

Gender Data to Achieve U.S. Policy Objectives: Evaluating the United States' National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality

A HISTORIC LEADERSHIP MOMENT FOR THE UNITED STATES ON GENDER AND MEASUREMENT

On October 22, the Biden-Harris Administration released the first-ever [National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#). Both the Strategy and the Gender Policy Council, which is responsible for guiding its development and now implementation, were mandated by [Executive Order](#). The [FY2022 President's Budget Request](#), which seeks to advance equity across government, further signals the administration's priorities, [including a 45% international affairs funding increase](#) for gender-related programs focused on addressing gender-based violence, advancing women's political leadership and participation, and promoting women's economic empowerment. However, the National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality is perhaps the Biden-Harris Administration's strongest statement yet—not only of a new era of United States leadership on issues of gender, but also of a return to domestic and foreign policymaking grounded in data and evidence.

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Measurement and data feature prominently in the strategy, along with explicit acknowledgement of the need to fill gender data gaps in order to remove systemic barriers that undermine the fundamental human rights of women, girls and other marginalized groups and inhibit the achievement of the United States' goals. Even more importantly, measurement and data are mandated in agency implementation plans, alongside strategic planning and budgeting, policy and program development, and management and training.

U.S. leadership on data and measurement in and of itself is not new. The United States has a long history of data investments, including the [Demographic and Health Surveys](#) (DHS) Program, which has been operational in more than 90 countries; the [Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index](#) (WEAI); and the [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief](#) (PEPFAR), which has enjoyed bipartisan support since its inception. Data2X itself was born out of U.S. leadership and diplomacy on gender and gender data issues, when in 2012, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for the creation of a data alliance to identify and advocate for the removal of pernicious gender data gaps.

There has never, however, been a national gender strategy bridging domestic and foreign policy, championed at the highest level of government, that decisively centers gender data. Even more historic is the National Strategy's focus on both equity and equality, as well as whole-of-government and intersectional guiding principles. This government-wide approach will require concerted collaboration among all federal agencies, and the definition of harmonized metrics for performance, to ensure that coordination will enable—rather than slow—progress. Indeed, how the administration addresses equity, equality, intersectionality, and integration not only as foundational principles but also as tangible indicators will be a key test of successful implementation and long-term accountability.

And there is much to be done.

Research on the availability and openness of gender data shows that the United States lacks quality evidence across several key categories. The country scores relatively low on the [ODIN Gender Data Index](#), which measures the availability of 27 key gender data indicators and ranks the United States 20th in the world, with an overall score of 66.2 out of 100. National data coverage is particularly weak on health outcomes, reproductive health, gender statistics, and the built environment. While the Equitable Data Working Group, also established through [Executive Order](#), provides a pathway for these issues to be addressed in close coordination with the Gender Policy Council and the Office of Management and Budget, the leadership of the working group is yet to be determined. The U.S. has been without a chief statistician or chief technology officer since January 2020 and January 2021 respectively. Filling these positions, and ensuring strong capacity for gender data collection, analysis, dissemination, and policy use, will be crucial to the success of the Equitable Data Working Group and the National Strategy. Further, the United States must take steps to strengthen its leadership for gender data abroad, providing dedicated financing for gender data as part of its official development assistance and advocating for gender data through multilateral fora.

As a roadmap, the National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality outlines an ambitious vision for U.S. domestic and foreign policy. From a measurement perspective, more specificity is needed to match the strategy's ambitions with its outcomes. Prioritizing the human and financial resources needed for gender data collection, analysis, and use will be an important first step to set the strategy on a path for success.

GENDER DATA AS A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE: A DATA-DRIVEN STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS

Quality gender data is a critical informant of progress, revealing systemic inequities, informing a path for action, and driving policy innovation. When used to craft evidence-based policies and programs and evaluate their efficacy, gender data enables the achievement of tangible, demonstrable progress for women and girls—and can ultimately accelerate gender equality. Gender data is thus a strategic imperative for the United States: the success of the new National Strategy will rest, in part, on agencies' ability to identify and measure the scope of inequalities; tailor new and existing initiatives; and rigorously measure progress. Gender data is, consequently, an enabler of implementation and a critical factor for success.

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In recognition of this imperative, the National Strategy centers gender data across strategic priorities and implementation guidelines, making a robust commitment to close gender data gaps and broadly collect, analyze, and use gender data across federal programs. The administration-wide plan lays out ten strategic priorities to advance gender equity and equality. Data is named in half of these identified goals:

Strategic Priority	Reference to Gender Data
Strategic Priority 1: Economic Security and Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote data collection and transparency in the financial, technology, and venture capital sectors to track the proportion of investments in women-led businesses Collect sex-disaggregated data on asset ownership to track the gender wealth gap
Strategic Priority 2: Elimination of Gender-Based Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase data collection and analysis to evaluate promising practices in the prevention of gender-based violence
Strategic Priority 3: Access to Health Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tackle maternal health disparities through better data collection and reporting
Strategic Priority 4: Equity in Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect comprehensive, disaggregated data on school disciplinary outcomes across the United States
Strategic Priority 6: Human Rights in the Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the development of data to identify the communities and geographic regions where trafficking occurs

Of course, high-quality, sex-disaggregated data will be key to planning interventions, measuring progress, and ultimately achieving every stated objective, and the administration must carefully consider how it will prioritize gender data collection and use across all ten strategic priorities. This must include identifying robust outcome metrics that are comparable across agencies, and building an open and transparent process for monitoring and evaluation to track government-wide progress.

