THE CENSUS AND FEMINISM

HOW CENSUS 2021 DATA BENEFITS FEMINIST ANALYSIS AND ACTIVISM

About the Women's Budget Group

The Women's Budget Group is a feminist think tank that provides evidence on women's economic position, proposes policy alternatives for a gender-equal economy, and uses our knowledge and skills to build capacity for others to do the same. Established over 30 years ago, we act as a link between academia, the women's voluntary sector and progressive economic think tanks.

About the Global Institute for Women's Leadership

The Global Institute for Women's Leadership works towards a world in which women of all backgrounds have fair and equal access to leadership. Chaired by Julia Gillard, the only woman to have served as Prime Minister of Australia, the institute brings together rigorous research, practice and advocacy to break down the barriers to women becoming leaders, while challenging ideas of what leadership looks like.

We would like to thank all delegates who took time away from their crucial work to make this event possible. We were joined by a brilliant variety of individuals and representatives of organisations/institutions, including:

Superhighways
Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales
Milton Keynes Fawcett Group
Margaret Egrot, Independent advisor
FWT, a Centre for Women
The Young Foundation
Oxford Brookes University
London School of Economics
Cornwall Council
Ruth Wilkinson, Freelancer
Office of Rebecca Long-Bailey MP
University of Birmingham
Population Matters
City, University of London
Economiefeministe.ch
The Breastfeeding Network
Stimulus
PlatformThirty1
Smallwood Trust

London Borough of Lambeth
Milton Keynes Doughnut Economics
Women's Equality Party
Start Easy
Queen Mary, University of London
Jo Costello, Freelance consultant
University of Manchester
The Growing Club CIC
Erin Parker Leonard, Councillor
Agenda Alliance
The Gender Index
OWIT UK (Organisation of Women in International Trade)
Inspire Women Oldham (Inspiring Futures Partnership)
Sustrans
Inspire Women Oldham
Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid
Jennette Arnold, Independent practitioner

The amazing illustrations included throughout this report were hand drawn live at the event by David Lewis. You can find out more about his work as a live illustrator at https://davidlewiscartoons.com/

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INTRODUCTION

"Gender inequality remains a persistent problem in the UK, affecting multiple dimensions of women's and men's lives. Unfortunately, too often gender differences are not meaningfully factored into policymaking. The availability of gender-disaggregated and intersectional data is a crucial step in exposing patterns of inequality and building an evidence base for change."
– Dr Caitlin Schmid, Research Fellow at the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London

"We need women to be able to read and analyse data, and talk to each other about what needs to be done to support their lives. Women at the grassroots level have invaluable insights, and they need to have the tools to turn these into evidence based policy ideas so that they can advocate for themselves."
– Dr Liz Hind, Senior Partnerships and Training Officer at the Women's Budget Group

"The most recent census was conducted in 2021, so this is our chance to harness the potential of census data for gender equality. I had never used census data before, but after a day of training, I believe it is a crucial tool for bridging the gender data gap by collecting data on a range of demographic and social characteristics such as age, sex, education, employment, and other gender-relevant data."
– Ilaria Esposito, census event delegate, Director at Start Easy[1]

The release of the England and Wales census 2021 gives us a once-in-a-decade opportunity to dive into population data, combine statistics with lived experience and bring raw data to life – moving one step closer to bridging the gender data gap. In May 2023, the Women's Budget Group and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London joined forces to deliver a full-day event bringing together feminist researchers and women's grassroots organisations to discuss and analyse the census 2021 data.

The day was started with a panel discussion moderated by Stella Creasy MP and featured the best-selling author and social commentator Caroline Criado-Perez OBE, Jennette Arnold OBE (Activist and former chair and member of the London Assembly), Dr Liz Hind (Local Partnerships and Training Officer at the Women's Budget Group), and Dr Caitlin Schmid (Research Fellow at the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London).

In the afternoon, a formal and informal data training workshop was offered, bringing together a selected group of activists, academics, policy makers and women's organisations with the following key aims:

- Engage with women's organisations and academics with the results of the census 2021 data and increase proficiency in reporting on population statistics.
- Create a space and opportunity for feminists, particularly those working at the local level, to work on data together and share insights.
- Demonstrate the value of the census as a useful tool for feminist activists, equalities campaigners, local women's groups that permits intersectional analyses.
- Promote the idea among journalists, statisticians and the wider public that data production and analysis require a gendered lens.

