

Gender indicators and statistics in Latin America and the Caribbean

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This chapter analyses progress in areas such as the use of comparable serial sources, the inclusion of gender on the mainstream statistical agenda and the growing demand of gender statistics users within various government sectors (particularly women's offices). This section concludes by examining where the region stands on such issues and the challenges it faces.

Commitments of the international community

At the sixth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean (Mar del Plata, Argentina, 1994), government representatives agreed to "strengthen systems for collecting and processing statistical data disaggregated by sex, and adopt the use of gender indicators that will contribute to a baseline analysis of the status of women and to the implementation of public policies at the national and regional levels and that will make it possible to improve the monitoring and assessment of regional and international agreements". This was subsequently confirmed by the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995)¹ and definitely constitutes the commitment that has demanded the most efforts in terms of preparing and disseminating gender statistics, given that promoting "the further development of statistical methods to improve data that relate to women in economic, social, cultural and political development"² remains somewhat of a challenge.

Latin America and, to a certain extent, the Caribbean have made significant progress in the collection, analysis and use of gender indicators. Ten years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, however, there are considerable disparities and shortcomings in the Caribbean, where information systems are at an early stage of their development. In the region as a whole, only seven Latin American countries have an independent system of periodic and comparative gender statistics³, with such systems being virtually non-existent in the Caribbean⁴. Most other Latin American countries report regularly available sex-disaggregated information in

¹ "Collect, compile, analyse and present on a regular basis data disaggregated by age, sex, socio-economic and other relevant indicators, including number of dependants, for utilization in policy and programme planning and implementation" (*Beijing Platform for Action*, par. 206 b).

² *Ibid.*, par. 208 b.

³ The following countries have independent gender indicator systems: Chile (<http://www.sernam.gov.cl/publico/categoria.php?sec=8&cat=32>), Costa Rica (<http://www.inamu.go.cr/set1.html>), Mexico (<http://dgcnesyp.inegi.gob.mx/sisesim/Principal.html>), Nicaragua (<http://www.inec.gob.ni/sieg/sieg.htm>), Panama (<http://www.contraloria.gob.pa/dec/siepa/>), Dominican Republic (<http://www.sem.gov.do/politicapublica/observatorio.htm>) and Uruguay (<http://www.ine.gub.uy/biblioteca/genero/genero02.htm>).

⁴ Although Jamaica has no gender statistics system as such, it is the only Caribbean country that regularly produces a series of surveys that make it possible to construct various social indicators disaggregated by sex. In other Caribbean countries, population censuses are about the only source of systematic information. Caribbean countries also produce annual vital statistics and the ministries of health and education keep administrative records, but these data are unavailable in electronic format or in databases.

social statistics, with many having disaggregated results at the stages of information collection and processing.

Some countries have successfully institutionalized the links between those that generate and use information by calling on various social and political stakeholders to create subsystems within the national information system or improve the collection, processing and analysis of the information available. In the most noteworthy cases, such as Mexico, countries have made innovative structural changes to all kinds of censuses and surveys.

Progress depends on the level of institutional development of national information systems; gender mainstreaming as spearheaded by governments and international cooperation; and the active demand of users in academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and policy-making bodies. More generally, progress is also dependent on the degree of institutionalization in terms of democracy and public policies.

Ten years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, one vital achievement has been the decision of the Statistical Conference of the Americas of ECLAC (which brings together the region's national statistical institutes) to include gender statistics as an important part of its 2003-2005 programme of work and to use the Millennium Declaration and world conferences such as the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) and the Fourth World Conference on Women as a framework for its activities.

This achievement was the culmination of a long process and was made possible thanks to the academic legitimacy of gender indicators as instruments of analysis based on a theoretical and conceptual framework that goes beyond the essential disaggregation of available information by sex. As a result of more than a decade of work on the part of women researchers and academics, the academic status of such indicators developed hand in hand with the advance of gender studies in the region. The social relevance of statistical information and the emergence of new and increasing demands of public policies were a gauntlet taken up by national machineries for the advancement of women, which have undergone long processes of institutionalization and incorporation into the government hierarchy to be able to position themselves as information users and conclude agreements with statistical institutes and sources within sectors such as health, education, the judiciary and police.

