



INFORMATION NOTE

Getting Every One in the Picture for Gender Equality The importance of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems for gender equality¹

Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems play a significant role for all individuals by ensuring the registration of births, deaths, marriages, and other vital events, and the recording of causes of death. They provide individuals with legal forms of identification, enabling access to government services such as education and healthcare but also facilitating opening a bank account, formal employment and getting a driving license or a passport. In addition, these systems provide data on the population of a country, facilitating the provision of services and statistics which leave no one behind. CRVS systems are therefore crucial to realize many of the commitments to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of the 2030 Agenda and beyond.

People in many countries face barriers that limit registration, and the impact of registration or lack of registration often depends on sex. The barriers potentially block women and girls from accessing services, restrict their enjoyment and exercising of rights and reinforce a gender gap. It is crucial that CRVS systems include all population groups equally, including women and girls, otherwise they are not only left uncouned but also limited in access to means of achieving empowerment such as education and economic opportunities.

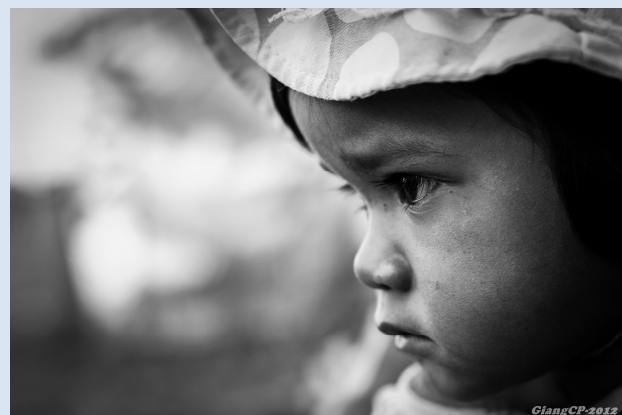
Efficient systems can benefit women and girls through access to financial services, rightful claims to property or inheritance and some protection against child marriage. Systematically enforced, birth and marriage registration are key to preventing child marriage.² A gender lens is required because gender inequalities shape the constraints of CRVS systems, thus determining many of the gaps and challenges in using civil registration data for producing vital statistics.

¹ This information note was drafted by Giordana Aragno, intern in the Statistics Division at UN ESCAP. The author wants to thank Sophie Shugg (Plan International), Sara Duerto Valero (UN Women), Petra Nahmias, Tanja Sejersen and Sharita Serrao (ESCAP) for their guidance, and significant contributions.

² Centre of Excellence for CRVS, Leaving none behind: CRVS Gender and the SDG Brief 1, Paper 2

The “missing women” phenomenon

In Asia and the Pacific, many CRVS systems need substantial improvement. Millions of individuals, disproportionately women and girls, live their lives under an invisible veil, with their births and deaths going unregistered. In some Asian countries this has led to the label “the missing women phenomenon”. The term, coined by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, refers to the arbitrarily low ratio of women to men in certain age groups in parts of the developing world – notably in India and China.³ Estimates of missing women and girls in China range from 20 to 50 million.⁴ These estimates are most commonly presented as evidence of large-scale practices of sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and substandard healthcare and nutrition for girl infants compared with boy infants.⁵



China’s sex ratio at birth (SRB) has been unbalanced since around 1980. At that time, China’s SRB was about 1.07, peaked around 1.21 in 2000-2005 and then slowly decreased to 1.13 in 2012.⁶ The global SRB average is about 1.06. The gap between this figure and the reported SRB in China has been labelled as “missing girls”.⁷

The initial increase in SRB coincided with the introduction of strict policies to reduce fertility (the “One Child” policy) which is thought to have accelerated the increase in the SRB.⁸ Three key reasons have been put forward to explain the higher than expected SRB, all centering around the prevalence of son preference in China in the context of declining fertility and the policies implemented to achieve it. These reasons are prenatal sex selection and sex selective abortion, female infanticide and abandonment, and the under-reporting of female births.⁹ Over time, the relative importance of these different reasons has changed with prenatal sex selection becoming more dominant as the necessary technologies have become more available and accessible.^{10 11}

³ Amartya Sen (1990), More than 100 Million Women are missing, The New York Review

⁴ Center of Excellence for CRVS, Knowledge Brief on Gender and CRVS, the Life-Course Approach to CRVS: a Crucial Tool to Advance Gender Equality.