The data training workshop was designed to enable peer to peer support and learning. A way of recording notable data was established so that the findings of the discussions could be recorded. This report summarises the design, implementation and outcomes of the workshop to demonstrate the benefits of census data for feminist analysis and activism.

[1] https://starteasy.solutions/

THE CENSUS

WHAT IS THE CENSUS?

The census is a survey conducted every ten years by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which gives a picture of every household and individual in England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland run their own censuses controlled by separate statistical authorities, namely the National Records of Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency respectively. The aim of the census is to build a snapshot of society – and how it is changing over time – by asking people questions about their households and home lives on a given day. The results of the census are widely used by policymakers involved in the planning, development and funding of public services.

The release of the census 2021 data gives us a once-in-a-decade opportunity to delve into population data that aren't usually accessible through sample surveys. These include detailed data on small population groups, categorised by demographic characteristics or narrower geographical levels. By collaborating with those at the forefront of the women's movement at the local community level, we can unite statistics with real-world experiences to give vitality to raw data. This collaboration brings us closer to the goal of bridging the gender data gap and understanding the policies and interventions needed to make real change in women's lives.

WHY IS THE CENSUS USEFUL FOR FEMINIST ACTIVISTS AND ORGANISATIONS?

As discussed in more detail below, a key benefit of the census data is the geographical granularity it provides for understanding local area issues. Additionally, its multivariate nature means that the data offers the opportunity for intersectional analysis of population data. In contrast to previous releases, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has improved accessibility of the census 2021 data thus facilitating such spatial and intersectional analyses. Finally, feminist organisers may find census data useful in a range of ways relating to their specific interest areas or localities.

Local data

Census data can be explored at many different geographic levels, including country, region, local authority, constituency and neighbourhood levels (e.g., Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOA), Local Area Super Output Areas (LSOA)). This makes it incredibly useful for those working at the local level, allowing them to gather information about the lives, needs and characteristics of people in their communities. Whilst census data can by no means tell us all we need to know, understanding more about, for example, the work, housing or language needs of local women can provide a starting point to help organisations tailor their advocacy, campaign work and support services.

Intersectional Analysis

Data sources disaggregated by a single protected characteristic (such as sex or age) are relatively common, but the census allows us to combine multiple characteristics when exploring different topics. Whilst there are important limitations (explored later in this report), this nonetheless offers a rare opportunity for those without technical data analysis skills to examine intersecting inequalities. Findings can be used to support calls for these inequalities to be considered in the planning, budgeting and delivery of public services, and to expose or prevent policy that discriminates based on gender or other structural inequalities.

Accessibility of data

New ONS functionality developed for the 2021 census – including interactive maps and a custom table builder tool – has made detailed population data accessible to people without traditional data analysis skills who have an interest in understanding more about the lives of people in their local area. Core feminist principles of collaboration, power-shifting and participation hold that it is imperative that the people behind the data – in this case, women and those providing frontline services to them – are an integral part of the conversation when it comes to developing meaning from numbers and proposing effective policy solutions based on this. Whilst there are improvements that can be made in this regard (which will be expanded on in a later section of this report), we welcome the work that the ONS has put into improving the accessibility of census data.

Topics pertinent to feminist issues

As feminists aiming to influence local and/or national policy and take action to improve the lives of women in our communities, it is important that we are able to evidence problems as thoroughly as possible as a means of building our knowledge and power to drive change. Whilst there are important limitations, census data provides an important tool for the above because it can tell us vital information about key topics that can evidence social issues. The fact that we can disaggregate census data by sex and other characteristics gives analysts the potential to expose important societal inequalities. Key census topics relevant to feminist organisers include:

- Population and identity (including migration, national identity, ethnicity, religion, language and sexual orientation)
- Work (including economic activity, employment, occupation, industry and working hours)
- Health, disability and care (including unpaid care, general health, long-term health problem or disabled under the Equality Act)
- Housing and Living Arrangements (including household size, composition and tenure, central heating and vehicle availability)
- Education (including apprenticeships, whether studying and highest qualification)

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF THE CENSUS 2021 FOR EXPLORING FEMINIST ISSUES?

