Implementing gender-sensitive civil registration and vital statistics systems through a life cycle approach

The importance of civil registration and vital statistics and legal identity for all to accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The present document provides a discussion of the importance of adopting a gender perspective when improving civil registration and vital statistics systems to overcome persistent and structural gender inequalities, including in health, education, political participation and economic empowerment.

The present document contains a description of barriers to gender-sensitive civil registration and vital statistics systems in Asia and the Pacific and an explanation of how systematic registration of marriage and divorce can help to protect women’s rights, foster empowerment, prevent child marriage and facilitate birth registration. It concludes with recommendations for eliminating barriers to civil registration and enhancing the contribution of civil registration and vital statistics to achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment in the region.

While civil registration is important for women, men, girls and boys, the document is primarily focused on the implications of non-registration for women and girls and the children they give birth to, given that issues such as child, early and forced marriage are human rights violations and harmful practices that disproportionately affect women and girls globally.

The Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific may wish to discuss the extent to which plans and strategies for improving civil registration and vital statistics incorporate a gender perspective and how the emphasis on incorporating such a perspective may be strengthened to achieve the shared vision that, by 2024, everyone in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems that facilitate the realization of rights and support good governance, health and development.
I. Introduction

1. Civil registration and vital statistics systems are essential components for the realization of fundamental human rights. Over several decades, international human rights declarations and conventions have served to reiterate the relevance of legal identity for ensuring rights and entitlements for all individuals throughout the life cycle, making clear its central and critical role for sustainable development. A fully functioning civil registration and vital statistics system generates important information that is a prerequisite to informed socioeconomic planning and decision-making at the national level. It enables Governments to monitor key demographic and health indicators, including the adolescent birth rate and rates of infant, child and maternal, and adult mortality, and target resources and interventions to geographic locations and population groups.

2. Marriage registration can help to prevent and reduce child marriage, protect owned and co-owned assets, facilitate inheritance rights, promote the recognition of paternity and enable a child’s birth registration. Similarly, divorce registration can support the division of assets and the establishment of custody arrangements. Documentation to prove family relations and civil status plays an important role in women’s empowerment by enabling other rights, such as the transfer of asset ownership upon a spouse’s death. Death certification is a final and permanent record, serving as a tool to support families and society in managing the legal and financial consequences of death. When causes of death are recorded in an accurate and timely manner, civil registration and vital statistics systems are well positioned to provide data on women’s causes of death, including maternal mortality. However, the potential underregistration of women’s deaths means that policies are inadequately informed, including on providing perinatal and maternal care, preventing intimate partner violence or ensuring access to economic assets.

3. Civil registration and vital statistics systems are crucial to realizing many of the commitments to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and beyond. The framework for international cooperation embedded in the 2030 Agenda explicitly included civil registration and vital statistics as a means of implementation in advancing health, economic and social opportunities (for example, target 16.9 concerns providing legal identity for all, including birth registration). Civil registration and vital statistics data are critical for monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, with 15 of the 17 Goals using indicators which can be partially or fully produced from high quality civil registration and vital statistics data.

4. Complete and accurate registration of vital events is fundamental to making all women and girls visible in population-based statistics. Producing sex-disaggregated vital statistics is critical for monitoring Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good health and well-being) and 5 (Gender equality), as well as Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), which includes indicators on homicide.

5. The Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024) was declared in 2014 at the First Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. By declaring the Decade, Governments marked 2015–2024 as a time frame for realizing their shared vision that all people in Asia and the Pacific would benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems that facilitated the realization of their rights and supported good governance, health
and development. Member States affirmed their commitment 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. Since the beginning of the Decade, considerable progress has been achieved in the registration of births and deaths throughout the region; however, further action is needed to ensure that all vital events are recorded by civil registration and vital statistics systems to inform gender-sensitive policies.

