



Knowledge Briefs on **Gender** and **CRVS**



Brief 1, Paper 1

Making the Invisible Visible: How Strong CRVS Systems Can Empower Women and Girls

Photo: Dominic Chavez/World Bank

KEY MESSAGES

- **Civil registration is critical for protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of women, girls, and other vulnerable groups.** Legal identity, proof of age, and civil status facilitate access to key rights and services, including social protection, voting rights, health, education, and financial services.
- **Vital statistics generated from civil registration provide valuable data** needed to monitor progress towards gender equality, including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets such as those related to maternal and infant mortality, education, and access to services.
- **Globally, women and girls still face many cultural, financial, and legal barriers** to experiencing the full benefits and protections of civil registration.
- **To make sure all women and girls can be counted, protected, and provided for**, it will be crucial to address the legal, financial, or social norms around civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems that exclude women and increase their vulnerability.
- **This Knowledge Brief Series, produced by the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems in partnership with Open Data Watch**, aims to inform the evidence base that can help drive the institutional and societal changes needed to build stronger, more inclusive CRVS systems.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek to eliminate poverty and create better life conditions for everyone. A cornerstone of the sustainable development agenda is a bold commitment to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (enshrined in **SDG 5**), including ending all forms of discrimination against women. Governments of countries including Canada, Sweden, and Iceland have recently adopted explicitly feminist international aid policies (IDRC 2018). This heightened commitment to gender equality couldn't be timelier. While important milestones have been made towards gender parity across education, health, economic, and political systems in many countries, much remains to be done (**World Economic Forum 2018**).

Importantly, there is insufficient data to measure and mitigate the challenges that continue to plague women and girls. Relevant, reliable, and timely gender statistics are critical to understanding the differences among men, women, and other vulnerable groups in any society (**United Nations 2015**). This kind of sex-disaggregated data, covering basic indicators such as population, health, education, and work, is a "must have" for measuring and furthering progress towards true equality. Yet, national-level statistics are not sufficiently nuanced and local enough for us to know who is really left behind and why (Mullinax, Hart and Vargas Garcia 2018). Without the right data, disaggregated by the right variables, the most vulnerable may be left even further behind.

Civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems are an indispensable part of the data ecosystem required to measure progress towards gender equality. As government administrative systems, they are unparalleled in their ability to provide real-time, reliable data disaggregated at the lowest level by sex, geography, and other relevant characteristics. CRVS systems are essential to monitoring progress towards the SDGs; 67 indicators

covering 12 of the 17 SDGs can be measured most effectively using data derived from well-functioning CRVS systems (**Mills et al 2017**). Improving CRVS systems is a target under **Goal 16: Peace Justice, and Strong Institutions**. CRVS systems are a crucial data source for many gender-related SDG indicators, are necessary for monitoring maternal and infant mortality and informing indicators on education and access to social services (**SDSN TReNDS and Open Data Watch 2018**). Strong CRVS systems equip countries with the evidence to design and implement public policies addressing the unique needs of women, girls, and other vulnerable groups.

Further, civil registration itself – the continuous, permanent, compulsory, and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events (births, marriages, and deaths) – protects the fundamental rights and freedoms of women and girls. Proof of age and identity ensure that women, girls, and other vulnerable groups can access social services, seek employment, open bank accounts, access credit and loans, own businesses, and exercise their right to vote. Having a birth certificate has a positive effect on early childhood growth and development outcomes (**Jeong, Bhatia and Fink 2018**). Marriage and death registration are effective tools for women's empowerment and for facilitating access to social benefits and protections (**Pryor 2016**). These are needed to access property rights, pension benefits, child support, or inheritance when a marriage ends or a spouse or parent dies.

CRVS systems are thus foundational for inclusive development because they simultaneously provide real-time data to guide planning for service provision and facilitate access to those services or benefits. This is particularly important for meeting the needs of vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations, the overwhelming majority of which are women and children.

The **Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems** at the **International Development Research Centre** (IDRC) has set out to inspire a global commitment to integrating gender analysis across activities to strengthen CRVS systems by discussing the status of the field, evaluating opportunities and challenges, and identifying priority areas of research and action to improve vital event registration for women and girls. As part of that commitment, the Centre of Excellence is proud to launch this Knowledge Brief Series on CRVS and Gender. The series will publish three briefs throughout 2019 each consisting of four papers. Created in partnership with **Open Data Watch**, the series will synthesize and disseminate key messages, innovative case studies, and emerging findings across a multitude of CRVS dimensions, including birth, marriage/divorce, and death registration. It will also address issues such as capacity, innovation, and resource mobilization.