Exclusion of topics relevant to feminist research

The exclusion of key topic areas limits the census as a tool for illuminating gender inequality. For example, no data is collected regarding incomes, earnings or social security, all of which are crucial for developing an understanding of women's economic inequality. There is also no data measuring time spent caring for dependent children (which is not included in the census classification of 'unpaid care') or violence against women and girls, which are both central feminist issues. It is, however, important to bear in mind that the census survey must be limited to a certain number of questions and topic areas by nature, to ensure that it is completed by as much of the population of England and Wales as possible. There are other data sources available on the topics listed above, such as the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings. It may therefore be more beneficial to call for improved accessibility and capability for intersectional analysis of these datasets, rather than to ask for all topics relevant to feminist social research to be included in future releases of the census survey.

Intersectional analysis is limited at local level

Detailed intersectional local data is limited by Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC), designed to prevent the identification of individuals. This may hinder those searching for very detailed information within a small geographic area. Records may be swapped between small areas or not released at all. This means that researchers using open access census data may need to choose between searching a more detailed geography or using more detailed variables in order to see any results. Whilst SDC is a crucial tool for protecting individual identities, this is nonetheless a limitation for those who support people based on specific characteristics (for example, a small ethnic population of women) within their local area.

Stories as well as numbers

The use of quantitative analysis has become a topic of debate within feminist theory, with some academics rejecting these methods as 'unfeminist' in favour of a qualitative approach. However, the complementary nature of these two methodological approaches is evident when dealing with statistics such as the census. Quantitative data analysis can be a powerful tool for evidencing structural inequalities, but women's lives cannot be adequately defined or understood through analysis of numerical data alone. Therefore, a rich understanding of these census statistics necessitates that both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. When quantitative data is used to develop policy positions or social interventions, space must also be provided for qualitative, local, context specific expertise to ensure that this data is not misconstrued.

Covid-19 context

The census 2021 took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. This has affected the pertinence of the data, especially regarding attempts to identify changes and long-term trends. Whilst 2021 census data can still provide meaningful insight into people's lives and behaviour during a snapshot in time, we must remember that this information was gathered in a very unusual national context. For this reason, the ONS cautions against using the data in isolation to make concrete policy recommendations. However, if we are mindful of this limitation and ensure we are consulting it alongside other data sources and methods, 2021 census data can still be a beneficial tool for helping feminist activists and organisations understand more about the people in their communities.

SUMMARY

In summary, there are important limitations affecting the usefulness of census data to feminist organisations, and these must always be factored into any feminist research that makes use of it. However, we believe the unique advantages of census data ensure that it remains an important tool for women's organisations to discover information about the people in their communities. Just as importantly, we believe that the census provides a useful moment around which feminist organisers can come together, develop their understanding of how to use quantitative data to support their work and ensure they are part of conversations aimed at providing policy solutions to social issues. It was on this basis that the Women's Budget Group and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership collaborated on the organisation of an event which put this into practice.

CREATING THE EVENT

DELEGATE RECRUITMENT

It's crucial that discussions about census statistics are open to everyone and that recommendations based on them include diverse viewpoints. Interpreting a large dataset well depends on an understanding of the issues and contexts it reflects. This is especially true when data is used to propose policy solutions for perceived problems. This is why having a mix of different women at the event was so important. We invited a range of women with different backgrounds in terms of academic experience, location, ethnicity, voluntary work, personal experiences related to key census topics, and social class. This way, we could get various perspectives on how to use the data, what factors mattered, and what policies may meaningfully address issues.

First, we looked at the list of grassroots organisations that the Women's Budget Group already had contact with. The Local Data Project gives basic training on how to understand and use data, so we reached out to women who had taken part in that training or other projects by the Women's Budget Group. We personally invited potential participants and let them know that their knowledge was crucial for the event to succeed.

Data is a feminist issue. It's collection and analysis doesn't always reflect the experiences of women. It is important to the Women's Budget Group that we can combine data analysis with the experiences of women's groups large and small.

This is why you are important to our work and why we want you to take part in an event that we are running in conjunction with the Global Institute for Women's Leadership
(text from delegate invitations)

Once priority attendee places had been accepted, we then invited other contacts from the Women's Budget Group and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, before finally offering the remaining places to an open call. We offered travel support, up to £150, to those from voluntary or community organisations outside London.

This part of the project took time and had its challenges in terms of staff resource, but it was necessary for the event to be a success. We should never underestimate the effort and skills needed for successful outreach like this, and extra resource will be factored into future events.

REGISTRATION QUESTIONNAIRE

All delegates were asked to complete a registration form in advance of the event. As well as to collect practical information, the purpose of this was to develop an understanding of attendees' current data skills, what they were most hoping to get out of the event, and what features could be included to make sure the day was inclusive and enjoyable.