6. Women and girls still face critical barriers and structural impediments from birth and throughout the life cycle in registering their vital events, such as birth, marriage, divorce and death. These challenges result in limitations for women and girls in securing their legal identity from birth and realizing their full rights, including economic and political rights. Underregistration of vital events prevents women and girls from reaching their full potential and prevents society from fully benefiting from their capabilities. Reducing barriers and differential access to civil registration is crucial to ensuring that women and girls are not left behind.

7. In times of crisis, proof of legal identity is critical. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic demonstrated the importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems and how the systems themselves are affected by crises. Registration services in many countries were temporarily closed, and health systems were under pressure, as many individuals needed proof of legal identity to obtain relief services. During natural disasters and conflict, efforts to provide evacuation, protection, resettlement and repatriation require reliable information about the identities of those affected.

8. Also in times of crisis, the infrastructure of civil registration and vital statistics is usually under severe pressure while it simultaneously plays an even more critical role in ensuring the rights of both present and future generations. For instance, a case study published in 2019 illustrated the intergenerational consequences of barriers to vital event registration for Syrian refugees displaced in neighbouring countries between 2011 and 2017. The non-registration of one type of vital event in a person’s life, for example a woman’s marriage, can result in the non-registration of other vital events later in the life cycle, such as the birth of her child. Such barriers to registration for displaced people are likely to have disproportionally greater consequences for women following their displacement, especially if the men in their families have been killed or are missing, because assets and property are mostly registered in men’s names. Furthermore, many vital events that took place before and during the conflict may not have been registered, making family relationships difficult to prove.

9. When women and girls are counted in key indicators, governments and other actors are able to monitor their status and the progress towards gender equality more broadly. This is of critical importance in times of crisis when governments must provide emergency services to the most vulnerable population groups. Making women and girls visible in population-based statistics and ensuring their legal identity is a prerequisite for building back better and strengthening development progress more broadly.

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10. In recent years, stakeholders have increased their focus on the importance of gender to civil registration and vital statistics. This was highlighted by discussions during an event held on the theme “Converge: connecting vital events registration and gender equality”, which took place in February 2020, and an event held on the theme “Making the invisible visible: civil registration and vital statistics as a basis to meeting the 2030 gender agenda”, which took place in Ottawa in February 2018. During the discussions, participants acknowledged that civil registration and vital statistics are critical for accelerating and monitoring progress towards gender equality.

11. The present document provides a discussion of the life cycle approach to civil registration and vital statistics with the objective of highlighting the issues from a gender perspective. In the context of a person’s life cycle, civil registration provides both the certification of identity for a newborn child and, critically, entry into the identity management system. Marriage and divorce registration are also key events with implications for inheritance, the status of children and women’s rights. Civil registration plays a critical role in notifying the appropriate authorities of deaths to ensure their reflection in the population register and the identity management system, which has implications for inheritances and understanding causes of death. Whether each of these events is registered or not has different implications for women, men, girls and boys, and the gender-differentiated impact of underregistration must be considered in designing appropriate interventions and policies at the national level. Reducing barriers and differential access to civil registration is crucial to ensuring that women and girls are not left behind.

II. Beginning of the life cycle: gender and birth registration

12. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is stated that everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law as well as the right to a nationality. Birth registration is the gateway to establishing legal identity and realizing other rights, such as the rights to a nationality and to access to education and health care. States parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child are obligated to register a child immediately after birth.

13. A gender perspective on birth registration supports efforts to tackle two important issues, namely the completeness of birth registration for both boys and girls, and the multiplier effects of accurate and quality data on birth registration for inclusive development.

14. Notwithstanding progress towards universal registration of births and the recognition of autonomy in family codes in several countries, civil registration practices, administrative procedures and social norms often function as barriers to a woman’s ability to register a newborn. In South and South-West Asia, there are currently 50 million children under the age of 5 who have not had their birth registered. While in most countries in South and South-West Asia, girls are as likely to be registered as boys, mothers attempting to report the birth of a child could still face discrimination owing to existing legislation.