The Knowledge Brief Series will also articulate the importance of CRVS systems for achieving better living standards for all, protecting the rights of women and girls, and monitoring progress towards global gender equality commitments. This introductory paper sets the scene for why the Centre for Excellence is taking on this initiative, provides a preview of the other three papers of the brief, and explores the themes of future knowledge briefs.

ADVANCING CRVS SYSTEMS, PROTECTING WOMEN AND GIRLS

This Knowledge Brief Series is a part of the Centre of Excellence's larger strategy to contribute to and lead the global conversation on gender and CRVS systems. Despite the many benefits CRVS systems confer to governments and individuals, they are chronically weak in low- and middle-income countries, and the gender dimensions are often overlooked. More than 100 developing countries still do not have



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functioning CRVS systems that can support the complete registration of births, marriages, divorces, and deaths (**World Bank 2018**). Only 46 countries were able to provide reliable statistics on deaths disaggregated by sex (as reported by civil registration systems) at least once for the period 2011 to 2014 (**United Nations 2015**).

Globally, women and girls still face many financial, cultural, and legal barriers to experiencing the benefits and protections of civil registration, including the cost of registration, requirements of a husband's presence for a child's birth registration or a marriage registration, the system's failure to recognize customary marriages, burial practices, and inheritance laws. In some countries, such as Syria, Nepal, Bhutan, and Nicaragua, children cannot be registered permanently without their father's or grandfather's signature (**UNICEF 2013**). While the births of boys and girls are generally registered equally around the world, birth registration is significantly lower among girls than boys in Sudan, Niger, Namibia, Guinea Bissau, Tajikistan, Costa Rica, Armenia, and Thailand (**Bhatia et al. 2017**). Marriage below the age of 18 is permitted in seven countries and allowed with parental consent in another 22 countries (**UNICEF 2017**). As of 2016, at least

10 sub-Saharan African countries lack any legal obligation to register a marriage (Hanmer and Elefante 2016). In Morocco, male deaths are twice as likely to be registered than female deaths (Silva 2016). Taken together, poorly functioning, gender-blind systems make it difficult for governments to create policies and programs aimed at protecting and supporting women and girls throughout their lives.

The Centre for Excellence supports, advances, and advocates for efforts to strengthen CRVS systems that include and count all women, girls, and other vulnerable populations. It has a system-strengthening mandate to contribute to global initiatives to increase the number of low- and middle-income countries with comprehensive CRVS systems that provide reliable and up-to-date records of births, marriages, deaths, and other vital events. Specifically, it works towards *improving CRVS Systems to track progress on women's, newborns', children's, and adolescents' health* in countries eligible for support through the **Global Financing Facility** (GFF). Gender analysis is a key thematic and cornerstone of the Centre of Excellence's work at both global and country levels.

One objective of the Centre of Excellence is specifically to increase the availability of guides, tools and documented evidence for the development and/or implementation of effective CRVS systems. As an initiative that brings together research from experts, this Knowledge Brief Series will contribute to the currently limited knowledge base on gender dimensions of CRVS systems.

The Centre for Excellence is already making progress on another of its aims: contributing to improving the mechanisms of coordination and collaboration among stakeholders involved in strengthening CRVS systems, a goal which is already underway. On February 26, 2018, the Centre of Excellence and its partners hosted

a high-level panel and technical consultation sessions on CRVS and gender through an event entitled "**Making the Invisible Visible: CRVS as a Basis to Meeting the 2030 Gender Agenda**". The meeting was the first of its kind to focus solely on the gender dimensions of CRVS systems and the barriers women and girls face when registering vital life events. It brought together different stakeholder groups, such as civil registrars, statisticians, UN colleagues, public health experts, and gender experts, to discuss challenges, opportunities, and initiatives in addressing the barriers to vital event registration. The meeting generated high interest and helped shape the dialogue on gender in the global CRVS agenda. It affirmed the critical role that CRVS systems play in achieving the SDGs, closing gender data gaps, and truly leaving no one behind.

Following up on this meeting, a side event was held during the UN World Data Forum in Dubai, United Arab Emirates in October 2018. The event, "**Civil Registration as a Tool for Women's Empowerment**," provided an opportunity to introduce the series, hear from the authors of Brief #1, and collect feedback and input on what should be covered in future briefs.