The responses to our questions showed that the group of women we invited had a wide range of experience and confidence with using numbers and spreadsheets. Throughout all our communications, we made it clear that formal data analysis skills were not necessary for delegates to be able to participate in the workshops. The event needed various types of expertise, including lived experiences, to work well. Partnership, respecting differences, and valuing diversity were all feminist principles we aimed to build into the event.

Form responses showed that delegates overwhelmingly prized the opportunity to network with other women; this was commonly raised in the question on what they hoped to get from the day and what would make it enjoyable.

Comments on what delegates were hoping to get out of the day:

Getting new ideas and / or tools to take back to Wales and put into operation!

I hope to get a practical experience. So far, I only had an academic training. I also look forward to meeting other feminist researchers. Indeed, a PhD is quite lonely.

I analyse census data in my work currently and would like to improve my feminist lens when analysing data as well as grow my network.

Comments on what delegates said would make their day enjoyable:

Opportunities to contribute and share /participation/involvement rather than too much listening.

Knowing my inexperience is welcome, and as I'm coming on my own that that will also be warmly received :)

Meeting other people, charities or agencies working to support women and diversify how and who they reach.
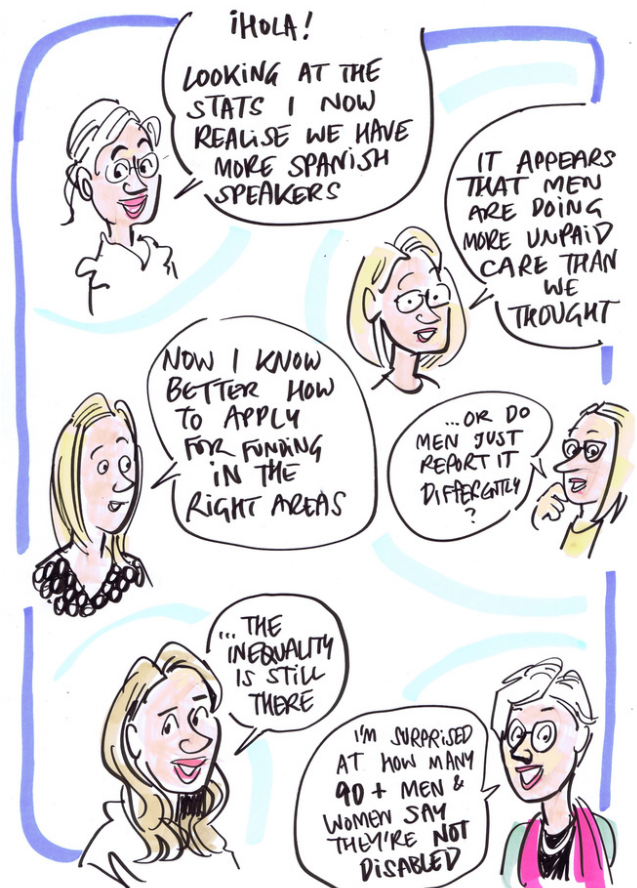
STRUCTURING THE EVENT

Since we gathered responses for the registration form several weeks before the event, we had time to ensure that the schedule included the factors that attendees valued most. There was a strong interest in networking and connecting with others, so we created a booklet with information about attendees and presented this on the day in their welcome packs. The formal training in the afternoon focused on learning how to access census data, using the custom table builder and working with Excel PivotTables. Most of the training was informal and kept short to leave plenty of time for networking and discussion. We set up tables where women could work in groups based on a topic (such as unpaid care) but be mixed in terms of experience with data analysis. This encouraged peer to peer learning and collaboration. Research staff from the Women's Budget Group were present to offer advice on data analysis.

Successful outreach and training happens when participants feel comfortable. Feeling welcome and valued breaks down barriers to learning as the participants are more likely to ask questions and participate without feeling intimidated. Feminist advocates are especially aware of social and cultural barriers which threaten to silence their voices, and they look for ways to make sure everyone is included. Attendees of the event were already familiar with the Women's Budget Group and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership and their reputation for careful, progressive analysis of economic data. This familiarity created a foundation of trust, which is crucial for any outreach work to succeed.

