

Building Political Will for Gender Data: Findings from 30 Countries



data2x^o

INTRODUCTION

Gender data is a powerful lever of global progress. When used to identify inequalities, craft and monitor evidence-based policies and programs, and inform feminist advocacy, it can advance gender-transformative sustainable development and accelerate the achievement of gender equality. Yet gender data for many key global indicators of sustainable development are [missing or incomplete](#). A [recent United Nations assessment](#) found that only 21 of the 32 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators that require sex disaggregation have the latest data available in most countries, and for eight indicators no sex-disaggregated data are available at all. At the same time, financing for gender data has plummeted in recent years. In 2020, after a decade of little or no growth, [donor investment in gender data decreased by 55%](#)—nearly three times the drop in investment to overall data and statistics.

A lack of political will for gender data is often invoked as a reason for its scarcity and a major obstacle to financing, yet the political environment surrounding gender data has received relatively little examination and remains poorly defined and understood. Mapping the contours of this environment is a critical first step to develop effective advocacy strategies that incentivize greater political prioritization, championship, accountability, and resourcing for gender data.

Gender data: Data that captures information on the different lived experiences of women, men, and gender-diverse people. This includes data that is disaggregated by sex, and reflects gender issues, including roles, relations, and inequalities. It can be both quantitative and qualitative, and collection methods account for stereotypes, social norms, and other factors that may introduce bias.

Political environment for gender data: The political context, factors, and actors shaping the collection and use of gender data at the national level. This includes the various stakeholders, policies, institutions, resources, and partnerships that influence government action (or inaction) on gender data.

In 2023, Data2X, in collaboration with the Local Development Research Institute (LDRI) and FemDev Consulting, interviewed government stakeholders from 30 countries, including representatives from women’s and gender ministries, foreign affairs and development agencies, and national statistical offices (NSOs).¹ By surfacing key insights across government stakeholders and geographies, this research aims to contribute to a better, more comprehensive understanding of the political environment for gender data and point towards a path forward for future advocacy. This report will outline key dimensions, barriers, and enablers to drive political will, followed by analysis derived from informant interviews and case studies.

THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT FOR GENDER DATA: KEY DIMENSIONS, BARRIERS, AND ENABLERS FOR POLITICAL WILL

While every country context is different, the interviews conducted for this research identified five common dimensions that constitute the political environment for gender data at the national level: political leadership, national policies, institutional coordination, resource mobilization, and engagement with non-state actors. Each of these dimensions has associated barriers and enablers where advocacy efforts can be targeted to enhance political will and demand for gender data.

¹ This paper was co-authored by Natalie Cleveland (Data2X), Kate Grantham (FemDev Consulting), Amina Nzinga (Local Development Research Institute) and Muchiri Nyaggah (Local Development Research Institute). We are grateful to government stakeholders from the following countries for participating in this research: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Canada, Côte d’Ivoire, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ghana, Germany, India, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mexico, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sweden, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United Kingdom, and Zambia. All of the country interview data has been aggregated and anonymized for this global synthesis brief, with the exception of any case study examples.

The Political Environment for Gender Data at the National Level

DIMENSION	DESCRIPTION	BARRIERS	ENABLERS FOR POLITICAL WILL
Political Leadership	Political support for and prioritization of gender data by those in leadership positions within government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of political incentive to prioritize gender data ▪ High political turnover ▪ Gender inequality in political representation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Promote awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives ▪ Mobilize gender data champions in government ▪ Attach gender data to other political priorities
National Policies & Frameworks	National policies and frameworks that provide a strong foundation to support and sustain gender data efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No dedicated constituency advocating for gender data ▪ Insufficient resourcing ▪ Inadequate accountability or enforcement mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Model best practices from other countries ▪ Develop national definitions and standards ▪ Promote international frameworks and commitments
Institutional Coordination	Collaboration and cooperation among government departments and agencies responsible for gender data collection and use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of standardization ▪ Siloing of gender data efforts ▪ Inadequate data infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Establish gender data units and/or focal points ▪ Bring together gender data producers and users ▪ Implement data governance structures ▪ Introduce mechanisms for data sharing and integration
Resource Mobilization	Domestic financing and external support provided by donors and partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Competing budget priorities ▪ Opaque nature of budget processes ▪ Low donor investment in gender data ▪ Prescriptive nature of donor funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demonstrate the importance of gender data for national priorities ▪ Enhance knowledge of budget processes ▪ Advocate for dedicated national budgets or budget lines for gender data ▪ Fund gender data systems and infrastructure
Engagement With Non-State Actors	Partnerships with civil society organizations and the media to advocate for and use gender data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shrinking civil society space ▪ Low data literacy ▪ Lack of open and accessible gender data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make gender data more open and accessible ▪ Forge gender data networks ▪ Leverage opportunities for partnership and innovation