MOTIVATIONS AND OBJECTIVES

This Knowledge Brief Series builds on the results of the previous technical meetings, integrates current research on the topic, and represents a strong commitment to advancing CRVS systems that count all women and girls. It aims to further inform and galvanize efforts to close gender data gaps and ensure that no one is left behind. It will serve as a tool to stimulate conversation and promote the adoption of good practices. By evolving the dialogue on the importance of CRVS systems for the global gender agenda, it will help build momentum and ensure that emerging insights are shared and used.

Specifically, the series aims to meet the following urgent needs¹:

- **Prioritization:** CRVS systems need to be prioritized under national development plans, statistical plans, and global agendas.
- **Balance:** All components of CRVS systems need to be equally strengthened with balanced investment in identity management (ID) systems and CRVS systems.
- **Partnership:** Building strong CRVS systems requires collaboration among all sections of government and the private sector.
- **Research:** More knowledge is needed to understand the barriers women and girls face and how to better incentivize and promote registration to close related data gaps.
- **Innovation:** An exploration of the current state of and use of innovation in CRVS for women and girls in developed and developing economies is needed to understand how technology can have a positive multiplier effect.
- **Capacity-building:** A documentation of successful capacity-building approaches to support a forward-looking agenda is needed.
- **Funding:** The economic, political, and social value of CRVS data need to be better communicated to increase funding for current initiatives and ongoing efforts that will yield effective results in a relatively short amount of time.

CLOSING THE GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

More understanding is needed to overcome the barriers facing women and girls, specifically how to do so within a country's unique political and cultural context. This is especially important for advancing CRVS systems in low- and middle-income countries. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of strong case studies that explore the successes or failures of these interventions. As such, there remains a knowledge gap on the proximate constraints and underlying factors that may influence the registration of different vital events for women and girls. And while there has been a growing recognition over the last several years of the importance of strong CRVS systems, there is little evidence around gendered barriers and inequalities. Unanswered questions remain, prompting the following approach:

- **Examine barriers and hidden biases:** What gender biases exist in the legal systems that govern civil registration? How do the current legal frameworks discourage or prohibit women from registering vital life events, such as their child's birth or their own marriage? What cultural, economic, or social barriers may prevent women and girls from registering their vital events?
- **Uncover the gaps:** Where are the registration data gaps? Where are women least likely to be counted, registered, or recognized? How can we increase demand for registration among these vulnerable populations? How can we better engage men to ensure that vital events pertaining to their daughters and wives are legally recorded?

1 These were identified through consultation at the February 26, 2018 meeting, "*Making the Invisible Visible: CRVS as a Basis to Meeting the 2030 Gender Agenda.*"

- **Develop a strategy:** How should countries register deaths, divorces, and different types of marriages, especially those that are least likely to be registered or recognized? How can we develop evidence-based strategies or design programs that facilitate registration of vital events for women and girls?
- **Build capacity, share knowledge, and increase data use and impact:** How can countries strengthen their technical and administrative capacities? On the local level, how can registration authorities more efficiently register marriages and divorces? How can we increase data use and promote evidenced-based policymaking?

EXPLORING THE KNOWLEDGE BRIEF SERIES

The issues identified above provide a glimpse into the motivations for the Knowledge Brief Series and a snapshot of topics that will be explored in each paper. The impetus behind the Knowledge Brief Series is to create a compendium that identifies current problems and challenges, offers opportunities and solutions, and proposes a call to action among relevant stakeholders within their specific topic.

Through the publication of this series, gender- and CRVS-related research will be disseminated to make a case for further investments that will improve CRVS systems and promote gender equality.

This research will provide crucial support to stakeholders including government agencies, funding agencies, the UN Statistical Commission and standard-setting bodies, academics, and gender data advocates. Among these stakeholders, the series will increase awareness of emerging issues and promote the adoption of good practices.

As the first knowledge brief of the series, this collection of papers sets the stage for a series of discussions within the topic of CRVS for women. The series begins with this paper – an overview of the motivations and objectives of the Knowledge Brief Series. The following papers serve to then provide a detailed introduction to CRVS for women and its role in the sustainable development agenda specifically, before delving into more detailed topics within the space such as financing and capacity-building.

Below we provide short descriptions of each paper in this first brief.

Paper #2: Leave No One Behind: CRVS, Gender and the SDGs

The second paper of this Knowledge Brief is “Leave No One Behind: CRVS, Gender and the SDGs,” by Mayra Buvinic and Eleanor Carey of Data2X. The paper provides a broad overview of the importance of CRVS for women and girls and explores the research gaps in understanding such dimensions. It examines the existing evidence on the interplay between gender and CRVS and details the benefits of this interplay for women and CRVS systems, then summarizes major themes that emerge in the empirical evidence. These themes help inform a gender lens approach. It concludes with recommendations for policy and research.