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2 See ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/1.
15. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) report on the status of civil registration and vital statistics in South Asian countries, births in Bhutan cannot be registered without the father’s name. Similar legislative gender bias can be found in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where only the father can register a child’s birth. Moreover, in Indonesia, parents must provide their marriage certificate to obtain a birth certificate that includes the father’s name. Because a certificate without the father’s name is potentially stigmatizing, this requirement directly affects the registration of children born to parents without a marriage certificate.

16. In addition to formal requirements that can make registration processes more difficult for women, there is evidence that local civil registrars may be more reluctant to support women in the registration of their children. A survey in Punjab, Pakistan, found that 4 in 10 women had experienced difficulties or were not allowed to register a child without the child’s father or another male relative present.

17. Some progress, however, has been seen in South Asia. For instance, the recent #whereismyname campaign in Afghanistan was aimed at changing the legislation so that birth certificates would include the name of the mother. According to a New York Times report, the women-led initiative eventually resulted in an amendment of the country’s population registration act to allow identity cards and birth certificates to include the name of the mother.

18. Despite potential and actual discrimination against mothers, the evidence suggests that there is less discrimination based on the sex of the child to be registered. Most current evidence indicates no significant differences in registration rates between girls and boys. Although the higher-than-expected numbers of newborn boys reflected in the sex ratio at birth in some countries may indicate the underregistration of births of girls, it may also indicate female infanticide, abandonment, prenatal sex selection and sex-selective abortion.

19. Gender-biased sex selection can be measured using the sex ratio at birth, which compares the number of boys born to the number of girls born in a given period. The biologically normal sex ratio at birth can range from 102 to 106 boys per 100 girls. When ratios as high as 130 boys per 100 girls are

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5 Syed Muhammad Mursalin and Farah Ashraf, “In-depth review and needs assessment of CRVS system to develop an action plan for overall improvement of the system”, paper prepared for the 2020 Asia-Pacific Statistics Week, Bangkok, June 2020.
observed, it is a sign that sex selection is taking place. Son preference is an expression of the low value placed on girls in some communities, and it often reflects discriminatory socioeconomic practices and traditions.

20. The importance of comprehensive civil registration data for identifying sex imbalances at birth, which may indicate the presence of gender-biased sex selection, is evidenced by a study conducted in Georgia by the United Nations Population Fund and the national statistical office. The study investigated trends in the sex ratio at birth in Georgia between 1990 and 2016 by supplementing analyses of census data with a review of recent birth registration data.

21. Despite improvements in the sex ratio at birth since 2005, the review of census and birth registration data shows the persistence of a strong preference for sons in Georgia at the time of the 2014 census. However, a sharp decline in the sex imbalance at birth was observed in 2016, as shown in figure I.

Figure I
Estimated annual number of missing female births in Georgia, 1990–2016


Note: The chart includes birth registration data, data from the Public Service Development Agency and census data from 2002 and 2014.

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22. The inclusion of parity data, which is collected during birth registration in Georgia, has facilitated further analysis of the skewed sex ratio at birth, providing important information about the differentials of gender preference in fertility and sex selection. An examination of the sex of the child by birth order revealed that for third- or higher-order births, the sex ratio at birth continued to increase until 2007, after which it started to decline (see figure II) but remained higher than for first- or second-order births. These differentials in the sex ratio suggest that prenatal sex selection for higher-order births among sonless couples may have been driving the sex ratio imbalance in Georgia. This example highlights the importance of accurate and comprehensive civil registration systems for identifying demographic trends which may reveal and broaden the understanding of individual and structural gender bias.