⁵ *Ibidem*

⁶ Tucker, C., & Van Hook, J. (2013). Surplus Chinese Men: Demographic Determinants of the Sex Ratio at Marriageable Ages in China. *Population and Development Review*.

⁷ Shi, Y., & Kennedy, J. (2016). Delayed Registration and Identifying the “Missing Girls” in China. *The China Quarterly*.

⁸ Goodkind, D. (2011). Child Underreporting, Fertility, and Sex Ratio Imbalance in China. *Demography*.

⁹ Yi, Z., Ping, T., Baochang, G., Yi, X., Bohua, L., & Yongpiing, L. (1993). Causes and Implications of the Recent Increase in the Reported Sex Ratio at Birth in China. *Population and Development Review*.

¹⁰ Goodkind, D. (2011). Child Underreporting, Fertility, and Sex Ratio Imbalance in China. *Demography*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*

Inclusion and access to registration: reasons why women are sometimes less likely to be registered or being able to register their children

In South Asia, 32 per cent of children under 5 do not have a birth certificate, making it home to the largest share of children in the world without a birth certificate.¹² While in most countries in South Asia, girls are as likely to be registered as boys, there is still legislation discriminating against the mother. In Nepal, as well as in Bhutan, births cannot be registered without the father's name.¹³ Similar legislative gender bias can be found in Islamic Republic of Iran where only the father can register a child's birth. In Indonesia, a marriage certificate must be provided by the couple in order to obtain a birth certificate for their child,¹⁴ meaning that births outside of marriage will not be registered. A survey in Punjab, Pakistan found that 4 in 10 women had experienced difficulties or denial to register a child without the child's father or another male relative present.¹⁵

Even in countries where legislation is not discriminatory in its purpose, discrimination still exists in practice: registration services are commonly not locally available and therefore require travel outside ones community which creates specific barriers for women, especially young women and girls in cultures that require male chaperones.¹⁶



Photo from NADRA Mobile registration and polio drive in Sultan Kot, Pakistan

Registration commonly occurs in open government offices. In these settings it is harder to ensure privacy and confidentiality, which may create a barrier for women and girls. This affects both vital statistics, preventing accurate data affect policy interventions and government decisions, and social protection by excluding unmarried mothers and their children.

¹² UNICEF (2019), Birth Registration by 2030: Are we on track?

¹³ Centre of Excellence for CRVS, Leaving none behind: CRVS Gender and the SDG, Brief 1, Paper 2.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*

¹⁵ Mursalin, Syed, Muhammad; Ashraf, Farah (2020), In-Depth Review and Needs Assessment of CRVS System to Develop an Action Plan for Overall Improvement of the System, forthcoming paper for Asia Pacific Statistics Week 2020.

¹⁶ Centre of Excellence for CRVS systems, Empowering women and girls through Civil Registration Systems, Knowledge Brief on Gender and CRVS, Brief 2, Paper 4

Birth registration gender gaps in Nepal

An analysis of the 2011 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) highlights the nexus between gender and other characteristics with registration. While at the national level, the difference is small with girls about 2 per cent less likely than boys to have a birth certificate, all other factors being equal. However, the gender gap increases in various sub-populations. Among children residing in the Terai or Mountain ecological zones, child girls are 4-5 per cent less likely to have a birth certificate, girls of middle-caste parents are 6 per cent less likely to have it than boys in the same group, while within children in either the next poorest or next richest wealth quintile, girls are 8-9 per cent less likely to have it. This data shows us the importance of the nexus between sex and other individual characteristics which can exacerbate inequality, such as income, geographical location and belonging to marginalized and hard to reach groups.

Examples of the role of CRVS in reducing the gender gap



Education:

Access to education is fundamental to reduce the gender gap as it opens future opportunities for women such as economic independence, reached through entering the job market. Access to education is often limited for children without birth certificates.