KEY RESEARCH THEMES AND FINDINGS

During the 'data dig in' workshops, delegates were asked to note down their research process (including variables used) and findings on a handout provided in their delegate packs. After the event, this data was evaluated and thematised by members of the research team at the Women's Budget Group. Most groups aimed to combine multiple variables in order to take an intersectional approach (a key benefit of census data capability) and so there is significant overlap between the key topics outlined below. It is worth noting that this report provides only a snapshot of findings from the day, which have been chosen to illustrate key points as well as benefits and disadvantages of the census as a tool for feminist analysis.

UNPAID CARE

A total of seven groups chose to explore data relating to the number and/or characteristics of women providing unpaid care in their local area, making it the most researched topic among delegates. Clearly, the health and well-being of unpaid carers is a priority for many grassroots organisations who support and advocate for women in their local areas.

In some cases, data revealed stark statistics that highlighted avenues for increased advocacy for certain groups. For example, one delegate found that there are 176 females under the age of 15 who provide 50+ hours of unpaid care per week in the London borough of Brent, 31 of whom are disabled under the Equality Act. Another group explored the same variables in Bexley and found that the more affluent areas had fewer young carers by a notable sum. Both groups reported that they would share these findings with local stakeholders with the aim of increasing support for unpaid carers in their communities.

> ***"Will show to Bexley Carers who are developing their new strategy."***
> – event delegate, Superhighways

The analyses of these delegates demonstrate the need for continued research into the characteristics and experiences of carers in different localities across the UK, ideally taking into account lived experience of those providing and receiving unpaid care.

HEALTH AND DISABILITY

Other delegates were able to draw on their context-specific expertise when analysing data about the lives of disabled women in their communities. For example, one delegate noted that, in their experience, many elderly women do not identify with the term 'disabled' and it is possible this may influence the data in a self-reported survey like the census.

> ***"Quite a few women 90+ do not label themselves disabled!"***
> – event delegate, independent advisor

A further piece of delegate analysis looked at the relationship between dwelling type of residents and their reported general health, finding that those living in mobile or temporary structures reported the highest rates of bad or very bad health of any other dwelling type. This analysis greatly benefited from the contributions of a delegate who has current lived experience of residing in a mobile/temporary structure and as such has a rich understanding of the context and challenges faced by their community with regards to health. Examples given were reduced access to services due to a lack of permanent address, poor ventilation and lack of heating. This exercise was a testament to the importance of including those with a variety of life experiences in feminist research.

WORK

Many delegates attended this event representing organisations working to improve women's economic circumstances in some way, for instance by providing skills and employment training. As such, there was significant interest in exploring variables relating to labour market participation, including employment and economic activity. In some cases, basic exploration of economic inactivity figures provided delegates with an increased understanding of the scale of economic inequality in their local area. For example, one group found that 50% of females in their Birmingham locality are economically inactive, compared to 38% of males.

Many groups chose to explore data related to women's employment and economic activity intersectionally. Of particular interest was disability; one group found that disabled residents travelling to work in their area are more likely to be passengers in a car or to walk than non-disabled residents. They also found that more disabled women use the bus or walk to get to work than disabled men.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Language

Some delegates chose to explore demographic information about women in their communities to determine how they might tailor their support services to meet key needs. In some cases, analysis of the data provided new insight. For example, delegates from the Breastfeeding Network discovered that there is a greater proportion of Portuguese language users than Spanish among women in the London borough of Lambeth; something they did not expect.

> *"We thought there were more Spanish than Portuguese but actually (it was the) other way round…"*
> – event delegate, the Breastfeeding Network