Figure II
Sex ratio at birth by birth order in Georgia, 2002–2014

![Sex ratio at birth by birth order in Georgia, 2002–2014](image)

*Source: Guilmoto and Tafuro, Trends in the Sex Ratio at Birth in Georgia, see figure I.*

23. Skewed sex ratios at birth may also indicate problems with birth registration itself. An analysis of the 2016 census of Vanuatu demonstrates gender differences in birth registration. The case study of Vanuatu, published by the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, indicates that 86.6 per cent of men and boys had a birth certificate compared to 83.3 per cent of women and girls.10 The difference was most evident in adults over the age of 20, with observed differentials by sex becoming more significant with increasing age while being negligible among children. This suggests that birth registration historically favoured boys.

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24. However, even in countries where no significant differences in registration rates by sex have been found, women and girls could still be at risk of exclusion. In most cases, the lack of comprehensive civil registration data or of certain questions in censuses means inequalities in birth registration are only estimated through surveys. While surveys are a useful source of data for estimating registration completeness and identifying the main socioeconomic factors impacting registration, their limited sample size does not enable a detailed analysis, which means that survey data showing relative equality at the national level could hide the disadvantages affecting girls in some subgroups of the population. In addition, the lack of literature on gender gaps in subgroups of national populations prevents an exploration of the intersectional causes and effects of the underregistration of births.

III. Gender and legal identity

25. Civil registration is often the foundation for identity documentation. Without a birth certificate, it can be difficult to obtain national identity documents. For example, birth certificates are required in 39 countries in Asia and the Pacific in order to obtain national identity documents.11

26. Birth registration provides an official and permanent legal recognition of a person’s existence. Proof of legal identity through birth certificates enables individuals to exercise their rights, including voting and political participation, as well as access to public services, such as health care, social security and education. Gender gaps in birth registration and legal identity can, therefore, exacerbate inequalities, usually disadvantaging women and girls.

27. The Identification for Development Initiative of the World Bank assessed global gender inequities in access to national identity documents through the Global Findex survey, which was first carried out in 2017 and is being carried out again through 2020–2021. According to the survey results, in low-income countries 45 per cent of women do not have a national identity document compared to 30 per cent of men. In Afghanistan, almost twice as many men as women have a national identity document. In Pakistan, women aged 18 to 40 are 6 per cent less likely than men of the same age group to have an identity card, after adjusting for gender differences in education and marital status. This gender gap is widest in the poorer quintiles (between 8 and 11 per cent) and narrower in the richest (2 per cent).12 According to the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, in Indonesia only half of all women in poor households have an identity card.13

28. Furthermore, an analysis of gender gaps in access to education in Pakistan from the 2017–2018 Demographic and Health Survey shows that birth registration is significantly linked to access to education services in the country. Among unregistered children, gender gaps in education outcomes at primary and secondary levels are greater, with the proportion of boys completing these levels being more than 20 percentage points higher than the proportion of girls. For children whose births were registered, the gender gap decreased to approximately 8 percentage points, and it falls to less than 3 percentage points for children with a birth certificate. All factors being equal (for example, wealth, type of residence and mother’s education), unregistered

11 See ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/1.
13 “Leaving no one behind: CRVS, gender and the SDGs”.
boys have a greater chance than unregistered girls to access education, but the gender gap is reduced for registered children and further reduced for children who are registered and have a birth certificate. The results stress that providing legal identity through birth registration and birth certification plays a fundamental role in ensuring girls’ access to education.\(^{14}\)

29. Beyond supporting access to public services, documentation of legal identity is often needed to access services in the private sector. For example, the lack of identification can be a key obstacle to accessing financial services. Gender disparities in financial services are acute, particularly in some subregions in Asia and the Pacific, such as in South Asia, where roughly 30 per cent of women have a bank account as compared to nearly 45 per cent of men.\(^{15}\) Legal proof of identity could greatly improve women’s financial inclusion and economic empowerment.