Financial inclusion:

In Asia-Pacific 42 per cent of women lack access to a bank account.¹⁷

Gender disparities have been significant, particularly in South Asia, where roughly 30 per cent of women have a bank account, compared with nearly 45 per cent of men.¹⁸ The lack of identification is a key reason for this exclusion from financial services.¹⁹ Civil registration is the foundation for identity documentation. Legal proof of identity can severely improve women's financial inclusion.²⁰ Thailand, on a positive note, has almost universal registration and is close to achieving gender parity in financial access, 84 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women have an account at a financial institution.²¹



Safety and Protection:

CRVS systems have the potential to protect girls by providing age verification, essential for the prevention, response, and persecution of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Real time age verification through a CRVS system has the potential to facilitate girls

¹⁷ SDG Gateway Data Explorer

¹⁸ International Monetary Fund Working Paper (2019), The Financial Inclusion Landscape in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Dozen Key Findings

¹⁹ The Global Findex database (2017), Measuring Financial Inclusion and Fintech Revolution, World Bank Group.

²⁰ Centre of Excellence for CRVS systems, Linking National ID and CRVS systems: an Imperative for Inclusive Development, Brief 2, Paper 3

²¹ World Bank Group (2019), Thailand Economic Monitor, Harnessing Fintech for Financial Inclusion.

access to age related legislations and support services that promotes their right to safety. In Bangladesh, marriage registrars can do on-the-spot age verification prior to officiating a marriage. This not only prevents the marriage of that particular girl but also contributes to the collation of data which can support the delivery of targeted age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health services in locations with increased demand.

Equal access to education in Pakistan: who has a birth certificate?²²

A recent study analyses gender gaps in access to education, looking at the statistical significance of registration for access to education. The gender gap is higher than 20 percentage points for unregistered children while it reduces to around 8 percentage points for registered children. For those who have a birth certificate the gender gap falls under 3 percentage points. All factors being equal (i.e. wealth, type or residence, mother's education), unregistered boys have higher chances to access education than girls. but the effect reduces for all registered children, even more so if they have a birth certificate. Results from this study stress how birth registration and certification are tools that play a fundamental role in ensuring and supporting girls to access education.

Inequalities in death registration

Gender inequalities are present also in death registration. Deaths in general, are usually less likely to be registered than births because there are fewer incentives to do so apart from the need to establish inheritance rights or to claim social benefits such as widowers' pensions.²³ In some countries, a death certificate is needed in order to be allowed to perform a burial or cremation, which is a strong incentive for registration.²⁴ Without this, there are few incentives to report a death to civil registration authorities if the deceased person had no resources to pass on to the family. This is more often the case for women, who generally hold fewer assets than men.²⁵

Countries where vital statistics show “missing women”, such as China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan,²⁶ are likely to under-record women's deaths more than men's deaths.²⁷ In Indonesia, a study carried out in three different areas of the country, has shown that 80 per cent of the deaths occurred at home, making it more complex to register the death, and only 2 per cent of families which experienced a death in the past five years had registered the death.²⁸ Only half of those families successfully received a death certificate. Although the data are sparse, there is evidence that the non-

²² World of Women (2020), forthcoming.

²³ James K. Knowles (2016), Assessment of the quality and relevance of existing data to monitor the gender dimensions of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific, Report to the UN Foundation under Data2x initiative.

²⁴ Centre of Excellence for CRVS systems, Empowering women and girls through Civil Registration Systems, Knowledge Brief on Gender and CRVS, Brief 2, Paper 4.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ James K. Knowles (2016), Assessment of the quality and relevance of existing data to monitor the gender dimensions of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific, Report to the UN Foundation under Data2x initiative.

²⁷ Centre of Excellence for CRVS, Leaving none behind: CRVS Gender and the SDG Brief 1, Paper 2.