This provides a key example of how census data may be useful for organisations providing support services, even if the data does not at first glance seem directly related to the services provided. Understanding the language needs of the women in their borough allows organisations like the Breastfeeding Network to tailor their services (e.g., the potential training of Portuguese-speaking peer supporters) to make them more relevant and beneficial to those they support.
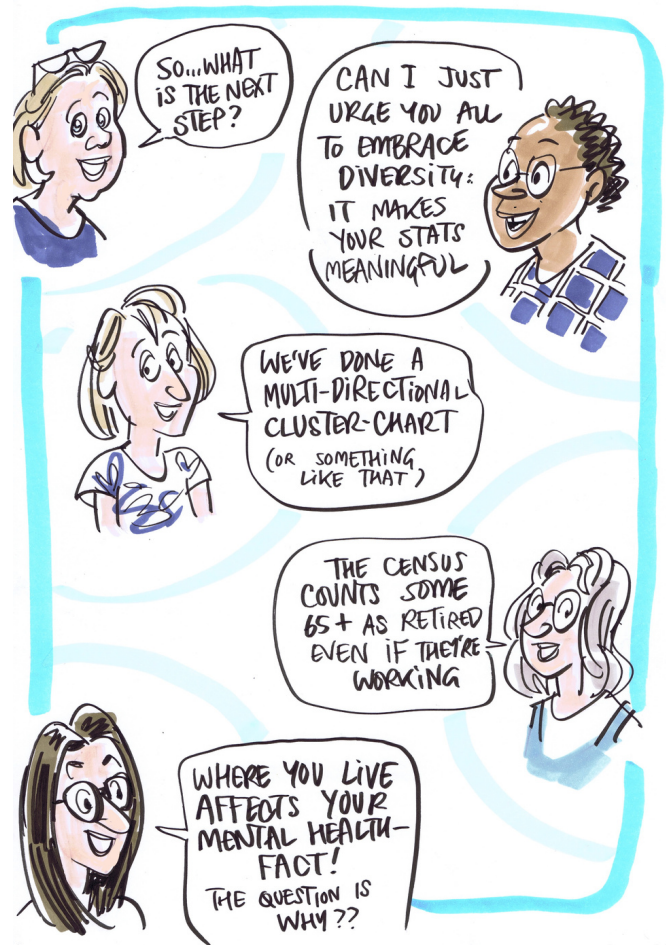
Age

In some cases, the addition of the age variable to analysis regarding men's and women's reported health revealed stronger inequalities than simply disaggregating the data by sex. For instance, one group were surprised at the number of women below age 35 who reported bad or very bad health in their area, noting that this requires further investigation. These findings serve to emphasise the importance of detailed intersectional analysis in addition to sex disaggregation – it is important that we understand how inequalities compound each other to disadvantage particular groups of women.

Ethnicity

Women face social inequalities not only along gender lines; ethnicity is an important intersecting structure of inequality, with women from Black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds facing increased disadvantage in key areas compared to White women. For example, the risk of maternal death is almost four times higher among women from Black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds compared to White women[3].

Many delegates had first-hand experience of the impact of gendered and racial inequalities in their local areas and were thus well-aware of the need to disaggregate census data by ethnicity. Whilst groups were able to evidence inequalities in their analysis at national or regional level (for example by looking at economic inactivity by sex and ethnicity), Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC) limited their ability to disaggregate census data by sex and detailed ethnicity categories.

As outlined earlier in this report, SDC is an essential tool designed to prevent the identification of individuals. However, public intersectional data for small geographic areas is crucial for providing the evidence needed to enact meaningful policy that aims to eradicate social, health and economic inequalities. Small area estimation is a challenge that must be met if key inequalities are to be addressed at local level.

> *"My biggest takeaway from the event? Always disaggregate gender data to get the real picture and use data actively to evidence need - in my case, the need for bespoke leadership programmes and coaching for everyday professional women from Black and Minoritised Ethnic backgrounds. Why? So that we have the right representation in decision making roles."*
>
> – event delegate, Penelope. Founder and director of Stimulus[4]

[3] MBRRACE-UK (May, 2023), Maternal Mortality 2019-2021

[4] https://stimulus.ltd/

AFTER THE EVENT

Participatory approaches to research and analysis require continual reflection and improvement. Therefore, the collection of post-event feedback is of key importance. A sample of feedbacks from the census event are included to evidence what went well and should therefore be replicated, as well as some limiting factors that will help us to improve on the accessibility and impact of future events.

FEEDBACK FORM RESPONSES

Feedback forms were circulated at the end of the event and collected before departure.

Following the event...

- **74%** agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident using census data in their work.
- **72%** strongly agreed that they would use something they had learned today.
- **78%** strongly agreed that the session was engaging and enjoyable.
- **88%** strongly agreed that they had networked with interesting people.

Selected Comments – What was the highlight of the day?

Being in the room in person. Speaking to other activists. Learning how to build a pivot chart within the pivot table.

No single highlight - it was just great to be sharing knowledge and insights with so many fabulous women. Really energising!

Meeting interesting women. Brilliant hosting by WBG and Liz in particular. Such a positive and educational day.

Selected Comments - Any suggestions for what could be done differently?

Maybe some discussion opportunities around key areas we are working on to see if similarities -ways of working together

I've got ADHD and it helps me from an access point to read through notes and annotate (just listening doesn't work as well for me to engage).

Knowing some of us had a long journey, a brew on arrival would have been kind.

