1 Introduction and Overview

What Are Gender-Sensitive Indicators and Why Are They Useful?

In efforts to advance equality and equity between women and men, there is a need to generate accurate and relevant data on the status of women, men and gender relations. This data helps make gender biases more visible and facilitates effective policy-making to bring about greater gender equality and equity.

The need for sex-disaggregated data has been stressed in numerous international conventions and declarations, including the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1985 Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the 1995 Platform for Action of the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development.

Statistics and indicators

An indicator is an item of data that summarises a large amount of information in a single figure, in such a way as to give an indication of change over time, and in comparison to a norm. Indicators differ from statistics in that, rather than merely presenting facts, indicators involve comparison to a norm in their interpretation.

A gender-sensitive indicator can be defined as an indicator that captures gender-related changes in society over time. Thus, whereas a gender statistic provides factual information about the status of women, a gender-sensitive indicator provides "direct evidence of the status of women, relative to some agreed normative standard or explicit reference group" (Johnson, 1985).

An example of a gender statistic would be: "60% of women in country X are literate, as opposed to 30% five years ago". An example of a gender-sensitive indicator would be: "60% of women in country X are literate, as compared to 82% of men, and compared to 30% and 52% five years ago". The norm or reference group in this example is men in the same country, but in other cases might be other groups of women.

National-level gender-sensitive indicators are among the key means by which planners and policy-makers measure gender inequality. They also provide information on the basis of which gender specialists advocate for policies likely to lead to greater gender equality. Gender-sensitive indicators support the gender and development approach which focuses on changing the gendered nature of society through the promotion of gender equity, rather than on women in isolation, which was the focus of the women in development model and is reflected in an emphasis on gender statistics.

Aim and Scope of this Manual

This reference manual is designed to assist the user in the selection, use and dissemination of gender-sensitive indicators at the national level. As a general introduction to an often complex subject, it aims to strike a balance between discussion of theoretical concepts and practical examples. References are provided where relevant.

This manual is designed to be of particular use to the following:
+ Commonwealth governments that are establishing and using a Gender Management System, in line with the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development;
+ governments working to develop a national database on gender-sensitive indicators; and
+ NGOs, women's groups, professional associations, the academic community and others interested in promoting gender equality and equity.

Gathering and Classifying Indicators

Classes of indicators

The gender-sensitive indicators discussed in this manual are classified into ten groups:
1 Population composition and change
2 Human settlements and geographical distribution
3 Households and families, marital status, fertility
4 Learning in formal and non-formal education
5 Health, health services, nutrition
6 Economic activity and labour force participation
7 Access to land, equipment and credit
8 Legal rights and political power
9 Violence against women
10 Macroeconomic policy and gender

This classification system has been adopted from Commonwealth government priorities, UN recommendations, and priority areas determined in the Beijing Platform for Action. Section 3 of this manual provides a detailed examination of specific indicators and related questions in each of these ten categories.

Sources of indicators

The three main data systems that produce indicators, some of which are gender-sensitive, are census surveys, the System of National Accounts, and sample surveys of the population. Censuses and similar surveys usually cover indicator groups 1-6. Indicators in groups 7-10 come from other sources, such as CEDAW and special surveys such as time use studies, and a revised System of National Accounts. All these sources are discussed in Section 2 of this manual.

Interpreting Indicators

Indicators, like any other methodological tool, have their limitations. Recognising these limitations is necessary for understanding what can and cannot be achieved by using them.

The major limitation of gender-sensitive indicators is that they do not provide information on wider social patterns: they will usually tell the analyst little about why gender relations have been shaped in a particular way and how these relations can be

changed. They point to key questions rather than provide answers. Indicator systems should therefore be complemented by gender analysis, which involves examining, often at a micro-level, the social relations between women and men, and the structural features of society which reinforce gender inequality and inequity.

Another limitation concerns the accuracy of data. Most indicator systems are developed from national censuses. However, much of the data in national censuses is subject to various problems, including infrequent collection, sex bias, poor enumeration, and imprecise definition of key terms. In addition, because of differences in definitions of terminology between nations, indicators are often not comparable internationally. Census data should therefore be considered a pointer towards a certain trend rather than definitive evidence of that trend.

A key element in the use of indicators is to interpret correctly the normative element that is inherent in their construction. The same indicator may be interpreted differently in different settings. For example, a falling birth rate may be considered a positive trend in a densely populated country, but a negative trend in a sparsely populated country.

Care must therefore be taken in defining the norm or benchmark implicit in any indicator and against which change is measured. For example, in examining the status of women, is the norm the situation of men in a particular country, or is it women in other countries? Care must also be taken to ensure that when using indicators to compare gender equity across countries, the indicators have been collected using similar definitions of, for example, economic activity or literacy.

A further problem can be a lack of participation and cross-cultural dimensions. Recommendations for indicator systems and data sets are often developed by specialists, with limited participation from governments, NGOs or the general population. Indicators may therefore reflect the interests of a few experts rather than a general consensus; for this reason, as widespread participation in the development of indicators as is feasible should be encouraged (see Sections 2 and 5).

Given these problems, caution should be exercised when using and interpreting indicators, especially when drawing cross-country conclusions.