

Civil Registration, Vital Statistics, and Gender

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What is CRVS?

Civil registration (CR) is the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of vital events (notably, live births, deaths and causes of death). A vital statistics (VS) system processes these vital event data. Complete CRVS systems are critical for countries and for individuals. They provide basic demographic and health information for countries, bridging the information gap between censuses, and, combined with other economic and social indicators, they are the basis for the calculation of national and sub-national population averages and making international comparisons. They provide identity confirmation for individuals and access to citizen rights and responsibilities, including entitlements (such as social security, health and pension benefits), individual legal status, and voting rights. There are huge gaps in the availability of vital statistics data, beginning with birth registration: approximately 230 million children or 35 percent of all children under the age of five have not had their births registered (UNICEF 2013). Only one-third of countries keep complete civil registries that capture deaths and causes of death (WHO 2012).

CRVS and gender

According to a recent UNICEF report, boys and girls are registered about equally across countries (UNICEF 2013). For this reason, the lack of reliable vital event data from a non-functioning or poorly functioning civil registration system could be perceived as a gender neutral gap. However, there are a number of ways women are particularly disadvantaged in the inability to register their children, and reasons why having complete CRVS can have disproportionate benefits for women and girls.

Gender-related birth registration challenges

In many countries, single mothers and women in consensual unions who are not legally married are unable to register their children without the signature of the father. Further, poor and less educated mothers register their children at birth significantly less often than other mothers (UNICEF 2002; 2013). Many countries are also biased toward the nationality of the fathers when determining the nationality of a child (UNICEF 2013). These gender related disadvantages in women's ability to register their children are not only unfair, they are a strong link in the intergenerational transmission of poverty between mothers and children. Some examples of the obstacles women face are outlined in UNICEF's 2013 report, *Every Child's Birth Right*:

- The 'birth notice form' in Nepal requires the names of both the father and the grandfather.
- Women in Nicaragua living in consensual unions can only register children temporarily if the father has not signed the birth record.
- A marriage certificate is needed to register a child in Indonesia.
- Children in Bhutan whose father is unknown cannot be registered.
- Papua New Guinea has just one birth registration site serving a population of roughly seven million people spread across more than 460,000 square kilometers, including 600 islands.

Benefits to girls and women

The benefits to girls and women from a strengthened, well-functioning CRVS system are multiple:

- While the quality of information on maternal mortality – still a major cause of death for adult women and adolescent girls in low-income countries – has improved considerably, nevertheless,

the data are estimates and inadequate for accurate monitoring and understanding of trends.¹ Strengthened CRVS allows for actual rather than estimated health statistics, including on maternal mortality and death due to diseases for which women bear a disproportionate disease burden.

- Marriage and divorce registration is a largely unrecognized part of well-developed CRVS systems. Having good marriage and divorce documents can contribute to women's ability to inherit property and register their children in some countries, among other benefits.
- Registering girls at birth and recording their marriages provides a legal backing against early and forced marriage.
- Identity documentation, closely linked to birth registration, is critical for individuals to exercise citizen rights and responsibilities and access entitlements – precisely some of the most significant domains with major gender gaps and gender data gaps. Individual identity documentation (ID): (a) expands women's economic opportunities, by allowing women to acquire, claim, transfer and dispose of physical and financial assets independently; (b) increases women's independent access to services and entitlements; and (c) expands women's access to voting and political rights and opportunities. National identity documentation yields the basic numbers to help close data gaps in all these domains. More importantly, it is a basic vehicle to increase women's voice and agency and their ability to both contribute to and benefit from development.

Channels to improve CRVS for women and girls

Expand what is collected: Advocacy is needed to ensure that marriage and divorce data are included as a standard component of national and international efforts to strengthen CRVS systems. (Efforts to date focus on strengthening registration of births, deaths and causes of death.)

Change discriminatory legal frameworks: In countries where single mothers or women in consensual unions are not legally allowed to register their children, advocacy toward changing these laws could have significant benefits for women.

Improve women's understanding of the importance of CRVS: Since poor and less educated mothers, as well as single and un-partnered mothers, are less likely to register their children, advocacy campaigns targeting these women, focusing on the benefits and how to register, could increase birth registration rates overall.

Target increased provision of individual ID to women using technology: The provision of unique digital identity is increasingly feasible, and there are growing experiences and lessons as to how best to address this gap in identification and data on citizenship records (Gelb and Clark 2013). Biometric systems have been used to improve the efficacy of CRVS systems, by digitizing records of individual identity. Especially in areas where women's mobility is limited, technological tools such as biometrics or even cell phone registration reporting can improve the ability of governments to reach and provide women with ID. It can also improve women's ability to register their children. Women's organizations and women's networks could be tapped to help with advocacy and dissemination efforts.

