

Article

Sex and gender within the context of data collected for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This article is designed to help users understand the complexities in reporting sex and gender data for the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Table of contents

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\): sex and gender](#)
3. [Data collection: benefits and complexities](#)
4. [Latest update on sex and gender](#)

1 . Introduction

This exploratory article was first published in 2019 with the aim of explaining the differences between the terms "sex" and "gender". The article highlighted the complexities in reporting the required data for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators, as the terms were being used interchangeably in some United Nations' definitions. It was intended for use only within the SDGs context.

The government definitions, which were included in the 2019 article, are no longer current and do not reflect a current cross-government agreed position. For this reason, they have been removed from this updated version of the article to avoid potential confusion for users and reduce the risk of the article being applied for purposes other than reporting for the SDGs.

While definitions of "sex" and "gender" are now out of scope of this article, Sections 2 and 3 explore these concepts within the context of data collected for SDGs. This is designed to help users understand which goal and target use which term and also set out some of the complexities in reporting data. Section 4 provides an overview of the latest work on the topics of sex and gender identity. The old content of the article will be available to users on request, but it should be noted that it does not reflect the latest guidance on sex and gender.

2 . Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): sex and gender

The [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) are a universal set of goals, underpinned by targets and indicators. They seek to eradicate inequalities, ensuring that no one is left behind. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the focal point of UK data for the global SDG indicators.

The data used to report on the indicators are often collected by other organisations (such as the NHS and government departments) and may not directly match SDG requirements. Most data collected capture those who are male or female only, and in some cases are labelled "sex", and in other cases "gender". There are very few organisations that collect data on gender identity. For more information, please see our [Equalities data audit](#).

In the SDGs, the goals and targets tend to refer to gender, for example, "Goal 5: Gender equality" and "Target 4. a: Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all". However, indicators refer to sex, for example, "Indicator 5.b.1: Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex" and "Indicator 8.5.2: Unemployment rate, by sex, age and persons with disabilities". This makes it complex in understanding what data are required and what information needs to be collected.

The main principle of the SDGs is to "leave no one behind". To meet this, each of these indicators are to be broken down, where relevant, by eight characteristics required by the United Nations (UN). In paragraph 74.g of [Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), they state the disaggregations are: income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location, and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. However, in paragraph 17.18 they state gender instead of sex (the other disaggregations are the same).

In some UN SDG definitions, the terms "sex" and "gender" appear to be used interchangeably. The "other characteristics" outlined in the 2030 Agenda relate to human rights and international laws, and include sexual orientation and gender identity. This suggests that measuring both sex and gender is important to ensure that no one is left behind.

However, the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) indicates there may be a concern when it comes to reporting, especially when data are disaggregated. Even where data on gender identity are collected accurately, the amount of data may be so small that disclosure control means the data cannot be provided.

3 . Data collection: benefits and complexities

There are many positives in collecting gender identity data. For example, the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) indicates that people welcome inclusion in surveys as it provides opportunities to express their opinions and to raise the profile of gender identity in society.

However, there are many different challenges in collecting and reporting this information. Gender identity is a very complex matter. There are multiple different identities, and there are also issues of privacy and confidentiality to consider, such as which information is appropriate to ask for in each context, and whether people would answer openly.

4 . Latest update on sex and gender

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) Harmonisation Team work to make statistics and data on a range of topics more comparable, consistent and coherent. This includes sex and gender and information about the latest work, and future developments, which are available on the team's [sex harmonisation guidance](#) webpage.

We know that an individual's sex and/or gender is a commonly asked-for variable in official statistics. There can be valid reasons to produce measures based on different classifications or definitions depending on the question the producers are trying to address. The Office for Statistics Regulation [guidance on collecting and reporting data about sex in official statistics](#) sets out what statistical producers should consider when collecting and reporting data about sex.

The GSS Harmonisation Team aims to improve the suite of guidance available for data collectors. This will involve making existing guidance easier to access and undertaking new research to fill data gaps, focusing on telephone and face-to-face collection modes. In December 2021, the Harmonisation Team published:

- a [review of the gender identity harmonised standard](#)
- an [update on the sex harmonisation guidance](#) giving timelines for the new work

We know that sex and gender are evolving topics. Definitions, terminology, and thinking will change and develop. The Harmonisation Team will continue to ensure that we are aware of changing social norms, and respondent and user needs. Different types of data will bring new insights about the topic and will help us develop our work further. Updates will be available on the [sex harmonisation guidance](#) webpage.