

Data for Democracy:

Investments in Gender Data Strengthen Democratic Resilience

INTRODUCTION

Democracies around the world are under growing threat. The rise of far-right authoritarianism has triggered a wave of democratic backsliding—marked by targeted attacks on human rights, civic space, judicial independence, and media freedom.¹ A central feature of this rollback is the growing backlash against gender equality. Authoritarian actors across the globe are weaponizing anti-gender narratives and disinformation to sow division, justify regressive policies, and consolidate power, often under the guise of protecting “national identity” and “traditional values.”^{2,3}

The suppression, manipulation, and destruction of data, and in particular gender data, has become a key tactic used by authoritarian actors to erode gender equality and weaken democratic institutions. Gender data is both an *indicator* of democratic health—monitoring the degree to which governments uphold principles of inclusion, accountability, and transparency—and an *input* into it, enabling evidence-based policymaking, countering anti-gender disinformation, and reinforcing democratic norms. When gender data is manipulated or obscured, it weakens public debate, shields those in power from accountability, and undermines efforts to build inclusive and responsive public institutions that uphold the rights of all citizens, particularly women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

In this context, steady and ongoing investments in gender data are essential to safeguard and strengthen democratic resilience.

Gender data is data that captures information on the different lived experiences of women, men, and gender-diverse people. It includes data that is disaggregated by sex or gender; data that pertains to women, girls, and gender-diverse people exclusively or primarily; and data that reflects gender issues, including roles, relations, and inequalities. It can be quantitative and qualitative, and come from a variety of sources (e.g., household surveys, national censuses, administrative records, research studies, big data sources, citizen-generated data, private sector data, etc.).

Democratic resilience refers to the ability of a political system to withstand, adapt, and respond to challenges, threats, and crises without compromising its core principles, institutions, or processes. This concept rests on three interrelated pillars: democratic governance, democratic participation, and democratic accountability.

1 Freedom House. (2025). Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2025/uphill-battle-to-safeguard-rights#elected-leaders-are-undermining-democratic-institutions>

2 In this brief, “anti-gender” refers to organized opposition to gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and feminist movements—often rooted in conservative, nationalist, or authoritarian ideologies.

3 Khan, A., Tant, E. & C. Harper. (2024). Facing the Backlash: What is Fuelling Anti-Feminist and Anti-Democratic Forces? ODI Global. <https://www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/align-framingpaper-backlash-mar24-es.pdf>

This brief explores the critical role of gender data in promoting democratic resilience amidst rising authoritarianism and anti-gender backlash globally. It outlines how gender data enables governments, civil society, and the media to monitor and respond to threats across key dimensions of democratic governance, participation, and accountability—and to anticipate and prevent future shocks. It concludes with recommendations for how these different actors can better support and leverage gender data in defense of democracy.

THE PROBLEM: AUTHORITARIANISM, GENDER BACKLASH, AND DATA SUPPRESSION ARE INTERSECTING THREATS

In many contexts, the deliberate suppression, manipulation, or destruction of data has become a key tactic used by authoritarian actors to simultaneously erode gender equality and weaken democratic institutions. These actors can include governments, opposition parties, religious and nationalist groups, media influencers, corporate and technology giants, and well-funded organizations backed by anti-gender and anti-rights movements.⁴ Many operate outside formal political power but play a key role in shaping public discourse, influencing policy, and eroding democratic norms.

By targeting the systems, institutions, and individuals responsible for generating and disseminating gender data, these actors aim to obscure inequalities and rights violations, silence dissent, and evade accountability. Common tactics include:

- Dismantling women's and gender equality ministries and halting the production of gender-disaggregated statistics and indicators.
- Cutting support for gender-focused research and revoking grants to independent institutions that generate feminist knowledge.
- Revoking accreditation and defunding universities offering women's, gender, or sexuality studies programs.
- Purging gender data and reports from government websites and digital archives, limiting access to historical trends and evidence.
- Passing legislation that restricts the collection or sharing of gender data domestically and in international cooperation.
- Co-opting multilateral frameworks and agreements to dilute or remove gender equality and human rights language.
- Spreading disinformation and launching politicized attacks against gender equality programming, often framing it as foreign interference or a threat to traditional values.
- Targeting, restricting, or criminalizing the work of civil society organizations that collect, analyze, and share gender-related data, including efforts to monitor inequality and human rights violations.
- Withdrawing funding from bilateral and multilateral initiatives that collect and publish gender data in more politicized areas such as gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, or LGBTQI+ rights.