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Political support for gender equality and statistics at the highest levels of government is a prerequisite for countries to collect and use gender data effectively. High-ranking officials within political parties and government agencies play a crucial role in setting priorities, allocating resources, and generally creating an enabling environment for gender data. They can champion national gender data policies, budgets, activities, and initiatives that may outlast their time in office.

Barriers:

- **Lack of political incentive to prioritize gender data:** A lack of willingness and determination among political leaders and government officials to support gender data is one of the biggest challenges preventing its collection and use. This can be due to limited knowledge and awareness about the importance of gender data for developing evidence-based policies and programs, low prioritization by their political party or voter base, or in more conservative contexts, fear of political backlash and loss of voter support.
- **High political turnover:** Frequent changes in political leadership can disrupt ongoing gender data activities, initiatives, and partnerships. When new leaders come into power, they may prioritize different issues and shift resources away from gender data initiatives, leading to a lack of continuity in data collection. New leaders may also restructure or downsize institutions responsible for gender data collection, leading to a loss of expertise, institutional memory, and technical capacity.
- **Gender inequality in political representation:** In countries where women and gender-diverse people are underrepresented in high-level leadership positions within government, gender-related issues, including gender data and statistics, may be less likely to receive adequate attention or to be prioritized in policy agendas.

How to enhance political will and leadership for gender data:

- **Promote awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives across government:** Gender data advocates in civil society and champions within government can help inform political leaders and government officials about the importance of gender data for developing evidence-based policies and programs. Even small-scale initiatives to raise awareness and build capacity can catalyze new momentum and support for gender data, especially in contexts with low representation of women and gender-diverse people in positions of power. Efforts should be made to engage stakeholders across different institutions, levels of government, and even political parties to help ensure continuity in gender data collection across political transitions.
- **Mobilize gender data champions in government:** Gender data advocates in civil society can encourage, support, and influence champions in government who are helping to raise awareness about the importance of gender data, advocate for its collection and use, and/or build the capacity of their colleagues and institutions. This can include high-level political actors like ministers, or lower-level public sector employees within the NSO or other departments and agencies. Importantly, championship for gender data is not always “top down”; it is just as often “bottom or middle up.”
- **Attach gender data to other political priorities:** Where gender data is not understood to be a standalone priority, champions within government can adopt the strategy of couching gender data budgets and activities within other issues of importance to political leaders. Common examples include mainstream issues like education or health, which have widespread public support and are less vulnerable to being abandoned during political transitions.

Data Feminism Series Encourages German Government to Take Action on Gender Data

The Data Feminism Series, co-organized by the GIZ Data Lab and Data Pop Alliance, aimed to increase awareness within the Government of Germany, and in GIZ specifically, about the importance of a feminist approach to data and data science, and the role of gender data as a cornerstone of successful feminist development cooperation.

Under the motto “From Talk to Action”, the series included four events covering different aspects of data feminism and gender data in development cooperation (e.g. gender data gaps, data feminist approaches, etc.) and featuring high-ranking national and international experts. The final event was a working session for colleagues to apply what they had learned and formulate recommendations for GIZ’s future work.

More than 150 stakeholders participated in the sessions, including gender data users and producers from different levels of government. The work and discussions carried out during this series helped to foster a shared cause, encourage improved ways of working, and spur new momentum for gender data collection and use in GIZ’s feminist development cooperation.

More information about this series—including the objectives, speakers, and recordings—is [available online](#).

NATIONAL POLICIES & FRAMEWORKS

National policies and frameworks that guide the collection, analysis, and use of gender data provide a strong foundation to support and sustain gender data efforts. This can include standalone gender data policies, but more often involve the integration of gender data mandates and commitments within broader national policies (e.g., national gender equality strategies, national development plans, national statistical plans).² These documents can outline clear definitions, guidance, budgets, and accountability and enforcement mechanisms to enhance the quality, availability, and use of gender data. Importantly, they also provide a strategic policy anchor for future gender data advocacy and initiatives, and help to ensure sustainability and continuity in gender data collection across political transitions.