30. Lack of civil registration and therefore, legal identity, also poses increased risks for women who are employed illegally abroad, as they may not be eligible for protection from the State in their country of work. This elevated risk is a pertinent issue to consider for the Asia-Pacific region, where labour migration to more-affluent countries is a common occurrence. Of an estimated 9 million Indonesians working abroad in 2016, almost 50 per cent are women, commonly employed in the informal sector as domestic workers in neighbouring countries and the Middle East. Approximately 19 per cent of women migrant workers from Indonesia lack proper documentation to work legally overseas.\(^{16}\) The lack of protection by labour laws of destination countries makes them more vulnerable to human rights violations. Furthermore, there are intergenerational consequences of women’s labour migration on civil registration, as children left behind in countries of origin are less likely to have their births registered.\(^{17}\)

**IV. Importance of marriage and divorce registration from a gender perspective**

31. Marriage and divorce are key vital events that need to be registered and certificated through a civil registration and vital statistics system. While there has been increasing attention accorded to birth registration and the need to increase both birth and death registration rates, the World Bank, in its report entitled “The role of identification in ending child marriage”, found that less attention has been given to strengthening marriage registries.\(^{18}\) Of all vital events, the recording of marriages and divorces is the most unreliable with the lowest data availability, especially in low-income countries, yet these records often have the lowest priority for improvement. In these countries, marriage


ceremonies are often only customary, making the registration of these events difficult.  

32. Marriage and divorce registration and certification provide the legal documentation that is necessary to claim individual rights, particularly for women and girls. For instance, a marriage certificate provides individuals with the necessary legal documentation that is required to claim rights to assets, inheritances, family benefit schemes and citizenship when married to a foreign national. Without formal marriage registration and certification, inheritance may not default to the surviving spouse upon the death of her husband, and she may be denied access to social protection assistance, such as widow allowances.  

Moreover, divorce certificates facilitate access to pension benefits, alimony, custody, child support and the distribution of assets acquired during the marriage.

33. The above-mentioned World Bank report contains the following findings with regard to Indonesia:

(a) Civil registration of marriage determines the marital property regime and therefore the allocation and management of property during marriage and at its dissolution;

(b) Civil registration of marriage is necessary to obtain family cards, which can be used to prove financial eligibility for cash transfer programmes, subsidized health care and other government services;

(c) Marriage registration means that marriage dissolution may only happen through legal divorce, which allows for clear division of assets and child custody arrangements;

(d) Proof of marriage may be needed in domestic violence charges, on the basis of specific legislation on domestic violence;

(e) Proof of marriage simplifies inheritance procedures for children.

34. In South Asia, registration gaps are generally greatest for marriages and divorces, with most countries having few or no reliable records. These gaps reflect the low demand for and supply of marriage and divorce registration services as well as the complexities of marriage registration, as different legislation may be relevant to different religious communities, and the fact that multiple institutions can register marriages in some countries. However, like all other vital events, the barriers to accessing marriage and divorce registration and the consequences of being in an unregistered marriage disproportionately affect women and girls.

35. In many countries across Asia and the Pacific, marriage registration is not compulsory. Unlike birth and death registration, there tend to be multiple legal frameworks underpinning marriage registration, including parallel processes for civil, religious and customary marriages. As a result, marriage and divorce registration and certification processes are overly complicated, duplicated and commonly founded on existing gender-based inequalities within a country.

19 Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, “Leaving no one behind: CRVS, gender and the SDGs”.


21 Ibid.
36. In Pakistan, for instance, a husband can utter the word talaq three times or send a written notice of divorce to his wife and a representative of the local government (Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961, article 7). By contrast, a wife divorces through a court (khul’ divorce) and can only do so in certain circumstances, such as abuse, desertion, or the husband suffering from leprosy or a virulent venereal disease (Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939, article 2). In a divorce, a wife is required to repay part of the mehr that the groom has paid to her as part of their marriage contract (Family Courts Act, 1964, article 9). Consequently, the social stigma and direct and indirect costs associated with divorce for women means they often find themselves either trapped in a marriage or propelled into poverty.