Call for a universal CRVS target in the post-2015 agenda: The proposed post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (Open Working Group, 2014) include eleven targets as part of goal five: Attain gender equality, empower women and girls everywhere. These include eliminating early and forced marriages; ensuring women's equal access to control and ownership of assets and natural and other productive resources, as well as non-discriminatory access to essential services; and promoting the availability of gender disaggregated data to improve gender equality policies. As we have seen, these and many other goals and targets require functioning CRVS systems to provide women and children with legal standing

¹ At 240 deaths for 100,000 live births, the maternal mortality rate for women in developing countries is 15 times higher than in developed countries (WHO 2012).

and to allow accurate monitoring of targets. Goal five is the only one of seventeen goals to mention improvements in statistics, and does not refer specifically to CRVS.

A global target for improving gender statistics is important. The High Level Panel's 2013 report on the post-2015 development goals, which called for a "data revolution" in developing countries, specified that targets of all goals should be measured separately for women and men, or girls and boys, where appropriate. Both the WHO Global Working group on CRVS and the independent Expert Review Group (iERG) have also called for a CRVS target in the post-2015 agenda. Women's voices should strongly support and endorse a proposed target for better gender statistics, with a strong emphasis on the role of CRVS, as part of the post-2015 goals.

Global momentum to strengthen CRVS: Key players

WHO: In partnership with Canada, UNICEF, USAID and the World Bank, WHO held a first annual Global Summit on CRVS (Bangkok), a follow-up technical meeting on "The Role of the Health Sector in Strengthening CRVS" (Geneva), both in 2013. In April 2014, a technical consultation organized by WHO, in collaboration with UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the World Bank Group and sponsored by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, was held in Addis Ababa to discuss investment in and acceleration of CRVS strengthening, building on the current regional and global momentum. The partners issued a Global Call for Action on CRVS, which seeks the removal of barriers to universal CRVS at the country level, including outdated laws, weak infrastructure, poor staff training, and inadequate funding. A WHO Global Working group on CRVS leverages country commitments and national plans for improvement. Canada finances national CRVS planning in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mozambique and the Philippines. In 2014, high-level commitments in support of CRVS are forthcoming in Asia-Pacific and Africa. CRVS is conceptualized as a critical building block for the post-2015 agenda and the data revolution.

World Bank: The World Bank Group and the World Health Organization have formed a partnership with several global health agencies and country governments to support a *Global Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Scaling Up Investment Plan 2015-2024*. The plan covers activities over a 10 year period from 2015 to 2024, with the goal of universal civil registration of births, deaths, marriages, and other vital events, including reporting causes of death and access to legal proof of registration for all individuals by 2030 (World Bank/WHO, 2014).

iERG (Independent Expert Review Group): An outgrowth of the UN Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health, in its second accountability report to the UN Secretary-General (2013), the iERG called for better data and making universal and effective Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems a post-2015 target. The iERG recommended a new global alliance to strengthen countries' CRVS systems through leadership, advocacy, norm-setting, and technical assistance, led by the UN Secretary General and the President of the World Bank (iERG 2013).

Center for Global Development: Following the rapid growth of biometrics in developing countries, the Center for Global Development is working to promote its use (e.g., finger prints and iris scans) to provide universal access to individual identity. Significant under documentation in the developing world contributes to an "identity gap" and less inclusive development. Biometrics can provide robust identification services, helping to close this gap. The Center calls for donor partnerships and support and South-South learning (CGD, accessed 2014).

UNICEF: UNICEF works to strengthen national child protection systems in order to reduce the obstacles of registering children at birth. UNICEF accomplishes this through legal and policy reform, civil registry strategic planning, capacity building and awareness-raising, integration of birth registration into other services such as health and education, community-based registration, and social mobilization campaigns. SMS technology for registration and support to governments to develop online birth registration information systems are also part of the work (UNICEF, accessed 2014). The agency maintains a database,

based on MICS and DHS data, on the percentage of children under five with a registered birth in countries where information is available, by sex (www.childinfo.org).

Data2X: Data2X, an initiative coordinated by the United Nations Foundation with support and collaboration from the Hewlett Foundation and the Office of Hillary Clinton, builds partnerships to support improvements in CRVS as part of its overall effort to increase the quality and availability of gender data. Data2X has released a report, *Data2X: Mapping Gender Data Gaps*, (Buvinic, Furst-Nichols, and Koolwal 2013) which identifies major gaps in gender statistics that complete CRVS systems would help to fill.

Regional Initiatives

The Africa Program on Accelerated Improvements of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS): APAI-CRVS is a regional program that has consolidated various CRVS initiatives on the African continent and established a program of action with strong political backing of the ministers in charge of civil registration in 54 African countries. The program is a joint initiative of the African Development Bank, the African Union, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). The program also maintains strong technical links with international organizations such as the WHO, UNHCR, and UNICEF.

Get Every One in the Picture in Asia and the Pacific: Governments and development partners have recently come together as part of the *Get Every One in the Picture* regional initiative to accelerate progress by generating political and technical commitments to improve CRVS systems in 62 countries. The regional initiative is driven by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, WHO, Asian Development Bank and Plan International and receives strategic guidance from a regional steering group chaired by the Fiji Minister of Health and composed of other high-level representatives of government and international organizations. Substantial progress has already been made in many countries, including Bangladesh, the Philippines and, through a Pacific action plan, in Fiji and Vanuatu.

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