ONGOING USES FOR CENSUS DATA FOR FEMINIST ACTIVISM

After the training sessions, delegates were asked what they might go on to do with their findings or with any future analyses they could undertake using the same skills.

The most common response from delegates was that they would use data to develop materials for their advocacy and policy influencing work. Suggestions included social media, presentations, brochures and reports. Other delegates recorded that their preliminary findings during the training sessions encouraged them to continue and deepen their research in order to gain a deeper understanding of an issue and/or to develop their data analysis skills. Four groups noted that they could use their findings to support and enhance funding bids for their projects and organisations.

> *"Funding bid for training in Spanish, Portuguese and other European languages. Training for new volunteers to support to families. Reports for commissioners. I know that this is not a huge amount of outputs, but it has been so useful to learn what to do!"*
> *– event delegate, the Breastfeeding Network*

Delegates suggested that census data and materials which make use of it could be used to aid policy change at local level, for instance in the creation of reports geared towards local stakeholders such as councils. Others reported that they would share their findings with local organisations to aid their strategy and advocacy targeting.

> *"…funding bid with Brent young carers to ensure girls aged 12-19 years can access girls' club in Family Wellbeing Centres."*
> *– event delegate, Start Easy*

Delegate responses clearly indicate the benefits of building the capacity of grassroots feminists to use quantitative data to support their advocacy, strengthen their policy influencing, and increase their chances of success with funding bids. It is crucial that different forms of expertise – including of academics, policymakers and grassroots activists – can be combined to develop an understanding of key issues and formulate policies to address them. It was very encouraging to see these conversations beginning to take place during the event, and to hear that delegates had the confidence to take their findings to decision makers.

REFLECTIONS

This event emphasised the importance of data literacy and knowledge sharing among feminist groups, while also showcasing the broader value of census data in driving evidence-based advocacy. The workshops demonstrated the advantages of a collaborative and participatory approach to feminist research: incorporating lived experiences and diverse perspectives added depth and meaning to the numerical data, whilst the numerical data provided generalisable statistics that can be used to support advocacy work and evidence local gender inequalities.

WHAT DID THE WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP AND THE GLOBAL INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ADD?

There are dedicated outreach teams from statistical and governmental organisations and the ONS runs consultation activities to get feedback from users about the statistics that they produce and how they present those statistics. Organisations such as the Women's Budget Group and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership can have an important role in widening access and participation in these activities.

Trust is an issue within feminism. Women feel let down by the institutions that are meant to protect us and progress towards gender equality is travelling at snail's pace. Our organisations have worked hard to establish and maintain integrity and respects the trust necessary to deliver an event such as the census day.

The Women's Budget Group and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership have extensive networks within feminist organisations across the UK. Both organisations run projects that actively seek out and support grassroots feminist organisations. This meant that there was an existing list of contacts that we could reach out to when inviting women to be part of the conversation. These women were already aware of the economic analysis that has been produced and were keen to take part in it.

The Women's Budget Group has its own training team that are skilled in making the world of economics and data relevant to women. Courses on understanding and accessing data have been trialled and improved upon so we have a rich understanding of the language and techniques that can be used to communicate and engage effectively.

The Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London produces rigorous research on gender equality and women's leadership - from the grassroot to parliament - with the aim of translating the findings into action through engagement with different stakeholders. The census day event collaboration followed the institute's commitment to bringing academic research into to practice – by putting data into the hands of advocates in the pursuit of greater gender equality for all.
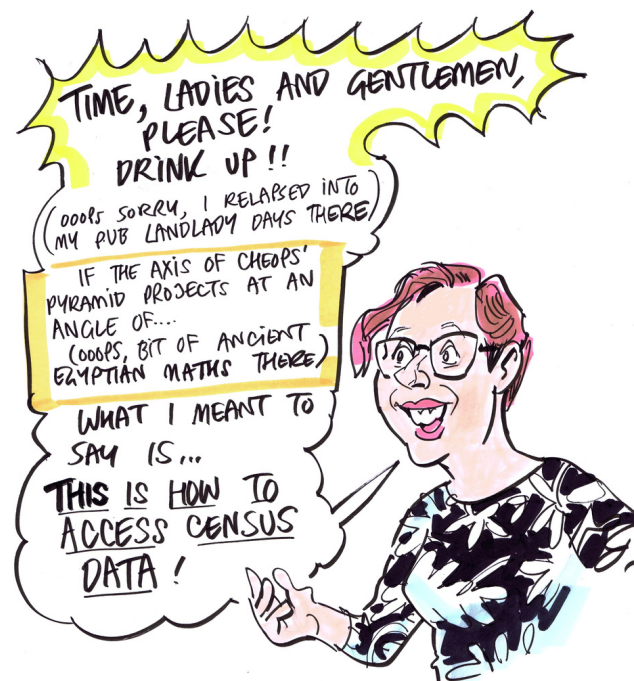
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ONS