One of the most alarming examples is the defunding of the United States' Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) program—a move that dismantled a critical source of gender, population, and health data across more than 90 low- and middle-income countries.⁵ This action not

4 McEwan, H. and L. Narayanaswamy. (2023). The International Anti-Gender Movement: Understanding the Rise of Anti-Gender Discourses in the Context of Development, Human Rights and Social Protection. Working Paper 2023-06: Gender Justice and Development, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. <https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/2023/wp-2023-4-anti-gender-movement.pdf>

5 Igoe, M. (2025, March 16). Critical Global Surveys Fall Casualty to US Foreign Aid Gutting. Devex. <https://www.devex.com/news/critical-global-surveys-fall-casualty-to-us-foreign-aid-gutting-109513>

only halted future survey rounds but also removed some previously accessible data from government archives, preventing many users—from researchers and advocates to governments and public health professionals—from using this important evidence to guide their work. This loss has an outsized impact on gender data. Though imperfect,⁶ DHS data is often the only source of reliable, large-scale, nationally representative gender statistics in many of these countries, making its absence a serious setback for global gender equality efforts.

When gender data is unreliable or unavailable, governments lack the evidence needed to allocate resources equitably and design inclusive policies that address the needs of all people, especially those marginalized due to their gender, age, race, disability, and other intersecting factors. This absence of responsive policymaking can deepen feelings of exclusion and disenfranchisement, fueling political backlash, violence, and social instability. Likewise, when gender data systems are deliberately dismantled or existing evidence is obscured, it weakens democratic oversight by depriving citizens, civil society, and the media of a critical tool for tracking progress on gender equality and holding power to account.

THE OPPORTUNITY: GENDER DATA IS AN INPUT TO AND AN INDICATOR OF DEMOCRATIC HEALTH

In the current global political context, gender data is vital for safeguarding and strengthening democracy. Gender data serves as an *indicator* of democratic health, monitoring the degree to which governments are delivering for all their people, and upholding principles of inclusion, accountability, and transparency. It is also an *input* into democratic health, enabling evidence-based decisions on policies, programs, and resourcing, countering anti-gender disinformation, and reinforcing democratic norms. It does so by:

- **Countering anti-gender narratives and disinformation:**
Provides credible, disaggregated evidence to dispel myths, challenge harmful stereotypes, and push back against false and regressive discourse.
 - [Afrobarometer](#) collects and publishes disaggregated public opinion data across African countries, revealing attitudes toward gender norms and rights—often challenging political rhetoric and regressive narratives with citizen-driven evidence.
- **Enabling inclusive, evidence-based policymaking:**
Ensures that laws, policies, and budget allocations are grounded in data and responsive to the needs of all people, especially women and marginalized groups.
 - UN Women’s [Women Count Initiative](#) works with national governments and statistical offices to close gender data gaps, improve data quality, and ensure that gender statistics are produced, accessible, and used for policymaking.
 - The [Equality Insights](#) program implemented by the International Women’s Development Agency works to redefine how poverty is measured so the influence of gender, age, disability, and other intersecting characteristics is visible in global poverty data, and to ensure this data is available to inform action.
- **Monitoring democratic participation and representation:**
Tracks whether women and other marginalized groups can meaningfully engage in political and public life and shape decision-making on matters that directly affect them.
 - The [Varieties of Democracy \(V-Dem\) Database](#) provides multidimensional and disaggregated data on democracy and political engagement across 200 countries. It includes measures on women’s civil society participation, political empowerment, and freedom of expression, and on inclusiveness of political decision-making.

⁶ Though a critical source of gender data and evidence, there are notable limitations to DHS data, including its focus on women aged 15–49, which excludes older women and gender-diverse individuals. This restricts intersectional analysis and reinforces only partial representations of “women’s” experiences. Learn more [here](#).

- **Signaling democratic backsliding:**

Shifts in gender equality indicators can reveal broader patterns of democratic decline, such as restrictions on rights, civic space, or media freedom.

→ OECD's [Social Institutions and Gender Index \(SIGI\)](#) tracks discrimination against women in formal and informal institutions—such as laws, social norms, and practices—across 179 countries, offering insights into how gender inequalities both reflect and reinforce democratic decline.

- **Strengthening accountability:**

Equips citizens, civil society, and the media with tools to monitor government policies and commitments and advocate for more inclusive, gender-responsive governance.

→ Equal Measures 2030's [SDG Gender Index](#) equips advocates with accessible, comparative data to track progress on gender equality across countries and hold governments accountable to their SDG commitments.

- **Promoting transparency and institutional integrity:**

Open, accessible gender data enhances transparency and fosters public trust in democratic institutions.

→ Canada's [Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Statistics Hub](#) makes disaggregated and intersectional data on topics like education, work, violence, and care, publicly available and easily accessible to data users, reinforcing a culture of openness and accountability.

→ Open Data Watch's [Open Data Inventory](#) assesses data provided by national statistical offices for topical coverage and openness, helping governments to identify data gaps and promote data transparency.