37. The Asia-Pacific region has alarmingly high levels of child, early and forced marriage. In the South Asia subregion, 56 per cent of women aged 20 to 49 are married before they reach 18 years of age.23

38. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem, putting an additional 13 million girls at risk of child, early and forced marriage.24 For example, in Indonesia, for the year 2020, the number of applications for permission to marry underage lodged with district and religious courts reached 24,000 by June – more than two and a half times the total number for the whole of 2012. Plan International noted that since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, child marriage and marriage dispensation requests had increased significantly in the West Nusa Tenggara Province in particular.25

39. National legislative frameworks play a critical role in the elimination of all forms of child, early and forced marriage. In that regard, significant national progress has been made in ending child marriage, including setting national targets and upholding the rights of the child by amending laws to set the minimum age of marriage at 18 and above. However, in its above-mentioned report, the World Bank shows that persistent low rates of birth and marriage registration in some countries make it difficult to enforce legislative improvements and track national targets, in particular in rural and remote locations where birth and marriage registration rates are low and child marriage rates are high.

40. Effective and accessible civil registration systems have the power to prevent child marriage, enable targeted service delivery for girls already married, establish formally that a marriage has taken place and provide full and equal protection under the law. Direct links between a marriage and a birth register can enable the registrar authorities to determine the age of the parties before completing a marriage registration. Those who officiate religious and customary marriages can play a significant role in the formal registration process by verifying the age of the intended spouses and reporting the marriage to civil registration authorities.

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22 Mehr is the obligation, in the form of money or possessions paid by the groom, to the bride at the time of Islamic marriage.


24 Ibid.

41. In that regard, the Government of Bangladesh and Plan International developed and piloted a mobile application to verify the ages of a bride and groom in real time, linked to the civil registration and vital statistics system. Marriage registrars could verify the ages of the bride and groom prior to officiating their marriage. It is estimated that during the six-month pilot period, the mobile application prevented more than 3,700 early or forced marriages.26

42. As the majority of marriage registration processes in the region are paper based, investing in digitization will not only improve the availability and accessibility of registration services but will also help to strengthen formal linkages between civil registration authorities, religious and customary courts, and religious and customary institutions.

43. Marriage and divorce registration and certification are critical events for addressing systematic violence experienced by women and girls. Nevertheless, efforts to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems rarely include gender-based violence investments in the Asia-Pacific region. Targeted investments are needed to strengthen marriage and divorce registration systems and services and increase the availability of evidence-based research documenting the experiences of women and girls trying to register a marriage or divorce.

V. End of the life cycle: gender and death and causes of death

44. Health systems worldwide rely on valid and accurate death data for programme and policy development and for tracking the distribution of ill health and diseases in populations. Death registration and recording causes of death are therefore fundamental to measuring and mitigating critical health challenges, including calculating excess mortality to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic.27

45. For families, the death certificate represents a final and permanent record of the fact of death, which the next of kin will need to manage the legal or financial consequences of death. Complete death registration, including an accurate recording of the cause of death, has significant gender implications, from generating evidence on the gender differences of certain diseases and causes of death to facilitating targeted interventions. Gender differences in causes of death include femicide, such as deaths at the hands of an intimate partner or dowry killings. Also, death registration can be essential for claims of inheritance, insurance and survival and spousal benefits. In some countries, a death certificate is required for widows to claim a widowhood pension. Therefore, complete death registration and accurate cause-of-death recording is critical.

46. Owing to a paucity of data, little evidence is available to show a significant gap in death registration completeness between men and women in most countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Nevertheless, limited existing evidence for South Asia suggests that there are large gender gaps in death registration. In India, for example, death registration completeness is much lower for women than for men.28 In 2019, the estimated completeness of death registration in the country was 67 per cent for women, and 85 per cent for

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26 Plan International, Time to Act!: Let’s Go Digital!.
27 See ESCAP/CST/2020/INF/3.
28 Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, “Leaving no one behind: CRVS, gender and the SDGs”.