The event workshops demonstrated that women, regardless of prior experience, can effectively analyse census data when provided with accessible tools and a welcoming environment. Whilst the ONS custom dataset tool was found to improve the accessibility of census data, delegates highlighted a number of limitations, leading to the following practical recommendations:

DATA GAPS

The ONS should consider gender equality when reviewing topics for future surveys, ensuring that issues most pertinent to women's circumstances are included where possible. Delegates noted the exclusion of key topics including parenting/childcare, violence against women and girls, and earnings. It is appreciated that the census cannot encompass all topics of interest, so additionally it is recommended that the ONS promotes awareness of other existing data sources with relevant information, ensures this data is disaggregated as far as possible, and develops similar user-friendly tools for analysis. Continued steps towards the improved availability of small area intersectional data are also advised so that small population groups can find themselves represented in data at local level. We believe these actions will help bridge existing data gaps and provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's circumstances across England and Wales.

ACCESSIBILITY AND FUNCTIONALITY OF TOOLS

The ONS should continue to develop its accessibility tools by adding the option to present downloaded census data in a pre-made table format similar to its NOMIS platform. The list format in which data is currently presented requires an understanding of how to analyse and interpret data through the use of formulae and/or tools such as Excel PivotTables. The option to include rates (percentages) alongside observations would further improve accessibility by removing the need for an understanding of how to do this within Excel. Finally, functionality could be improved by enabling the data to be examined across different area types (e.g., Local Authorities and regions) within the same spreadsheet. This would encourage more assessment of absolute as well as relative gender inequalities.

WHAT NEXT?

FOLLOW UP

Many of the women expressed an interest for more training, with the two topics identified as priorities being good practice in Equalities Impact Assessments and using Nomis. These sessions will be scheduled for online workshops over the summer and early Autumn.

ONS CONSULTATION

The ONS opened a formal consultation on population statistics after this event had taken place and acknowledge the importance of engaging grassroots organisations in this process[5]. The Women's Budget Group and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership will be working with them to ensure that the consultation garners a wide response in a format that is useful to the ONS.

FURTHER EVENTS

This workshop was from the outset an experiment in how to effectively engage women in workshops in a time when online meetings are changing the way we work. The resource level needed to organise and deliver a novel workshop is considerable, but the results here show that it is worthwhile and this model of participatory evaluation of data has the potential to be replicated and adjusted for different contexts and organisations. As stated previously, participatory approaches to research require continual lesson-learning and development; suggestions provided by event delegates will inform and improve upon the accessibility of future events. For example: we will ensure that travel costs are paid upfront in advance of future events, that refreshments are immediately accessible to those who have travelled long distances, and that we are continually working to challenge power dynamics and soften the dividing lines between different forms of expertise.

[5] Office for National Statistics (June, 2023) The future of population and migration statistics in England and Wales: a consultation on ONS proposals

CONCLUSION

Events like the one organised by WBG and GIWL serve as significant milestones in promoting data literacy and fostering collaboration among feminist groups, politicians and academics. The event underscored the importance of integrating lived experiences with statistical data to ensure inclusive and effective policymaking. Whilst a powerful tool for evidencing structural inequalities, numerical data such as that contained in the census should not be used in isolation to shape or transform policies. Our workshops demonstrated that insights from the women behind the data are key to developing meaningful analysis and for mitigating potential harms of ill-conceived policy interventions.

To ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach, researchers and policymakers should integrate quantitative data analysis with lived experience accounts and participatory approaches, acknowledging the vital role of those directly affected by the issues evidenced by the data and the policies developed as a response to them.

By addressing data gaps, enhancing accessibility and improving data analysis tools, the ONS can further contribute to building the capacity of local women's organisations and facilitating evidence-based advocacy in the pursuit of gender equality.

Find our other census 2021 resources here: https://www.wbg-localdata.org.uk/resource-hub/explainer-how-to-use-census-2/

Find out more about the Local Data Project at the Women's Budget Group here: https://www.wbg-localdata.org.uk/

Find out more about the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London here: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl