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**Developing a common dissemination platform for gender statistics \***

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## **Developing a common dissemination platform for gender statistics**

The development of a dissemination platform for statistics becomes more complex when that platform needs to be structured at the international level and when we focus on a very dynamic area, such as gender. The platform is composed of a list of indicators organized on multiple frameworks and coming from different sources. However, agreeing on that composition implies dealing with issues such as policy priorities, data availability, national capacity and international coordination. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) proved to be an important facilitator in solving those issues, even though partnership strategies are still the key aspect of developing a common dissemination platform. As key output of this unifying platform, the United Nations Statistics Division proposes to launch the *GenderInfo* initiative. The *GenderInfo*, while intensively using ICT for developing this platform, will require strong partnership with stakeholders, and especially data providing institutions, to be successful.

### **1. Introduction**

One of the main phases in the statistics production cycle is the dissemination. Even though the collection and compilation of statistics is probably the stage in which most of the effort is concentrated and where most of the methodological issues needs to be solved, accessing the result of that process and being able to disseminate them effectively poses an important challenge for statisticians.

The challenge arises from statisticians having the capacity to adapt the statistical data to different audiences that will use the data for different purposes, such as policy making, research, education, etc. In addition, when the intention is to disseminate statistical data at the global level, the problem becomes even more complex. At this level, the process of compilation and harmonization of methodologies and frameworks need to be resolved beforehand.

Disseminating gender statistics at the global level introduces another layer of complexity. We are dealing with different frameworks and perspectives that are still being discussed and new areas that are gradually being introduced into the discussion agenda. New areas, such as violence against women, time-use statistics and others, require the dissemination platform to be adapted constantly.

As many international organizations, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other institutions are producing and receiving statistical data on gender, usually from the same source, it is necessary to have a common platform for exchanging gender statistics at the global level in an effective way.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the main elements that a common dissemination platform for gender statistics must have, as well as identifying the main challenges for developing it. The next section characterizes the main substantive components of this dissemination platform. The third section discusses how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) may contribute to the development of that platform. In the fourth section, the main challenges and the success factors of developing this global platform at the international level are presented. The fifth section introduces the *GenderInfo* initiative from the United Nations Statistics Division.

## 2. Substantive components of a common dissemination platform

A review of efforts at creating platforms for the dissemination of gender statistics reveals many initiatives that provide a global perspective on gender indicators. Most of these initiatives, however, were concentrated in one or more of the following areas:

- Specific topics such as health, education, work, empowerment, population, etc.
- Specific regions
- Specific policy areas such as reproductive health, violence against women, poverty, etc.

The main reason for this specific focus on gender statistics is that most of the efforts were by international agencies whose mandates focus on specific topics; governments or non-governmental organizations whose interests are on specific policy areas; or regional commissions that concentrate on the specific needs of their members states.

Global data dissemination efforts such as the Women's Indicators and Statistics Database (WISTAT), released by the United Nations Statistics Division, covers all regions and also a wide range of topics, but has not been updated since 2000, The *World's Women* series and the UNIFEM *Progress of the World's Women* series is another medium for dissemination of gender statistics. For them to have a wider application, they should conform to a standard dissemination platform that was agreed and administered at the global level.

Disseminating gender statistics at the global level requires making many decisions that needs to be made at that level as well. All of these decisions involve standardization, and we have identified three areas:

- Sources
- Frameworks
- Indicators

### Sources

In the development of a common platform for disseminating gender statistics, standardizing sources implies assigning responsibility to a given statistical producer the preparation and/or compilation of a given set of indicators. It is currently not uncommon to find in gender statistics that a given indicator may be produced by different organizations at either the national, regional and international level. Thus, overlapping of substantive criteria and methodology is common and that complicate the aggregation of statistical data at the international level.

One of the main requirements for a common dissemination platform is to have a single source of statistical data for the selected set of indicators, which may contribute to the comparability of statistical information and avoid uncertainty. Of course, this approach presents many challenges that will be discussed later.

### Frameworks

Many frameworks have been defined to categorize gender indicators. In general, I can distinguish two basic types.

One type of framework groups indicators by the policy area for which the indicator can be used. An example of this is the framework established in the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 (Figure 1).