Photo: Dominic Chavez/World Bank

Paper #3: Harnessing CRVS Systems for the Gender-Related SDGs – Opportunities and Challenges

The third paper, "Harnessing CRVS Systems for the Gender-Related SDGs – Opportunities and Challenges," by Shaida Badiie and Deirdre Appel of Open Data Watch, situates CRVS and gender more deeply within the sustainable development agenda. Specifically, it examines the gender-relevant indicators within the SDGs and links their measurement to the data provided by CRVS systems. Previous papers on CRVS and the SDGs have documented the centrality of CRVS within the sustainable development agenda, but none have done so through a gender lens. This paper does that, amplifying the relevance of CRVS systems for global commitments to gender equality. The paper explores open data and interoperability of systems as potential pathways for progress.

Paper #4: The Costs and Benefits of CRVS as a Tool for Women's Empowerment

The last paper of the series, "The Costs and Benefits of CRVS as a Tool for Women's Empowerment," authored by Jessica Espey at the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, takes a step back from examining CRVS systems themselves to explore the financials behind them. The previous papers in the series unpack the benefits of robust CRVS systems for gender empowerment, enabling us to better understand societal dynamics, gendered experiences and opportunities, provide gender- and sex-specific services, and ensure no one is left behind, as mandated by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This paper complements this contextual analysis by focusing on some of the practical barriers to the expansion of CRVS systems, namely the costs, current levels of investment, and the shortfall, but also highlighting the immense investment opportunity.

Upcoming Papers and Briefs

Two additional briefs will be published in 2019. Potential themes and topics to be covered in the future briefs include, but are not limited to: current efforts and future capacity development plans for improving CRVS systems; best policies and practices that incentivize registration for women and girls; improving registration of the deaths of women and girls; the role of national statistics offices in advancing CRVS systems and gender data; the intersection of CRVS and legal identity through a gender perspective; legal frameworks and legislation; and the economic costs and value of investments in CRVS. Similar to the first Knowledge Brief, the additional briefs will be authored by experts in the field. Each paper and brief will build on the themes before it with the aim to conclude the initiative with a collection of papers that are greater than the sum of individual parts.

FROM PAPER TO PRACTICE: MOVING THE CRVS AGENDA FORWARD

Improving CRVS systems for women and girls will take more than just documenting the benefits and publishing research or policy papers. It will require sustained investment, commitment, and collaboration, as well as broader institutional and systemic change. Substantive equality requires fundamental transformation of economic and social institutions, including the beliefs, norms, and attitudes that shape them ([UN Women 2016](#)). It is critical to address the underlying norms and systems that continue to shape gender-based inequalities and vulnerabilities (IDRC 2018). For CRVS, this means it will not be enough to simply increase awareness of gender gaps or improve women's access to civil registration services. It will be essential to address the legal, financial, cultural, or societal norms and systems that exclude women and increase their vulnerability.

By publishing high-quality research and policy papers, this Knowledge Brief Series aims to inform the evidence base that can help drive the requisite institutional change, recognizing that this kind of change is often a long-term, incremental process. The knowledge housed within this series must be translated from paper to practice. With this information, international organizations can better provide funding for research and technical assistance; research organizations can improve evaluation of interventions and understand factors impacting access; and civil society can better help to illuminate the ways in which CRVS impacts men, women, and children's lives.

It is the aim of the Centre of Excellence and its partners to bring such stakeholders together to improve CRVS systems and move closer to achieving the SDGs. All women and girls, regardless of geography, race, wealth, nationality or other factors, need to be counted so that they can be protected, provided for, and empowered.



This paper was authored by Irina Dincu and Nomthandazo Malambo of the Centre of Excellence. It is part of the Knowledge Brief Series on Gender and CRVS, developed by the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems, in partnership with Open Data Watch.

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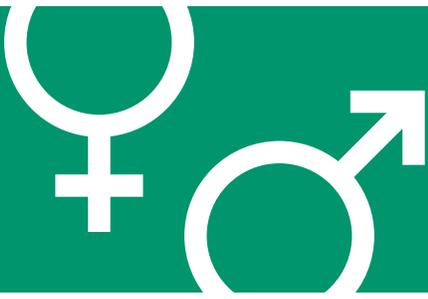
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