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men.\textsuperscript{29} It should be noted that the gap in 2019 was wider than it had been in previous years, having grown with the progress of death registration completeness in the general population, indicating that proactive policies are necessary to bridge the gender gap. In Bangladesh, research showed that only 17 per cent of surveyed deaths in rural areas of the Matlab region were registered in the national civil registration and vital statistics system, with large gender differences in registration rates (26 per cent for men and 5 per cent for women).\textsuperscript{30} Among respondents who reported that a recent death in the household was registered, the primary reasons for registration were to secure an inheritance and to access social services. In South-East Asia, similar disparities are present in Myanmar, where death registration completeness rates in 2017 were 58 per cent for men and 47 per cent for women – a difference of 11 percentage points.\textsuperscript{31}

47. Even in countries where death registration completeness is similar for both sexes, a more detailed analysis can reveal gender bias. For instance, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, most deaths are registered, but women’s deaths are often registered much later as compared to men’s, which may curtail the utility of such registration for timely mortality surveillance and diminish the quality of the data collected.\textsuperscript{32}

48. Women’s deaths in general are less likely to be registered than births because there are fewer incentives to do so. Women typically own fewer assets than men, so inheritance rights are less relevant when a woman dies. In some countries, a death certificate is needed to perform a burial or cremation, which provides a strong incentive for registration.\textsuperscript{33} Death registration may also be needed to claim social benefits such as widowers’ pensions.\textsuperscript{34} Apart from these, there are few incentives to report a woman’s death to civil registration authorities, especially if she had no formal resources or assets to pass on after her death. In addition, incentives to hide the causes of certain deaths in women, such as femicides and dowry deaths, contribute to the problem of underregistration.

49. Since accurate and disaggregated data are not available for many countries, proper analysis cannot be conducted to assess gender gaps in registration or related bias, especially for deaths. The lack of other data sources for death registration, such as survey data, makes it even more challenging to capture inequalities. More work needs to be done to better understand who is excluded from death registration and how their exclusion can be addressed.

50. Moreover, sex-disaggregated mortality data are necessary to provide quality information on diseases and health patterns, and gender patterns in causes of death are relevant to the design of public health policies. Thus, fragmented mortality information systems contribute to the loss of information that is essential for public health. One such example is the underreporting of

\textsuperscript{29} Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), “Death registration completeness in Asia and the Pacific”, Stats Brief (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{30} M. Moinuddin Haider and others, “Adult death registration in Matlab, rural Bangladesh: completeness, correlates, and obstacles”, \textit{Genus}, No. 77 (July 2021).

\textsuperscript{31} ESCAP, “Death registration completeness in Asia and the Pacific”.

\textsuperscript{32} James C. Knowles, “Assessment of the quality and relevance of existing data to monitor the gender dimensions of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific”.

\textsuperscript{33} Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, “Leaving no one behind: CRVS, gender and the SDGs”.

\textsuperscript{34} James C. Knowles, “Assessment of the quality and relevance of existing data to monitor the gender dimensions of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific”.
deaths caused by domestic violence or intimate partner violence, even though the tenth and eleventh revisions of the International Classification of Diseases allow for reporting of external causes of morbidity and mortality.\textsuperscript{35} According to the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, 60 per cent of countries worldwide have no useful civil registration and vital statistics data on homicide deaths,\textsuperscript{36} and evidence suggests that mortality caused by intimate partner violence is less visible than other homicides in such data, even in more developed systems.\textsuperscript{37} Homicide data are not typically collected through the civil registration system but through other administrative systems,\textsuperscript{38} while data on homicide as a cause of death, if recorded at all, are captured through the civil registration system. It is critical to triangulate or integrate these data sources in order to fully understand the issues related to homicide deaths.