Nevertheless, this process has often been accompanied by a simultaneous weakening of national bodies responsible for the information system as a result of a shortage of resources and a certain loss of State credibility in the field of information management. Some countries made the mistake of creating gender information systems that were separate from statistical institutes and highly dependent on international cooperation, many of which were unable to survive and have either already disappeared or are soon to close.⁵ The credibility of the information handled by such systems was affected by managerial shortcomings, limited human resources, high turnaround of technical staff and, in some cases, excessive political pressure.

An increasing number of countries request technical assistance from United Nations specialized agencies to calculate gender indicators. At the same time, several countries also report the existence of civil society initiatives to assess the performance of the authorities and the

⁵ In less than a year, three of the countries with gender indicators subsystems under the authority of the national machinery for the advancement of women (Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador) have reported its demise, while the number of gender indicators calculated by the national institutes of Bolivia and Peru is constantly falling.

fulfilment of national targets.⁶ Also, this demand has arisen in the context of significant institutional changes, including the growing concern to measure the impact of public policy; social demands of accountability, transparency, Social Watch; and decentralization and citizen participation. All of the above requires data that go beyond averages, a degree of geographical and demographic disaggregation to show the differentiated results of public policies.

As mentioned above, however, little progress in this direction has been made in national systems and it is therefore still vital to “ensure that producers and users of statistics in each country regularly review the adequacy of the official statistical system and its coverage of gender issues, and prepare a plan for needed improvements”.⁷

Regional statistics

In terms of regional statistics, ECLAC has developed a database of comparable information using available data mainly from household surveys with a view to analysing government goals in terms of population, fertility, household and family, education, health, participation, income and poverty. Using information from Demographic and Health Surveys in countries that carry them out⁸ and extending the exercise to those that do not is also essential for analysing poverty-related issues such as reproductive health, violence and population development.

Poverty

One of the most important advances to date has been in the field of gender-based poverty statistics. At the request of the governments represented at the World Conference on Women, priority was assigned to increasing the visibility of female poverty. This led to a wide theoretical and methodological debate on whether conventional poverty measurement methods⁹ were compatible with other sources available in 17 countries of the region and with the current method used to show gender disparities.

According to the *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2002-2003* (ECLAC), although gender inequality as a historical construct can be demonstrated through information available in household surveys, there is also a need for new concepts, instruments and methodologies designed specifically to measure gender inequality in information systems.¹⁰ Although these sources alone do not fulfil all the information and coverage requirements for analysing gender inequality and female poverty, the data they provide speak volumes about the disparities between men and women in the region. Gaps between individuals and between members of the same household are identified and included in an explanation of unequal resource distribution and power relations in the domestic and public spheres. The findings also point to the need for new sources of quantitative and qualitative information such as surveys on time use, perception and

⁶ Such as the index of fulfilled commitments, created in 1996 by the Women’s Initiative Group of Chile (Grupo Iniciativa Mujeres), with the support of Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) and on the basis of a proposal from the regional coordination of NGOs in Latin America and the Caribbean.

⁷ *Beijing Platform for Action*, par. 207 b.

⁸ Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago (see <http://www.measuredhs.com/start.cfm>).

⁹ Vivian Milosavljevic, "El enfoque de género y la medición de la pobreza", document presented at the expert meeting on poverty and gender (Santiago, Chile, 12-13 August), Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)/International Labour Organization (ILO), 2003.

¹⁰ Much of the information on poverty and unpaid work comes from “Poverty and inequality from a gender perspective”, *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2002-2003* (LC/G.2209-P), March 2004, Chapter III.

career path studies and panel-type surveys, which will allow for a more effective analysis of poverty.

It is generally recognized that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. Still, in measuring it, priority has been given to monetary metrics applied to household income as a proxy for access to resources and satisfactors. The debate about gender-based poverty has led to an evaluation of these metrics and has brought to light crucial aspects that must be examined. It is maintained that this kind of measurement is inadequate for capturing gender-based poverty, i.e. comparing the status of men and women and identifying factors that cause each to face different problems in overcoming poverty. In addition, it is clear that most current indicators of poverty are not gender-sensitive, in that they are aggregates based on the household as the unit of analysis rather than individuals; that is, they were not designed to shed light on gender gaps. Further, under this methodological option it is assumed that there is an equitable distribution of resources among all household members, that their needs are equivalent and that all decisions are democratic and consensus-based, as if negotiation and conflict, even violence, did not exist.