Ultimately, investing in gender data systems and infrastructure is a powerful way to equip governments, civil society, and the media with the evidence and capacity to monitor emerging threats, respond effectively, and safeguard against future shocks. In other words, an investment in gender data is an investment in democratic resilience.

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LEVERAGING GENDER DATA TO BUILD DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Democratic resilience refers to the ability of a political system to withstand, adapt, and respond to challenges, threats, and crises without compromising its core principles, institutions, or processes.⁷ The collection, analysis, and use of gender data reinforces all three pillars of democratic resilience: governance, participation, and accountability.

Democratic governance relies on inclusive, transparent, and accountable public institutions that uphold the rule of law, protect human rights, and ensure representative and responsive decisionmaking. Gender data plays a crucial role in this process by revealing disparities in access to rights, justice, and legal services. It enables governments to design evidence-based policies, programs, and budgets that meet the needs of diverse populations. Gender data also supports monitoring progress on commitments such as gender quotas, anti-discrimination laws, and legal protections for women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

USING GENDER DATA TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN SPAIN'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

Spain's **Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) Guide** offers a compelling example of how gender data can reinforce democratic governance by embedding transparency, accountability, and inclusion into institutional structures, reporting, and decision-making processes.

Central to Spain's FFP is a robust monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) framework introduced in its **2023-2024 Action Plan**. The framework links policy objectives to specific gender indicators, assigns institutional responsibilities for data collection, and establishes regular reporting timelines. For example, one objective tracks Spain's promotion of gender equality in the European Union and multilateral forums, using indicators that measure the inclusion of gender issues in diplomatic efforts and engagement with feminist movements. Another focuses on gender equality within the foreign service, tracking the number and percentage of women in leadership positions.

By systematically collecting and using gender data, Spain strengthens democratic governance in three key ways:

- Informing evidence-based policymaking to address gender disparities and promote equitable outcomes.
- Promoting inclusive representation by tracking and addressing barriers to civic and political participation.
- Enhancing institutional accountability through regular reporting on gender equality objectives.

Through this data-driven approach, Spain integrates gender equality into the fabric of its foreign policy while enhancing the credibility and responsiveness of its democratic institutions. Its FFP serves as a model for how structured, indicator-based gender data systems can foster transparent, responsive, and inclusive governance.

⁷ Cheeseman, N., et. al. (2024). How to Strengthen Democratic Resilience: Five Lessons for Democratic Renewal. European Democracy Hub. https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/How-to-Strengthen-Democratic-Resilience-Five-Lessons-for-Democratic-Renewal_final.pdf

Democratic participation refers to the ability of all people, including women and other marginalized groups, to engage meaningfully in civic and political life, and to be involved in decision-making on matters that directly affect them. Gender data is essential for identifying barriers to democratic participation—such as voter suppression, political violence, time use, freedom of mobility, and unequal access to education, national identity documentation, and digital technologies—which often disproportionately affect women and other marginalized groups. It also enables tracking of women’s and gender-diverse individuals’ engagement in civic and political life, including voter registration and turnout, and their representation in parliaments and governance institutions.

TRACKING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN POLITICIANS IN KENYA

Violence against women in politics is a growing threat to inclusive democratic participation. Around the world, women politicians face escalating levels of harassment, intimidation, and abuse—much of it gendered, coordinated, and increasingly online. These attacks aim not only to silence individual women, but to deter broader participation in political life. Gender data is essential to document the scale, nature, and impact of this violence, and hold institutions accountable for addressing it.

In Kenya, a [study by Pollicy and the National Democratic Institute](#) tracked online violence targeting women candidates during the 2022 general elections. The findings were alarming: over 55% of respondents reported experiencing some form of online violence, including trolling (63%), hate speech (59%), disinformation (45%), and sexual harassment or threats of violence (43%). Much of the abuse focused on women’s appearance, personal lives, or morality rather than their policy positions. It was often spread through coordinated campaigns using fake social media accounts and inflammatory hashtags.

The findings also show that many women did not report these incidents due to fear of retaliation, inadequate responses from social media platforms, and distrust in the justice system. This environment contributes to a culture of impunity that silences women, reinforces inequality, and undermines democratic processes.

By collecting and publicly sharing gender-disaggregated data on this issue, the study helped close critical evidence gaps and apply pressure on political institutions, social media platforms, and law enforcement to take action. It also strengthened efforts to protect women’s political participation, reinforcing the broader resilience and inclusiveness of Kenya’s democratic processes.

Democratic accountability encompasses the systems, mechanisms, and protections that allow citizens, civil society, and the media to hold those in power to account. Gender data strengthens these efforts by enabling the assessment of government performance, tracking restrictions on civic space and press freedom, and identifying bias in public policies and spending. It also supports monitoring of disinformation, harassment, and violence directed at women in public roles, including journalists, activists, and human rights defenders.

