

Ghana case study

This case study on administrative data systems and gender statistics is based on interviews held during December 2019 with staff from the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP). While Ghana has well-established statistical and administrative data systems, it continues to face challenges associated with primarily paper-based and decentralised systems for data capture and transmission. Ghana has a dedicated ministry for gender and a national policy guiding gender-related development initiatives: gender-relevant data is collected across a wide range of data sources. However, the dissemination and broader use of gender statistics that are generated through administrative data systems remains a challenge.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

In May 2015, the MoGCSP released its National Gender Policy, outlining five policy commitments (1). Despite the attempts of successive governments to address gender inequality, issues of concern include: unequal access to social protection, education, and social and economic power; inequalities in decision making at all levels; and stereotyping and persistent discrimination against women and girls, with severe implications for maternal health and mortality (1). Further, while Ghana has progressed through substantial political and economic reform, poverty remains high in some areas and among certain socio-economic groups, particularly women and girls, with poverty-endemic areas often constrained by inadequate basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity supply and internet connectivity (2).

The GSS, responsible for the production of official statistics for the country (3), relies on data produced through routine surveys and administrative data provided by various ministries, departments and agencies. It has led in the localisation and coordination of indicators for reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are available on its national SDG reporting platform.¹ Currently, three of the 14 indicators relating to Goal 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) are reported online, two are 'in progress', and potential data sources for another nine indicators are 'being explored'. Gender statistics are also published by key line ministries including health and education, which primarily report on sex-disaggregated measures such as disease burden, enrolment rates and learning outcomes, among others. A 2017 MoGCSP assessment on gender statistics found that while some ministries and departments are generating gender statistics, not all have the possibility of disaggregating their data by sex, and the 'compilation and dissemination of such information is limited' (3) (pg. xvii).

The GSS has sophisticated quality control mechanisms at all stages of data collection, capture, processing and reporting, including a three-stage process of data validation before data is entered into the national SDG reporting portal. The GSS, through the Ghana Statistics Development Project, also provides support to line ministries, providing them with funds to acquire statistical infrastructure, direct technical support on statistical projects, and general support in the development of handbooks on key concepts and definitions to ensure data harmonisation (3). For example, the GSS has assisted in developing manuals and in-built software validation rules, and supported regular training sessions, supervision, and phone support, along with post-census validation for the annual school census, managed by the Ministry of Education (MoE) (4).

¹ Available at <http://www2.statsghana.gov.gh/>

QUALITY AND USEFULNESS OF ADMINISTRATIVE DATA FOR GENDER STATISTICS

There was general agreement from interviewees that administrative data is useful in reporting against national and international frameworks on gender equality, with “so much good data being collected” and administrative data being one of the “best ways to move forward” in terms of good statistical practices. However before this can happen, data custodians must be made aware of potential uses of the data, with one interviewee from the GSS commenting that capacity building at the grass-roots level is required to help data custodians understand how the data will be used for statistical purposes, and not just administrative ones. This is particularly the case for gender statistics, where there is often limited broader understanding of the types of data needed for national and international reporting, or why they are important at the sub-national level.

Within the Department of Social Welfare, MoGCSP, there is a clear pathway from receipt of quarterly reports to action, with reports viewed as a “working tool at the department level” used to identify issues and provide solutions, and used as key inputs into national policy formation. Data collection tools specify for the collection of data by sex, with “sex disaggregation very important” and an active system of follow-up when reports are submitted using aggregate numbers. However, while the system can provide adequate information for a range of administrative decisions, very little of it is used for broader statistical purposes, with limited data sharing agreements in place with the GSS, and few publicly-available reports published routinely. This has been recognised as a key challenge within the MoGCSP, who have been working with the GSS to strengthen the collection of sex- and age-disaggregated data and to develop a shared database.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS WHEN WORKING WITH ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

“I don’t know what data they want” – “I don’t know what data they have”