Barriers:

- **No dedicated constituency advocating for gender data:** Beyond a small technical community within NSOs and women’s/gender ministries, there is typically no dedicated or established body within governments specifically advocating for the collection, analysis, and use of gender data at the national level. For this reason, gender data mandates and commitments tend not to get included within broader national policies and frameworks, and standalone national policies on gender data are even more rare.
- **Insufficient resourcing:** Even when relevant gender data policies and frameworks are in place, without the necessary funding it becomes challenging, if not impossible, for government departments and agencies to implement them effectively. Insufficient resourcing can lead to inadequate staffing, outdated equipment, insufficient training for data collectors, reduced coverage and sampling, and low-quality or irregular data collection, resulting in gender data gaps.

² Some examples where countries have integrated gender data mandates and/or commitments within broader national policies include: the [Philippines Magna Carta for Women \(2009\)](#); [Kenya’s National Policy on Gender and Development \(2019\)](#); [Zambia’s Second National Strategy for the Development of Statistics \(2023-2027\)](#); and [United States Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security \(2023\)](#).

- **Inadequate accountability and enforcement mechanisms:** Where they do exist, gender data policies and frameworks can tend to be aspirational, serving as broad guidance for departments and agencies to operationalize at their discretion but with more limited emphasis on actionability and accountability. Moreover, officials may have limited authority or mechanisms to enforce compliance where gender data targets and standards are not being met.

How to enhance political will and national policies for gender data:

- **Model best practices from other countries:** Champions within and outside of government can advocate for the development of national gender data plans and/or the inclusion of gender data within broader national policies and frameworks, and look to other countries for best practice models. By examining what has worked well elsewhere, governments can understand the potential benefits, adopt best practices, and avoid common pitfalls or missteps.
- **Develop national definitions and standards:** A helpful foundation and prerequisite for establishing standalone or integrated gender data policies and frameworks is to develop official definitions and methodological standards for gender data collection at the national level. International standards bearers and organizations like [UN Women](#) and the [UN Statistics Division](#) have developed guidance for this purpose that can be used for support and to ensure that national gender data collection is comparable with other countries.
- **Promote international frameworks and commitments:** Global and regional agreements like the SDGs, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Maputo Protocol do not directly mandate countries to collect gender data but they do provide a strong motivation, framework, and methodological guidance for doing so. Gender data advocates can push for governments to sign on to these agreements and fulfill their associated data collection responsibilities.

INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION

Institutional coordination for gender data refers to the process of collaboration and cooperation among various government departments and agencies responsible for gender data collection, such as the NSO, women’s and gender ministries, and ministries of health, education, labor, etc. It includes the strategies, mechanisms, and frameworks in place to ensure a cohesive and systematic approach to gender data collection, analysis, and use across the whole of government.

Barriers:

- **Lack of standardization:** Without standardized definitions, methodologies, processes, indicators, and capacities for gender data collection at the national level, it is difficult to ensure the consistency and comparability of gender data across government departments and agencies. This makes institutional coordination on gender data efforts difficult, if not impossible.
- **Siloing of gender data efforts:** Where government departments and agencies responsible for the collection and use of gender data work in disconnected silos, they may be completely unaware of what the other is doing. This can result in missed opportunities to pool resources, expertise, and analysis across institutional boundaries. It also prevents the widespread uptake and use of existing gender data to develop evidence-based policies and programs.
- **Inadequate data infrastructure:** Inadequate infrastructure and technology to support gender data storage, management, integration, and information sharing. This can include the lack of any mechanism, system, or platform for easily uploading and sharing gender data across different departments and agencies.

How to enhance political will and institutional coordination for gender data:

- **Establish gender data units and/or focal points:** Establishing 'gender data units' within the women's and gender ministry, or other departments and agencies, can enhance technical capacity, improve interdepartmental coordination, promote greater demand for gender data, and increase the use of existing gender data. Installing 'gender focal points' within the NSOs is a similar and/or complementary strategy that can be used.
- **Bring together gender data producers and users:** Creating spaces for dialogue between gender data producers and users can help to foster new and improved ways of working and greater clarity on how to facilitate problems. It can also help to promote a sense of solidarity and amplify calls for increased funding for gender data. This dialogue can take place at the national level among government stakeholders, or internationally among counterparts from different governments and institutions.
- **Implement data governance structures:** Champions within government can help put in place mechanisms to oversee the coordination and management of gender data efforts. This might include the creation of interagency committees, task forces, or working groups specifically focused on strengthening gender data activities.
- **Introduce mechanisms for data sharing and integration:** Champions within government can promote or introduce mechanisms for sharing gender data across departments and agencies in order to avoid duplication of efforts, facilitate a holistic analysis of gender issues, and enable evidence-based policymaking. For example, some countries maintain online portals, platforms, or publications integrating gender data and statistics from across many different departments and agencies.