The Economy
Education and Training
Power and Decision-making
Health
Violence against Women
Poverty
Armed Conflict
Institutional Mechanism for the Advancement of Women
Human rights
The Media
The Environment
The Girl-Child

Figure 1: Beijing Platform for Action – Source: Fourth World Conference of Women, Beijing, China, September 2005

Access to Resources
Crime and Justice
Economy
Education
Environment
Families and Households
Health and Nutrition
Housing
Information and Communication Technology
Legislation
Population
Public Life and Decision Making
Time-Use
Work and Employment

Figure 2: Preliminary framework for gender statistics. Source: United Nations Statistics Division, GenderInfo Project, 2006

The other type of framework groups indicators by thematic area. Figure 2 shows an example of this topic-oriented framework that is under construction in the United Nations Statistic Division, as part of the *GenderInfo* proposal described in section 5.

There are also some frameworks that combine topic and policy oriented categories.

Many frameworks can be used simultaneously, depending on the purpose of the user, and the dissemination platform that we develop should be flexible enough to support that framework multiplicity. In addition, frameworks are actually models of representation, therefore, we should be able to incorporate or eliminate categories depending on the need for statistical data.

The framework should represent not only the indicators that we currently have as part of our inventory, but also the potential indicators we need to obtain in order to have gender-sensitive information on a particular policy or topic area. For example, areas such as time-use currently have few indicators and it is not generally included in most of the existing frameworks; however, that highlights the need for defining and producing indicators on that area at the international level.

### Indicators

Indicators are the basic level of our dissemination platform. The list of indicators that we want to disseminate at the international level needs to be determined within the framework or thematic agenda (policy or topic oriented), the availability of sources, as well as considering the capacity of each country for producing them.

The list of gender indicators to be disseminated needs to be manageable, comprehensive and accessible. Manageable means that we need to have a list that can easily be maintained and disseminated at the international level; comprehensive implies that it should reasonably cover most of the topics or policy areas defined in the categories of the framework; and accessible means that we should establish how they are going to be obtained.

In respect to accessibility, it is important to add that I am not only implying that the source needs to be clearly established, but also the definition of what the indicator means and the assumptions established when it was constructed. In the next section, I will stress the importance of supporting metadata in any common dissemination platform we plan to develop.

### **3. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)**

ICT is a key component in developing a standard platform for gender statistics for many reasons.

First, through ICT we are able to enforce standardization in the different stages of the dissemination of gender statistics. Even though ICT will not make us agree or disagree on a given set of gender indicators, assuming the agreement was made, we can define the data structures and flows for disseminating that information without diverging from the standards. For example, standards like SDMX (Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange) provides us with a common language for exchanging gender statistics that will enable the different statistical organizations to link with each other, independently of the dissemination platform they decided to use at their local level. SDMX might be a good example in which ICT can help national and regional statistics producers, compilers and disseminators to connect with each other, without losing their autonomy and allowing them to better serve their own stakeholders.<sup>1</sup>

Second, ICT not only provides standard structures but efficient tools to access gender statistics. As we have indicated before, one of the main issues of disseminating gender statistics at the international level is the great variety of users. ICT enables us to customize the scope and presentation of statistical information to the audience we want to particularly focus on. Series can be presented as raw data that can be easily imported into statistical software packages for further analysis, or it can also be displayed as graphs, tables and maps for presentation at different levels.

The dissemination media may also be adjusted to the existing ICT infrastructure in the place where statistical data need to be accessed. A common dissemination platform may allow distribution on the Internet, CD-ROM, Paper-based, etc, but always making sure that the data structure remains the same and completely independent of the presentation format.

Third, ICT not only helps us to disseminate statistical data, but also metadata. Any dissemination platform that we use needs to be capable of managing data about how the data have been produced and about the statistical systems used in its compilation. This refers not just to sources. Metadata need to have a clear definition of the potential and limitations of the selected indicators, and the assumptions that need to be done before using it. As this information is as important as the data element itself, we need to consider an integral part of our dissemination platform.

Finally, ICT may facilitate collaboration. And collaboration is a key requirement for the development of a common dissemination platform. Portal technologies, on-line discussions, content management applications, document management applications and other technologies provides us with efficient

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<sup>1</sup> SMDX is an initiative sponsored by BIS, ECB, Eurostat, IMF, OECD, UN and the World Bank to foster standards for the exchange of statistical information. For more information, please refer to <http://www.sdmx.org>

channels for communication between producers, disseminators and users of statistical information on gender. These tools can also help us to reach the agreements on frameworks, indicators and sources that, as we have seen in the previous section, we need to establish in order to develop a common dissemination platform. Conferences recommendations, training preparations, document editing and other activities can be coordinated and easily managed through the Internet, and might expand the current technical cooperation activities into a potentially unlimited number of stakeholders and substantive areas.