Interviewees commented on a general sense of not knowing what data is needed for monitoring gender equality at the sub-national level, or what gender-relevant data was being collected by various ministries and departments. The MoE for example, conducts an annual school census on every public and most private schools in Ghana (those known to the ministry), collecting data on topics including infrastructure, the number of teachers and students, and student performance (4). Many of the resulting indicators are disaggregated by sex, and a gender parity index is calculated for each education level (from kindergarten to senior high school) (5). However, official school census reports only include a small number of indicators. While the school census collects detailed data, including the number of girls who became pregnant during the year, student deaths by sex and age, and pupils with deceased parents by sex, among others, such data is not widely published. Raw data is made available to select partners via CD (6). Further, the school census itself only collects data on a relatively small number of questions representing a fraction of the data that is routinely collected in all schools and recorded in the various administrative and class registers, log books, teacher attendance records, inventory books, cash books and visitor books (4). New items are often added to the school census, while old items are not removed (5), with one interviewee commenting:

“It is very hard to change what is collected – many people don’t know why they are collecting certain data.”

Overall, while Ghana follows best practice principles when conducting national censuses and surveys, defining data needs is much more challenging when dealing with administrative data systems, given the breadth of data being routinely collected. This challenge is particularly pronounced for countries with paper-based systems for data capture, which can result in a cycle of data not being utilised to its full potential as data custodians generally only disseminate data when specifically asked; many potential data users don’t ask as they don’t know the data is available. For both the MoGCSP and MoE, while each institution collects very detailed data at the unit record level, most of this

individual-level data remains within the institution, with the national office only receiving aggregate tally reports or more detailed data upon request. This situation is compounded when working in areas such as gender, where there is limited broader understanding or communication on the types of sex-disaggregated or gender-specific data required. As reflected by a respondent from the MoE:

"[We] only report on a small number of key performance indicators, while there is lots of data in the system; unless people specifically ask for the data, it remains unused."

TIMELINESS AND ACCESS

Given the limited internet connectivity and intermittent power supply across the country, most administrative systems collect their records on paper, which may be aggregated and sent to the relevant national office or scanned and sent directly to the GSS. As with any paper-based system, this creates "major issues" for data users, due to the poor timeliness of the data. The Department of Social Welfare, MoGCSP, for example, while receiving quarterly reports, reflected that issues can arise when the quarter hasn't ended but there is an urgent request for information, requiring the development of interim reports. Similarly, the process can be delayed when various institutions or regional offices are waiting for the data to be complete before they can file and submit, thus slowing the process.

Another major barrier identified is that administrative data are often in a format that cannot be further used for statistical purposes, including aggregate data – the primary form of data in many administrative systems. While school census findings from the MoE are disseminated in PDF and made available online (5; 7), there is limited availability of disaggregated data for secondary analysis, with raw data available to select partners and upon request (8). While the GSS generally requests data to be sent to them in Microsoft Excel, this can introduce errors, as it means additional data entry for the ministries. Further, administratively Ghana is divided into 16 regions and 260 districts, and each region and district have their own code for statistical purposes. However, the codes used by the GSS and line ministries often do not match, making system interoperability and data linkage difficult.

It can also be difficult to validate the data reported to the GSS, with one interviewee commenting on the difficulty in accessing and using certain administrative systems, and their inability to verify the data being reported "from the ground." For ministries that aren't routinely collecting their data by sex, it is also not reasonable to expect them to change their collection processes half-way through the year, or when additional data is required. The context for data sharing is also complex and often results in long delays, with any requests for new data needing to be signed-off by the minister of the relevant line ministry.

MOVING FORWARD

Overall, while Ghana has made substantial progress with its statistical and administrative systems, meeting the increased demands for monitoring gender equality requires strengthening its routine data collection systems, including digitisation. The GSS is currently working with Statistics Denmark on several data quality improvement projects, including a data-quality assurance framework and a single 'data pipeline' that ministries can use to deposit their data for direct reporting to the GSS. Further, the MoE has been working with USAID to develop a fully electronic administrative data system. However, several challenges have been encountered, primarily due to the limited electricity supply and internet connectivity. An offline version is currently in development. Numerous initiatives are also underway, including mainstreaming gender in administrative data collection forms within the MoGCSP, and the development of a database aligned with strategies from the National Gender Policy and the SDGs.

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