DATA COOPERATIVES AS A DEMOCRATIC AND COMMUNITY-LED ALTERNATIVE TO CENTRALIZED DATA CONTROL

The growing centralization of data—especially through large-scale artificial intelligence and big data systems—has concentrated immense power in the hands of a few dominant actors. Increasingly close ties between some governments and technology companies are eroding the boundaries between public and private control of data. This consolidation enables those in power to shape what data is collected, how it is used, and who can access it. The result is a data landscape that is more vulnerable to destruction, manipulation, and misuse, with fewer mechanisms for public accountability.

Gender data is especially at risk. Anti-gender actors can more easily suppress or distort evidence of inequality, restrict access to vital information and services, or weaponize data systems to surveil and silence civil society organizations, journalists, and human rights defenders who expose abuse or demand accountability.

In response to these challenges, data cooperatives can provide a democratic and community-led alternative to centralized data control. These organizations pool information, especially digital information, for mutual benefit and are governed by transparent, participatory, and equitable principles. Members collectively decide how their data is stored, shared, and used, ensuring community consent, oversight, and protection. In particular, data cooperatives offer individuals the ability to decide how entities like companies and governments access and use their data, or whether they access it at all. By decentralizing power and embedding democratic values into data governance, cooperatives reinforce public accountability and are less vulnerable to political interference.

INVESTING IN GENDER DATA TO COUNTER DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Amidst rising authoritarianism and anti-gender backlash, an investment in gender data is an investment in democratic resilience. The following recommendations highlight opportunities for actors in government, civil society, and the media to better support and leverage gender data to monitor signs of democratic decline, counter disinformation, and design inclusive, evidence-based policies.

Governments

- **Support robust and resilient gender data systems:** Ensure sustainable domestic and bilateral investments in gender data systems that can withstand political interference and authoritarian threats. Prioritize financial and technical support to national statistical offices— particularly in low- and middle-income countries—to strengthen their capacity to collect and use gender data.
- **Make gender data open, accessible, and actionable:** Ensure that gender data is transparent, timely, and available to government agencies, civil society, and the media. Open and accessible data strengthens accountability, supports advocacy, and enables inclusive, evidence-informed democratic dialogue and decision-making.

- **Use gender data to track and respond to democratic threats:** Leverage gender data as an early warning system and accountability mechanism. Prioritize collecting, analyzing, disseminating, and using high-quality gender data across all aspects of democracy, including governance, participation, and accountability.
- **Integrate and invest in gender data through foreign policy and development cooperation:** Donor governments should embed gender data into foreign policy and development strategies, including FFP and WPS frameworks. This requires not only using gender data to monitor global trends and identify authoritarian threats to democracy but also requiring it as a foundation for informed decision making and investing in the systems, infrastructure, and institutions that produce it.

Civil Society

- **Advocate for governments to recognize gender data as a democratic imperative:** Emphasize its role in enabling evidence-based policy- and decision-making, countering anti-gender disinformation, and reinforcing democratic norms. Encourage governments to use their standard-setting authority to require the collection and use of gender data domestically and through international cooperation.
- **Strengthen data-driven advocacy and legal accountability:** Civil society organizations should build capacity to use gender data strategically in policy advocacy and public campaigns that expose rights violations and democratic erosion. This includes leveraging gender data to challenge discriminatory laws, demand government transparency, and hold state actors accountable.
- **Support alternative and decentralized data sources:** Explore and invest in democratic and community-led alternatives to datasets maintained by governments or international institutions, such as [data cooperatives](#) and [citizen-generated data](#). These models can amplify marginalized voices, build local data ownership, and diversify data sources, helping to reduce the vulnerability of data to political interference and suppression.

Media

- **Use gender data to investigate and counter disinformation:** Journalists and media outlets should incorporate gender data into investigative reporting and fact-checking efforts to expose anti-gender disinformation and hold perpetrators accountable. Training journalists to interpret and apply gender data can enhance the quality of democratic debate, counter false narratives, and elevate evidence-based public discourse.

Conclusion

Investment in gender data is not just good policy—it is a social and political imperative. In an era of democratic backsliding and rising anti-gender backlash, timely and reliable gender data is essential for understanding lived realities, identifying early warning signs, countering disinformation, and designing inclusive, evidence-based, and responsive policies that support political legitimacy and resilience. Without it, governments lack the tools to detect and respond to emerging threats, while citizens, civil society, and the media are left without the evidence needed to demand accountability and advocate for public institutions that are inclusive, transparent, and uphold human rights. In a world where authoritarianism, disinformation, and anti-gender backlash is on the rise, an investment in gender data is an investment in democratic resilience—and a step towards safeguarding the rights of all, especially women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

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