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

Resource mobilization for gender data encompasses both domestic financing and external support provided by donors and partners. Domestic resourcing is the first and best option to fund gender data activities because of its sustainability, predictability, and alignment with national priorities. However, where governments cannot fund their gender data activities through public finances alone, external support from donors and partners can help to fill the gap. A significant share of resources for gender data in many low- and middle-income countries are donor or partner funded.

Barriers:

- **Competing budget priorities:** Compounding crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, rising food and energy prices, and global inflation have all contributed to fiscal tightening by governments. Within this context—as governments struggle to adequately fund areas like health, education, and food security—political willingness to finance gender data tends to be constrained.
- **Opaque nature of budget processes:** National budget processes are complex and sometimes lack transparency and clarity in terms of how they are formulated, implemented, and monitored. Even in the context of gender-responsive budgeting processes, governments tend to incorporate gender considerations into existing budget lines, without having specific allocations solely dedicated to gender data-related activities. For these reasons, it can be difficult to know how much money is actually going to gender data, or when and how gender data champions can effectively influence budgetary allocations for gender data.
- **Low donor investment in gender data:** As mentioned, donor support for gender data has sharply declined in recent years. In addition to this, funding for gender data is highly concentrated [with just a handful of donors](#), rendering it more vulnerable to strategic shifts by a single provider, especially during periods of political and economic uncertainty.
- **Prescriptive nature of donor funding:** Donors tend to put funding for gender data into their own priority areas, rather than directing it towards national priorities or strengthening data systems. This limits the potential impact and sustainability of funding, and does not create the kind of ownership that is needed in-country to maintain strong gender data systems.

How to enhance political will and resource mobilization for gender data:

- **Demonstrate the importance of gender data for national priorities:** Champions within and outside of government can raise awareness about the importance of gender data for achieving national priorities using available evidence from other countries and international organizations, and by highlighting past examples where having available gender data helped to develop effective domestic policies and programs. Cultivating this kind of evidence base will help to convince governments to invest in gender data even in a context of resource constraints.
- **Enhance knowledge of budget processes:** Awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives can help teach gender data champions within and outside of government about the national budget process, including when and how to effectively influence budgetary allocations for gender data.
- **Advocate for dedicated national budgets or budget lines for gender data:** Gender data advocates in civil society and champions within government can advocate for dedicated national budgets for gender data, with clear processes and allocations, ideally supported by law. Another, more accessible, option in some contexts may be to advocate for a specific budget line for gender data to be included within national or departmental budgets.
- **Fund gender data systems and infrastructure:** Donors and multilateral organizations should focus their support to countries on promoting an enabling environment for gender data. Initiatives that aim to strengthen countries' gender data systems and infrastructure for the long-term are more impactful and sustainable than those that aim to increase gender data production on a specific topic or issue, and do more to promote domestic ownership and priorities.

Women Count Provides Support for Uganda's National Gender Data System and Priorities

Since its launch in 2016, UN Women's Women Count Uganda project has provided financial and technical support for the Government of Uganda to strengthen the country's national gender data system and advance its own gender data priorities.

Some of the key achievements from this project include:

- In 2016, the Government of Uganda adopted the first National Priority Gender Equality Indicators. This set of 140 indicators is being used to monitor progress on gender equality, including the National Development Plan and the SDGs.
- In 2018, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) assisted 45 federal and local government ministries, departments, and agencies to develop and implement statistical plans to increase the production and use of gender data, resulting in a complete mainstreaming of gender in the national statistical system.
- In 2020, UBOS launched the [Gender Statistics Portal](#), a centralized database for up-to-date gender statistics in the areas of demography, production, economics, and the environment. The data is presented in the form of tables, graphs, and maps with the accompanying metadata available for download by users.

