor SDG 5 is available, leaving us flying blind when it comes to understanding how deeply gendered experiences play out in real life. These blind spots prevent us from crafting policies that serve everyone. Without robust, granular data, our attempts to level the playing field remain shallow, and worse, we risk creating policies that miss the mark entirely. This article will delve into the key gender data gaps in India and explore targeted strategies to bridge these divides. The stakes are high, but the reward? A more just, inclusive, and equitable future for all.

What has contributed to the 'gender data gap'?

India faces considerable challenges in collecting and utilizing gender-disaggregated data. Despite increasing recognition of the value of data-driven policymaking, gender data in India remains underfunded, inconsistently collected, and incomplete in several key areas. As a result, the country struggles to fully understand the scope of gender disparities in employment, health, education, and economic participation.

Generating high-quality, gender-disaggregated data is expensive, and like many countries, India has not prioritized this. The Indian statistical system includes two main

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types of data: large-scale surveys and census data on socio-economic indicators, and administrative data collected by various ministries. Although the Ministry of Women and Child Development oversees women-specific policies, gender-disaggregated data is produced across multiple ministries in a fragmented, decentralized way. This lack of a unified framework for integrating gender-sensitive indicators into surveys and administrative systems creates significant data gaps.[1]

An additional, critical issue often overlooked is the lack of intersectional analysis in gender data. Gender inequalities in India are intricately linked to other social factors such as caste, religion, and economic background. However, India's data systems frequently fail to capture these intersections. For example, the experiences of a rural Dalit woman differ significantly from those of an urban upper-caste woman, but without intersectional data, these differences remain invisible, limiting the development of policies that address the distinct challenges faced by marginalized groups.

Even when gender data is collected, methodological challenges remain. Many surveys rely on proxy reporting, where one household member-usually male-reports on behalf of others. This practice can skew the data, especially in patriarchal settings where women's contributions, particularly in unpaid sectors, are often overlooked.[2] Added to this is the complexity of measuring key issues like unpaid labor, roles in the informal economy, and gender-based violence, which often remain hidden or underreported. Unpaid labor, such as domestic work and caregiving, is largely invisible in official statistics, despite being a major contributor to household and national economies. Similarly, women's roles in the informal economy are difficult to quantify due to the lack of formal records and inconsistent definitions. Gender-based violence, often surrounded by stigma and fear, goes significantly underreported, making it challenging to accurately assess its prevalence and impact on women's lives.[3]

Data accessibility is another significant hurdle. Even when reliable gender data is collected, it is often not easily accessible or usable. Government databases can be difficult to navigate, and data is not always readily available to researchers, civil society, or the public, limiting the ability of key stakeholders to use gender data for advocacy, research, or policymaking.

Are there any quick wins?

Given these challenges, it's clear that addressing the gender data gap will require both long-term investments and immediate, actionable steps. While systemic reforms are essential, there are also practical, more immediate solutions that can start making a difference now.

Integrating gender data into administrative systems presents an immediate opportunity to close the gender data gap.[4] Administrative data, already collected by government ministries for program monitoring, often lacks sex-disaggregated insights due to the absence of mandates or incentives. For example, only 8% of beneficiary indicators

in Indian government schemes are gender-disaggregated. Mandating sex disaggregation in datasets that track areas like housing, employment, and agricultural support would quickly and cost-effectively generate vital gender statistics. This should be a priority, though it doesn't diminish the need for gender disaggregation in surveys and censuses. The focus here is on taking the most immediate, impactful steps to drive change.

Another low-hanging fruit is leveraging private sector expertise in digital, financial, spatial, and Big Data. The private sector already generates vast amounts of real-time data through digital platforms, mobile networks, financial transactions, and geospatial tools. This data can provide critical insights into women's access to resources, economic participation, mobility, and digital inclusion. By partnering with tech companies, fintech firms, and spatial data providers, India can tap into existing resources without the need to build new data infrastructure from scratch. Integrating Big Data analytics with traditional surveys improves precision, enabling policymakers to track gender disparities at a granular level and respond with targeted interventions. This public-private collaborative approach has been internationally recognised, and is cost-effective, scalable, and can be implemented quickly.[5]

India can also address the gender data gap by adopting mixed-methods data collection, combining quantitative approaches (surveys, censuses) with qualitative insights (interviews, focus groups). This approach captures not only measurable indicators but also the nuanced experiences of women that traditional surveys may overlook. Mixed methods are particularly valuable for understanding complex gender issues such as unpaid labor, domestic violence, and mental health, where quantitative data alone cannot fully explain the underlying social and cultural dynamics. Global initiatives, including those supported by the World Bank, emphasize the importance of tailoring mixed methods data to national contexts and ensuring that gender-disaggregated data is analyzed and applied effectively in policymaking.[6]

Looking Long-term

But this is not where our efforts should end. India's efforts must be guided by a long-term, strategic vision that builds a sustainable, integrated system—one that not only collects data but ensures it is meaningful, accessible, and truly reflective of the diverse experiences of all women. To achieve this, we propose that three key principles should anchor this approach.

At its core, this strategy must prioritize inclusivity, ensuring that data captures the experiences of women across different social, economic, and regional contexts. Intersectionality—recognizing how gender intersects with other factors like caste, religion, and economic status—should be central to the data collection and analysis process. This will allow policymakers to design interventions that address the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups.

The strategy also needs to focus on coordination across all levels of government and sectors. Gender data initiatives should be integrated across ministries, breaking down silos to ensure a unified approach. Collaboration between public and private sectors, as well as civil society, is essential to harnessing diverse expertise and resources, fostering a more comprehensive and responsive gender data ecosystem.

Lastly, accountability must underpin the entire process. Clear mechanisms should be established to ensure that the collection, analysis, and use of gender data are tied to concrete, measurable outcomes. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should track progress not only in data availability but in how effectively this data is being used to inform policy and drive gender equality.

By embracing these core principles, India can create a more agile, equitable system that not only closes existing data gaps but ensures the ongoing production of reliable, gender-sensitive data. This strategic approach will empower the country to craft policies that genuinely reflect the realities of its women and girls, enabling more effective, targeted solutions to advance gender equality.

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