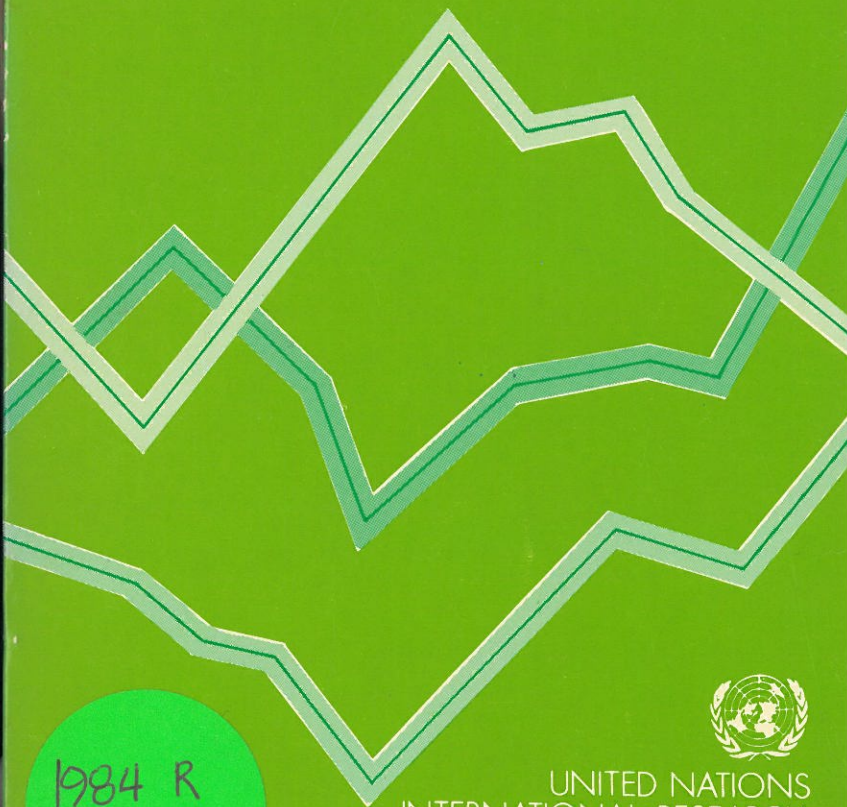


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Improving Statistics and Indicators on the Situation of Women



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UNITED NATIONS
INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH
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FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN
(INSTRAW)

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A JOINT PROGRAM OF THE
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IMPROVING STATISTICS AND INDICATORS ON THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

INTRODUCTION

International Women's Year and the United Nations Decade for Women helped to focus public opinion and policies on the inequalities of the sexes, and in so doing they exposed weaknesses in statistical information on the situation of women.

Statistics are an essential ingredient of planning and policy evaluation and those who wanted to tackle the inequalities faced by women soon found that they lacked reliable information on which to act.

Their problem was two-fold. Not only was much of the available data biased and incomplete, but many of those who wanted it had difficulty determining which material was most relevant to their needs and where to find it. However, two reports designed to improve statistical indicators on the situation of women and to promote their effective use are currently available following a joint project of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the United Nations Statistical Office. The first *Compiling Social Indicators on the Situation of Women* is designed to show interested parties how to make effective use of the current data base. It outlines the shortcomings of existing statistics and discusses the methods and concepts underlying their collection so that they can be meaningfully interpreted. The second *Improving Concepts and Methods for Statistics and Indicators on the Situation of Women* provides a critical view of the current approach to data collection and suggests possible changes in practices which could be applied over the long term.

These documents were produced by consultants to the United Nations and have been widely reviewed to reflect the views and experiences of experts from developed and developing countries as well as the specialized agencies, regional commissions and other relevant bodies of the United Nations system.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Most conventional data systems suggest that women's work roles are at best supplementary to family income when in fact many women are heads of households and responsible for their own, and their children's survival. Women generally are given lower priority than men for access to education, salaried employment and labour-saving technologies. Often they are discouraged from seeking jobs in many industries and occupations, and when they do gain access they are frequently paid lower wages than men who do the same work.

No society can afford to ignore 50 percent of its human potential, but the cultural stereotype of the man as the sole breadwinner has persisted in rich and poor nations alike, and data collection efforts frequently reinforce the perception rather than correct it. In order to formulate policies and evaluate progress towards the basic social and economic changes recommended by the World Conferences of the United Nations Decade for Women it is essential to be able to identify and highlight differentials in the socio-economic status of men and women; their relative access to opportunities and resources, the degree of poverty among female as well as male-headed households, and their health.

The information is vital not only to the planners but also to members of women's organizations and other interested groups which might use it to stir public opinion and receive more adequate responses from their decision makers.