There is no gain saying what important role ICT can play in the development of a common dissemination platform for gender statistics. The adoption of a common dissemination platform could, however, present some challenges that go far beyond technological issues.

#### **4. Some Challenges**

The agreement on each component of the platform for disseminating gender statistics is its main challenge.

Agreeing on a common framework is like trying to have a unique perspective on gender statistics and that is something almost impossible. We mentioned that the dissemination platform should have multiple frameworks (some more policy oriented, while some other more topic oriented), but categorizing implies that not all perspectives will be included. Gender statistics is an area that receives input from multiple disciplines and with different policy objectives, and reaching that agreement will be something difficult to obtain or, if obtained, to maintain over time.

The coordination of multiple sources presents further challenges. At the international and regional level, we may have different agencies and commissions compiling or adjusting similar indicators from similar sources. At the country level, we have countries that have their own data which in some cases differ from the data obtained at the regional or international level. Therefore, agreeing on the source and the procedure to disseminate gender statistics must be cumbersome and it might also imply discussions about data ownership and access rights.

Lastly, agreeing on a comprehensive list of gender indicators is another level of discussions. This is a discussion not only about which topics will be covered (which is more a framework discussion), but what is the precise indicator that will show progress on that topic for each country. Also, present challenges in term of the capacity of each country to disseminate those indicators. In other words, we need to agree on a list that simultaneously represent gender concerns worldwide and take global data availability into consideration.

To respond to these challenges, we need to deploy a consistent partnership strategy. The important level of collaboration we need among organizations at the international level is fundamental for the dissemination of this common platform. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) model of dissemination proved to be successful as 48 indicators are obtained from different sources, but in which each source is actually a partner in the process of compiling the data. In general, the MDG model proved that when the partnership issue is solved, the rest can be easily done through effective implementation of ICT and proper methodologies. I firmly believe this is a model we can reuse for gender statistics dissemination.

## **5. The GenderInfo initiative**

*GenderInfo* is an initiative being launched by the United Nations Statistics Division. The purpose of this initiative is to create a global database with a compilation of standard indicators at the international level that become an instrument to promote the dissemination of standard indicators at the national level.

*GenderInfo* will be based on the DevInfo software package. DevInfo is a database system which monitors progress toward the Millennium Development Goals and it was originally developed in cooperation with the United Nations System from an adaptation of UNICEF ChildInfo technology. DevInfo is currently being used for monitoring MDGs and other purposes in more than 100 countries, as well as international organizations and regional commissions.

*GenderInfo* will use all of the DevInfo capabilities including the generation of tables, graphs and maps for reports and presentations, as well as its data exchange capabilities following the requirements explained in previous sections of this paper. The database itself is composed of indicators by time periods, and the possibility to integrate statistical data from multiple sources and grouped using multiple frameworks.

The United Nations Statistics Division collected an inventory of 456 indicators preliminary organized in the framework presented in Figure 2, and it is planned to launch its first release on March 2007. The inventory, which is going to be distributed as a supplementary document, also contains the likely sources from where data will be obtained and the existing programs and guidelines from where the indicators were identified.

The United Nations Statistics Division expects this to become a regular production of annual CD and the maintenance of an on-line database on gender indicators. Also, it is expected that this initiative will stimulate the creation of national and regional versions of *GenderInfo* to streamline the dissemination of gender statistics, and using the data exchange capabilities of DevInfo technologies. Finally, it is expected to get the endorsement of the United Nations community through partnership agreements following the MDG model that proved to be successful in the creation of a common dissemination platform

Beyond the physical product, the long-term objective of this initiative is to promote a persistent debate towards the creation of a global gender statistics system.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

I have reviewed the main components of a common dissemination platform for gender statistics: frameworks, sources and indicators. I highlighted the role that each of them has in the dissemination model and the key role that ICT must have in the development of a common platform. Finally, I summarized the main challenges as agreeing on indicators and frameworks and the coordination of multiple sources from multiple stakeholders. I concluded that, even though technology is always beneficial for confronting these challenges, there is a need to deploy partnership strategies following models such as the ones employed in the dissemination of the MDGs. The future of the *GenderInfo* initiative of the United Nations Statistics Division, which I introduced in the previous section, mainly depends on that.