²⁸ Centre of Excellence for CRVS systems, Empowering women and girls through Civil Registration Sytems, Knowledge Brief on Gender and CRVS, Brief 2, Paper 4.

registration of deaths is more common for women than for men. Adult males tend to have higher mortality rates than females, but large differentials indicate that female deaths are underreported.²⁹



In Asia Pacific, only two out of seven deaths are recorded with a cause of death. And for countries with data on how many are assigned a cause of death, only 29 per cent of deaths were assigned a medically certified cause of death using the international form of the death certificate in 2019.³⁰ In India, for example, only a small proportion of deaths in the country have a medically certified cause, and most of these are in urban areas.³¹ In Pakistani hospitals, the standard international death certificate is rarely used and there is limited use of ICD-10 for coding causes of death.³²

The resulting lack of data on women's deaths and causes of deaths means that issues related to women's health and safety, ranging from death in childbirth or domestic violence to cancer or cardiovascular diseases, are less likely to be addressed by governments. In general, gender patterns in causes of deaths are relevant for public health policies. As an example, the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) has long been recognized as one of the key indicators of population health and development. The MMR is particularly high in South and South-West Asia, which is home to 1.6 billion people and has the largest population affected by maternal mortality in the ESCAP region.³³ Reliable data on maternal mortality, especially the levels and causes of maternal deaths, are necessary for informing policy making, planning of sexual and reproductive health programmes, priority setting and advocacy purposes. Therefore, the need for women's deaths and causes of death to appear in official statistics is urgent, and necessary for health and safety policies.

Moreover, the under reporting of deaths caused by domestic violence, or Intimate Partner Violence (IPV),³⁴ within national CRVS systems constitutes an issue that requires further attention. Sixty percent of countries worldwide have no useful CRVS data regarding homicide deaths and IPV caused mortality.³⁵ This is so because homicide deaths data is often collected through other information systems and therefore held by institutions that are not directly related to CRVS (ex: police, mortuaries).³⁶ All of this leads to a mismatch between what countries report through their national CRVS system and global estimates for the number of IPV fatalities. Fragmented mortality information systems contribute to the loss of essential information for public health. IPV deaths,

²⁹ *Ibidem*

³⁰ Data based on countries' midterm questionnaires responses sent to UNESCAP in 2019-2020.

³¹ James K. Knowles (2016), Assessment of the quality and relevance of existing data to monitor the gender dimensions of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific, Report to the UN Foundation under Data2x initiative.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ UNESCAP Stats Brief (2015), Maternal Mortality and the Importance of comprehensive civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems.

³⁴ Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a type of gender-based violence inflicted by the victim's current partner or ex-partner.

³⁵ Centre of Excellence for CRVS, The Danger of Gender Bias in CRVS and Cause of Death data: the path to Health Inequality.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

mostly recorded in mortuaries or police stations, are often invisible to the official vital statistics due to the lack of integration of information systems.³⁷

What is Asia and the Pacific doing to improve the situation?

The Asian and Pacific CRVS Decade, 2015-2024, was proclaimed in 2014 at the first Ministerial Conference on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific. Through the Ministerial Declaration,³⁸ governments marked 2015-2024 as a timeframe for realizing their shared vision that all people in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive CRVS systems facilitating the realization of their rights and supporting good governance, health and development. Member States and Associate Members of ESCAP committed to “promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls through the provision of documents to prove family relations and civil status, and the production of age-, sex- and geographically disaggregated statistics”. During the Ministerial Conference, governments also committed to focusing their efforts on improving national CRVS systems by endorsing the Regional Action Framework on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific.³⁹ The Regional Action Framework sets out Goals that are in line with the core human rights principles of progressive realization, non-regression, non-discrimination and equity:



Civil registration

Goal 1: Universal civil registration of births, deaths and other vital events;



Legal documents

Goal 2: All individuals are provided with legal documentation of civil registration of births, deaths and other vital events, as necessary, to claim identity, civil status and ensuing rights;



Vital statistics

Goal 3: Accurate, complete and timely vital statistics (including on causes of death) are produced based on registration records and are disseminated.

The progress towards the achievement of these goals will be reviewed at the midterm of the CRVS Decade in 2020/2021.

³⁷ *Ibidem*

³⁸ UNESCAP, Ministerial Declaration to "Get every one in the picture" in Asia and the Pacific, Adopted by the Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific on 28 November 2014 in Bangkok, Thailand

³⁹ UNESCAP, Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, Res 69/15, November 2014