Unpaid work

The failure to assign economic value to unpaid domestic work or to regard it as income in households where one person is devoted exclusively to housekeeping and caregiving also limits the ability of traditional poverty measurements to capture gender inequalities. This is all the more true since this circumstance can make a major difference in household income, especially considering that households headed by men are more likely to benefit from the housework performed free of charge by the spouse or partner and therefore do not have to incur expenses for housekeeping services. Women heads of household shoulder the burden of housework without receiving compensation, generally by increasing the time they spend doing unpaid work and incurring additional expenses to buy services available on the market. This gives them fewer opportunities to improve their position in the labour market, participate in public life or enjoy leisure and recreation, not to mention the effects of this situation on their physical and mental health. This difference demonstrates other dimensions of poverty that are not always taken into consideration. Identifying specific differences between men and women in terms of their use of time and their spending patterns is therefore relevant to an analysis of poverty and the different ways in which it may be experienced.

One innovative aspect of gender-based poverty analysis is that it considers the situation of individuals who have no income of their own, in both poor and non-poor households. This situation, which is common to most women (especially those living with a spouse or partner), limits economic autonomy and decision-making capacity and leaves women more vulnerable in the event of widowhood or marital or family break-up. This vulnerability must be addressed with adequate policies.

As part of the regional review of the Beijing Platform for Action, it was established that poverty does indeed affect women in a differentiated and negative way. Indicators such as the adjusted femininity index, the growing number of female heads of indigent households, the visible proportion of women with no income of their own and domestic activity rates show that, despite regional variations, discriminatory patterns against women are common across the board.

Time-use surveys or the inclusion of a special time-use module in regular surveys constitute a genuine step forward.¹¹ Eight countries in the region have carried out such surveys at least once¹², thereby providing access to the previously neglected dimension of the unpaid caregiving of women in the family and society. From an economic perspective, this makes unpaid domestic work an adjustment variable that keeps increases in social spending at a reasonable but sufficiently low level for children, older persons and the sick to receive care at no fiscal cost.

Operative difficulties in measuring poverty

From a statistical point of view, there are many practical limitations to the feasibility of carrying out a study that incorporates all of the proposed dimensions. Even assuming a more operative conceptual framework, there remains the problem of combining and measuring each of the variables needed to capture all dimensions in the same source. The current situation and level of progress within national statistical systems cannot be ignored in this process. It is nonetheless possible and indeed necessary to promote the inclusion of questions related to the above-mentioned aspects in official sources of information. As it is, incorporating a gender perspective in current poverty measurement methods remains an ongoing challenge.¹³

Challenges

The main general challenges include:

- Increasing the number of countries that carry out comparable household surveys
- Maintaining the frequency and comparability of surveys and institutionalizing working links with equality policy makers within all national information systems
- Addressing areas of concern in the Caribbean, where the institutional strengthening of machineries for the advancement of women (which are usually still low down in the State hierarchy) and of national information systems is vital
- Widening dissemination of basic information on key issues for the design of equality policies, such as violence, unpaid work and political participation
- Extending the implementation of time-use surveys.

¹¹ María José Araya, “Un acercamiento a las Encuestas sobre el Uso del Tiempo con orientación de género”, *Mujer y desarrollo* series No. 50 (LC/L.2022-P/E), Santiago, Chile ECLAC, November 2003 (<http://www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/UnidadMujer/2/LCL2022/lcl2022e.pdf>).

¹² Cuba (2000 and 2002), Dominican Republic (1995) (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/timeuse/tusresource_country/dominicanr.htm), Guatemala (2000) (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/timeuse/tusresource_country/guatemala.htm), Jamaica (1993), Mexico (1996 and 2002) (http://www.inegi.gob.mx/est/contenidos/espanol/sistemas/enut2002/datos/2tema/enut02_2_32.xls), Nicaragua (1998) (<http://www.inec.gob.ni/mecovi/pdf/usodeltiempo.pdf>), Peru (1994 and 1997) (<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/lac/lacinfoclient.nsf/Category/By+Category/641E5EA4D6D5B4C685256B5D006FB4A3?OpenDocument>) and Uruguay (2003) (<http://www.choike.org/nuevo/informes/2238.html>). In Trinidad and Tobago, a question on time use was included in the 2000 census.

¹³ See Vivian Milosavljevic, “Análisis de la medición de la pobreza desde la perspectiva de género”, presentation to the panel of experts on “Remaining challenges in relation to statistics and indicators” held as part of the forty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (8 March 2005).

The final commitment that remains pending relates to methodological innovation in all areas including culture, technology, trade and financing for development. This fundamental task calls for governments and international organizations to work together to facilitate institutional openness to innovative ideas.