To this end, the National Strategy recognizes measurement and data as one of four core methods for implementation. Referencing persistent gender data gaps, the plan pledges to augment gender data collection and analysis across federal agencies, working in tandem with the Equitable Data Working Group. This includes a commitment to sex-disaggregation of data across all programs, with cross-tabulation across race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, and other factors—a strong and unequivocal statement demonstrating the administration’s serious commitment to intersectional analysis and eliminating discrimination against the most marginalized communities.

Additionally, the National Strategy pledges improvements across the data value chain, from collection and analysis to dissemination and investment, together amounting to some of the broadest and most ambitious commitments to gender data put forth by the U.S. government to date. Achieving these goals will require concerted action—not only to close gender data gaps,

identify comparable cross-agency metrics, and set forth a transparent process of monitoring and evaluation, but also to move beyond collection and analysis toward regular use of gender data to inform progress, an end goal implied but not explicitly asserted.

Further, the administration's commitments must also comprise not only domestic improvements but, as the Strategy rightly states, United States advocacy for gender data overseas, both multilaterally and bilaterally. Crucially, this must include direct financing for gender data in United States official development assistance. [As research from Data2X and Open Data Watch has revealed](#), core gender data systems suffer from chronic underinvestment, with an estimated \$450 million annual funding gap per year. While the United States has historically invested in data and measurement, [it is not currently among the top 10 global donors](#) providing support for gender data. The National Strategy provides an opportunity for the United States to increase both domestic and foreign investments in gender data—as well as to harness its status as the largest DAC donor of official development assistance to encourage greater domestic resource mobilization for gender data by partner governments. Provision of U.S. development financing for gender data stands to amplify American global leadership; support the achievement of U.S. foreign policy commitments, including those made during the Generation Equality Forum; and directly advance gender equality worldwide.

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Additionally, while the National Strategy references the impressive [U.S. Generation Equality Forum \(GEF\) commitments](#), the plan does not articulate the relationship between these commitments and the administration's newly identified goals. The administration must take steps to elucidate this link—particularly by clarifying which programmatic and financial commitments are pre-existing, and which are new—in order to achieve greatest coordination and impact.

As federal agencies move to create implementation plans over the next nine months, and the Gender Policy Council works to produce an annual accountability report, gender data must remain at the heart of efforts to realize the National Strategy's ambitious goals—as a baseline for progress; as a measure of accountability; and as a guiding light to illuminate the road to gender equity and equality ahead.

THE WAY FORWARD

- **Contribute to closing the global gender data financing gap.** In addition to increasing its own development financing for gender data, under the new National Strategy, the United States has an opportunity to use its influence as the largest DAC ODA donor to encourage other bilateral donor and national government financing of core gender data systems. In tandem, and to support these investments, the United States can play a bigger role in multilateral advocacy to close gender data gaps, contributing to monitoring the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

- **Make gender data use an explicit priority central to strategy implementation and measuring progress.** While the identification of gender data gaps and the collection of gender data is important, the success of the Strategy will be limited if gender data is not ultimately used to inform policymaking. Centering gender data use will also strengthen accountability for the most effective use of taxpayer dollars.
- **Harmonize metrics for success across agency implementation plans.** Comparability of data across agencies will be key to tracking government-wide progress, and these data must be open to allow for a transparent process of monitoring and evaluation.
- **Increase human resource capacity for gender data collection, analysis, and policy use and ensure it is a priority within the Equitable Data Working Group.** U.S. investments in gender data should also support increasing the capacity of partner governments to collect, interpret and use gender data to advance equity and equality.
- **Clarify how financial and programmatic Generation Equality Forum commitments intersect with the National Strategy.** This includes making clear how specific GEF commitments support agency implementation plans and establishing baselines that distinguish commitments based on preexisting investments from new initiatives.
- **Consider the role of big data to fill gender data gaps.** Data2X research has demonstrated that big gender data—which is often held by technology firms such as social media platforms—has the [potential to complement more traditional forms of data like the DHS](#). To that end, there may be value in defining a plan to engage private sector actors in the U.S. and overseas to help fill gender data gaps implicit in the National Strategy.
- **Build on the strong consultative strategy development process for implementation.** The National Strategy was developed through an impressive, deeply consultative process that involved civil society, the private sector, and more than 200 women, girls, and gender non-conforming youth. The administration should consider how implementation can also be undertaken with a similarly inclusive, multistakeholder process to foster mutual accountability.

The National Strategy represents an historic achievement, and an ongoing opportunity to evaluate, finance, collect, and use the gender data needed to achieve the administration’s domestic and foreign policy objectives. The United States has recognized the centrality of gender data to this new agenda—and as the implementation phase begins, must take concerted action to deliver the data necessary to inform equitable interventions; hold policies and programs to account; and ultimately drive progress for women, girls, and gender non-conforming people worldwide.