More information about the Women Count Uganda project and its achievements is [available online](#).

ENGAGEMENT WITH NON-STATE ACTORS

Non-state actors including civil society organizations, academics, and the media, among others, are important advocates and end users of gender data. They play a crucial role in promoting national gender data collection and use by pushing for improved gender data and resourcing, putting existing gender data to use, and partnering with government departments and agencies on gender data initiatives and capacity building. They also provide important oversight and accountability for taxpayers whose dollars are funding gender equality programs that will be less effective if not evidence-based.

Barriers:

- **Shrinking civil society space:** In some countries, governments are increasingly closed off to engaging with civil society and the media on gender equality issues, including gender data, and may even take steps to restrict, suppress, or limit the information and activities available to them. This makes it difficult, and sometimes dangerous, for non-state actors to campaign for greater government action on gender equality, including data collection, especially on more politically sensitive issues like sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, and LGBTQI+ rights.
- **Low data literacy:** A lack of understanding by civil society and the media about how gender data is collected and reported by governments can prevent efforts to monitor the progress and quality of national gender data collection, and to put available data to use for research, reporting, and advocacy.
- **Lack of open and accessible gender data:** Even in contexts where governments are collecting gender data, it is not always quickly or easily accessible to non-state actors. For example, some government agencies require formal requests, lengthy approval processes, or impose fees, which can deter civil society organizations, academics, and media outlets from obtaining gender data. In other cases, gender data is provided in formats that are difficult to download, read, analyze, and use.

How to enhance political will and engagement with non-state actors:

- **Make gender data more open and accessible:** Gender data champions within government can encourage their institutions to adopt more open data policies that prioritize the proactive release of gender data in accessible formats. This involves making datasets freely available online, preferably in machine-readable formats, to facilitate easy access and analysis by non-state actors. Establishing dedicated data portals, platforms, or publications specifically for gender data can also help to centralize access to relevant datasets and resources. These platforms should be user-friendly and feature robust search and visualization tools to enable non-state actors to explore, analyze, and download data easily.
- **Forge gender data networks:** Non-state actors and champions within government alike can take action to establish or join gender data networks, coalitions, and working groups. These networks help to build political will on gender data by sharing experiences, working through challenges collectively, amplifying calls for increased funding for gender data, and in some cases providing financial support and capacity building for governments. This includes coalitions like the Gender and Environment Data Alliance (GEDA), Equal Measures 2030, Clearinghouse for Financing Development Data, Inclusive Data Charter, and the Gender Data Network.
- **Leverage opportunities for partnership and innovation:** Although national crises and emergencies often result in diminished financing and political will for gender data, they can sometimes be the catalyst for new and innovative gender data partnerships between governments and non-state actors. This was true, for example, during the pandemic, when new partnerships were formed among government agencies, academic institutions, local governments, private businesses, and civil society organizations to collect urgently needed health and social data for policymaking.

India's Annual Gender Publication Series Provides a Comprehensive Resource for Publicly Accessible Gender Data

The 'Women and Men in India' publication series has been released annually by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation since 1999. It is a comprehensive collection of gender data and statistics produced by more than ten different government agencies (e.g., Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Education, Department of Justice, etc.) portraying the current state of gender equality in the country.

The latest edition in the series—*Women and Men in India 2021*—is divided into six chapters covering diverse aspects of gender equality: population-related statistics, health, education, participation in the economy, participation in decision making, and impediments to empowerment. All of the gender data for each chapter is aggregated as an Excel table that can be easily downloaded by users.

Each publication consolidates the latest available gender data and statistics into a single, publicly accessible format, to serve as a comprehensive resource for users. This includes policymakers in India, who use the data to understand and address different aspects of gender inequality, and to monitor changes at the national and state level over time. It also includes non-state actors from civil society, academia, and the media who use the data to conduct their own research, analysis, and reporting.

More information about the latest publication in this series is [available online](#).

STRENGTHENING THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

In the hands of policymakers, advocates, and communities, gender data is a powerful force for gender-equitable change, yet data remains incomplete, irregularly produced, and chronically underfinanced around the world. While a lack of political will and demand for gender data is a root cause of these challenges, this research demonstrates that gender data is indeed a political issue—and to build a stronger enabling environment, advocates, governments, and philanthropy alike must all play a role in incentivizing political prioritization, mobilizing championship, and boosting resourcing and accountability for gender data.

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