51. Accurate, reliable and timely mortality statistics are also critical, especially during health emergencies. The current pandemic has brought to light the need for more reliable and timely death data. Knowing how many people are dying, as well as who they are and where they are dying, is essential to track the spread and virulence of the virus and develop informed policy responses. The pandemic has exposed deep gaps in death registration systems around the world and in Asia and the Pacific, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Gender bias in death registration could be obscuring the pandemic’s gendered impacts. Given the existence of such a critical blind spot in the analysis of the pandemic’s effects, the COVID-19 responses are less effective and evaluations of them are less insightful.

52. In the Punjab region of Pakistan, for instance, between February and September 2020, 23,552 deaths were reported to the District Health Information System, which serves as a record of manually compiled death statistics. During the same reference period, the digital cause-of-death system recorded 10,943 deaths, with a medically certified cause recorded for 46 per cent. Of these medically certified causes, COVID-19 accounted for 17 per cent. These data highlight important recording gaps, as less than half of all deaths are reported with a medically certified cause through hospital death record system. The data also point to the broader potential of a comprehensive civil registration and vital statistics system, such as the capacity to identify the proportion of overall deaths attributed to COVID-19 and the different health impacts of the pandemic on women and men. Sex-disaggregated data analysis of records in the extended cause-of-death system that was created in response to the pandemic indicates that COVID-19 caused more deaths in men than in women (71 per cent of registered COVID-19 deaths occurred in men). Although global mortality data indicate that more men may be dying as a result of the pandemic, the large gender gap registered in Punjab is well above the

\textsuperscript{35} See https://icd.who.int/icd11refguide/en/index.html.

\textsuperscript{36} “The dangers of gender bias in CRVS and cause of death data: the path to health inequality”, Knowledge Briefs on Gender and CRVS, Brief 3, Paper 3 (February 2020).


\textsuperscript{38} Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, “The dangers of gender bias in CRVS and cause of death data: the path to health inequality”.
world average and likely compounded by underreporting of women’s deaths in civil registration systems.\(^{39}\)

VI. Conclusion

53. In 2014, with the Ministerial Declaration to “Get Every One in the Picture” in Asia and the Pacific, Governments in the region agreed to the vision of universal registration of births, deaths and other vital events and affirmed their commitment 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. Despite this commitment, there are still gender gaps in the relevant regulations and processes. While girls are as likely to be registered as boys, women nevertheless face significant obstacles to register their children, marriages and divorces in several countries in Asia and the Pacific, and women’s deaths are substantially less likely to be registered than men’s in many countries across the region.

54. Evidence suggests non-registration may have larger impacts on women than men. Governments should take measures to reduce all barriers to civil registration and ensure the registration of vital events among women and hard-to-reach and marginalized populations, and further explore intersecting forms of inequality and discrimination in registration. More in-depth research is needed to identify and address the ways in which women experience gender discrimination in the registration of vital events, and how this experience intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as discrimination based on ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Additional focus on awareness-raising and training of registration staff may be necessary in countries where gender-neutral laws exist but practices discriminating against women and girls persist.

VII. Issues for consideration

55. The Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific may wish to discuss plans and strategies that are in place to incorporate a gender perspective when improving civil registration and vital statistics, to achieve the shared vision that, by 2024 everyone in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems that facilitate the realization of rights and support good governance, health and development.

56. The Ministerial Conference may wish to provide suggestions on the way forward to strengthen a gender-inclusive approach to civil registration and vital statistics to ensure universal registration for all, with a view to allowing everyone to access services and opportunities, realize their rights, including to inheritance and property, and be provided with protection from harmful practices such as child marriage, and with a further view to ensuring that the marital status of parents does not affect the birth registration of their children.

57. The Ministerial Conference may wish to recognize, in particular, the importance of marriage and divorce registration for addressing gender issues and to discuss possible improvements in that regard.

58. Lastly, the Ministerial Conference may wish to discuss and provide advice on addressing the urgent need for further disaggregation of birth and death registration data in order to support good governance, health and development and give governments important tools to respond to future crises in an effective way.