There is need to challenge the presumption that the head of household as currently defined in most censuses and surveys is necessarily a man; that his income is necessarily representative of the household's total income; or that he will automatically pass on benefits equally to each and every member of the family.

There is also a need for statisticians to reflect new trends in labour migration to towns and cities; to understand why female-headed households are increasingly among the poorest of the poor; and to redesign their procedures to accomodate these new realities.

GUIDELINES FOR EARLY ACTION

Compiling Social Indicators on the Situation of Women contains a guideline to data which can be gleaned from existing sources to fill information gaps immediately.

It discusses the most widely used approaches to data collection so that statistics can be meaningfully interpreted and it outlines the complementary roles of censuses, sample surveys and registration systems which can be used to build a reliable picture of women's needs and participation in development.

Population and housing censuses are considered the best source of information on the size and distribution of the female population and they offer the broadest range of data according to the demographic, social and economic characteristics of a country. Their main disadvantages are that they can only skim the surface of many subjects to be covered nationally; the weight of data does not lend itself to easy reference; and the other statistics lose their timeliness between censuses which are carried out only once every 10 years.

As a benchmark however, censuses are invaluable. Areas of special concern can be explored in greater detail and updated by smaller and more manageable household surveys and the information gathered can be supplemented further from administrative records of such things as births, deaths, marriages and divorces.

Records of taxes, education, health and employment can also shed additional light on the situation of women. Tax records can show the size and type of agricultural holdings by sex. Records of employment tell something about women's job prospects in towns and cities, and farm registers can aid comparisons between men and women in agricultural occupations.

The report notes that almost every country keeps records of some kind and that anyone who wants to approach the question of equality can improve their understanding of the situation through a judicious use of existing material.

IMPROVING CONCEPTS AND METHODS

In the past many censuses and surveys tended to explore a one-dimensional view of women as wives and mothers and that approach is reflected in the relative abundance of data on fertility and the shortage of accurate information on women beyond traditional household obligations.

This bias has left planners with an incomplete and frequently misleading picture of society and its needs.

For example: Unemployment statistics in some countries are tabulated for men only, thereby understating both the extent of the unemployment problem and the social consequences. Crude death rates are frequently taken as a measurement of a population's health even though the death rate of female infants is often under-reported, particularly in countries where male babies are more highly valued than females.

Another example: School enrolment figures which suggest equality of sexes often do not reflect disproportionate drop-out rates between boys and girls, or differences in curriculum which often train boys for salaried employment and girls for domestic work.

Improving Concepts and Methods takes stock of today's approaches to data collection and identifies problem areas where a reconceptualization is critical. It suggests a broadening of concepts, definitions and classifications to reflect the specific circumstances of the women's world as well as the man's, particularly as they relate to poverty.

Its general approach is to suggest ways in which individual societies could adapt or redesign procedures for collecting and compiling statistics to produce a more accurate picture of women's needs and participation which would allow pragmatic action according to specific circumstances of each country.

TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

The low priority given to women in the collection of

statistics is often exacerbated by communication difficulties between users and producers of the data.

Statistical offices are often understaffed and they respond most readily to well articulated requests for information, whereas those who have little experience in using statistics are frequently unable to describe their needs in specifics terms.

INSTRAW and the United Nations Statistical Office are attempting to generate a better understanding of the needs of both groups by following up on recommendations of the expert group to develop national and regional workshops which will establish priorities for the selection of statistics and indicators on women's needs, and train users and producers to better disseminate and utilize data on sex differential in the main areas of concern.

They are also working to promote an exchange of views between national and international specialists.

It is recognized that the existence of appropriate data on the situation of women will not in itself guarantee an end to laws, policies or practices which work to their disadvantage.

However, the availability of statistics and indicators which quantify the special disadvantages women face in relation to men, as well as their progress towards equality, can influence changes in public perception, policies and programmes.

INSTRAW, having completed the first phase of its project for the improvement of the availability and the promotion of the use at the national, regional and international levels of indicators and related basic statistics concerning women, has a number of follow-up activities. In co-operation with the organizations of the United Nations, programmes have been formulated in the hope to cast light on women's participation in non-monetary economic activities within the household and outside it which still remains largely invisible and is not reflected either in national statistics, census and household surveys or in decision-making.

Copies of the reports: *Compiling Social Indicators on the Situation of Women and Improving Concepts and Methods for Statistics and Indicators on the Situation of Women* are available upon request from International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) – Calle César Nicolás Penson, 102-A, P.O. Box 21747, Telephone and Facsimile 685-2111, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

INSTRAW is an autonomous institution within the framework of the United Nations to serve as a vehicle at the international level for the purpose of undertaking research and establishing training programmes to contribute to the integration and participation of women in development. In pursuit of its objectives, the Institute acts in close co-ordination with institutes and other bodies within and outside the United Nations system.

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