

Toward gender equality through civil registration and vital statistics systems

Highlights from the final evaluation of the Centre of Excellence for CRVS

WHY CRVS SYSTEMS MATTER FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems help protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of women and girls through their life-course by recording and certifying events included in national legislations. At a minimum, these include birth, marriage, and death (and their causes). CRVS systems support the generation, analysis, and dissemination of vital statistics, which are disaggregated by sex, age, geography, and other socio-demographics. These statistics provide data about population health that can be used for health and social policy (1). CRVS systems also facilitate individuals' access to public services, such as health and education, by certifying proof of legal identity, age, and social relationships.

Women and girls are among those who gain the most from strong CRVS systems and institutions. Complete records and disaggregated data make women and girls visible for policy makers and national records. Yet cultural, financial, and legal conditions threaten women and girls' access to civil registration globally. Since its founding in 2015, the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems has become a major world player responding to the need for CRVS systems that protect women and girls.

ABOUT THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR CRVS SYSTEMS

Housed at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Ottawa, Canada, **the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems (the CoE) is a global knowledge hub working to develop, strengthen, and scale up CRVS systems that protect and count everyone, especially women and girls.** The CoE collaborates with organizations and experts to broker access to CRVS information, including global standards, tools, research evidence, and good practices. The CoE is funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and IDRC (\$16m CAD budget) and has a mandate spanning December 2015 to July 2021. Their efforts contribute directly to the work of the Global Financing Facility (GFF), a key financing platform of the UN Secretary General's Global Strategy for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

In early 2020, the CoE commissioned Cathexis Consulting Inc. to conduct a final evaluation of the CoE's first five years (2). The main objectives of the evaluation were to: (i) synthesize the accomplishments and learnings of the CoE's first phase; and (ii) generate recommendations for the design and implementation of a renewed mandate. The evaluation focused on the CoE's outcomes, strategies, and potential for scalability and sustainability. As an early step in the process, Cathexis reviewed approximately 150 project documents and analyzed monitoring data. Following this, Cathexis conducted 44 interviews with CoE staff, key program partners, national CRVS implementers, and regional-global stakeholders.

This brief provides an overview of the findings from the final evaluation relating to the CoE's work toward gender equality.

Supporting country-level decision-making in gender and CRVS

The CoE plays an important role in addressing gender gaps in CRVS systems. As confirmed during the interviews, one stakeholder highlighted how the CoE provides technical resources around good practices for countries that recognize a gender gap in their CRVS systems.

In Guinea, the CoE facilitated a working group for prioritizing reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health, and raised awareness of CRVS as a tool for measuring progress in this area. When asked to rate the extent of the CoE's support toward improving CRVS systems, Guinea stakeholders rated it 'very helpful'.

The CoE's efforts in sharing promising CRVS practices, pitfalls, risks, and trade-offs globally also motivated some countries to make gender-responsive decisions around their CRVS systems. For example, in Guatemala, Ecuador, and Peru, stakeholders reported using CRVS data to address stigma against adolescent pregnancies, inspired by CoE-documented practices from Costa Rica and Uruguay.

The CoE also supported the development of CRVS systems in non-GFF supported countries. For instance, the CoE's technical assistance to Jordan and Tunisia helped lead to commitments from these countries to cooperate regionally to advance gender-responsive CRVS systems.

Building capacity in gender and CRVS



Thanks to the teachings received during the workshops, seminars, and conferences organized by the Centre of Excellence... [my country] has the main strategic documents likely to lead to the modernization of its CRVS system. — National CRVS implementer



The CoE's knowledge products are among stakeholders' first line of resources for information on gender and CRVS. One stakeholder explained, "The materials on gender and CRVS... The CoE is sort of the best." Another stakeholder shared: "I use their work as a touchstone when I want to make sure CRVS policies and practices are as inclusive as possible."

Examples of the CoE's leading knowledge products include [three different series of knowledge briefs](#) and a [six-blog series](#) on gender and CRVS. Quantitative analysis of monitoring indicators revealed the important role of the CoE as a facilitator of learning. For example, 4 out of the 5 most popular downloads to date (May 10, 2021) on the website are gender products, each with between 200 and 400 downloads (3 gender briefs and a report on gender).

The CoE's focus on gender training for national CRVS implementers has led to gender being integrated into CRVS systems. For instance, one stakeholder reflected: "We know now the percentage of our population according to a specific gender. We didn't collect this detailed information before." And in Burkina Faso, national CRVS implementers reported the CoE's capacity building activities helped them better understand the role of gender equality in CRVS systems. As a result, Burkina Faso added questions on birth, death, and marriage registration to its census.

Leadership in gender and CRVS



[The CoE is] a research and development leading-edge agency, which is not evident anywhere else in the CRVS field....[Their] work on gender had never been done before. — Regional-global stakeholder

Before the CoE, there had been no global discussion of the gendered dimensions of CRVS. Now, the CoE has responded to this gap in the CRVS field and its credibility has grown. The CoE has received invitations to join high-level CRVS groups, such as the UN Global CRVS Group and the OECD Group on Data for Development. Leading organizations such as UN Women have requested the CoE's support on initiatives, including identifying gender indicators for CRVS systems. Stakeholders have said that the CoE provides a "constructive critical voice, when it comes to the intersection of CRVS, gender, equity, identity, and development."

The CoE's work in organizing the first global conference on gender and CRVS in 2018 and a follow-up conference in 2020 were landmark events in the field which raised the CoE's profile as a leader in advocacy for gender-sensitive CRVS systems. The CoE's advocacy efforts have also led to gender being considered in a toolkit guiding the analysis of existing laws on CRVS (3). This outcome is important as a strong legal framework provides the foundation from which a gender-sensitive CRVS system can be built.

Leveraging partnerships to achieve outcomes



The project staff emphasized the contributions of partners in achieving outcomes: "The impacts we have managed to scale have been almost entirely because of the partnerships we've built. Without Open Data Watch and Data2X, I'm not sure how we would have accomplished so much on gender."

The CoE partnered with UNFPA to launch and roll out the Connecting Vital Events Registration and Gender Equality (ConVERGE) initiative which aimed to improve the collection and use of gender-sensitive vital statistics. After a panel session on marriage registration convened by ConVERGE at the 2019 Conference of African Ministers, one stakeholder shared "we were able to get a resolution adopted by the Ministers in the committee that yes, there has been neglect of marriage registration, marriage registration has to be taken seriously, and we need to strengthen that."

ConVERGE's efforts also led to another notable outcome: questions on marriage registration were included in the methodology, shared with 120 countries, for the 2020 census round. Additionally, questions on marriage registration were introduced in the Demographic Health Survey (DHS 8), which will be administered in 2021. This will provide the first comprehensive global picture of marriage registration completeness that has ever been available. This is an important initiative for gender equality as marriage registration helps protect women from early and forced marriage and ensures women can inherit from their deceased husbands and claim custody of children.

As a convenor, researcher, knowledge hub, and gender champion, the CoE is contributing to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's goal of universal registration - 100% birth registration and 80% death registration.

Responding effectively to COVID-19

The CoE made adjustments in order to keep programming going during COVID-19. They continued to provide support to countries on maintaining CRVS systems and convened a CRVS and COVID-19 Working Group to foster reflection on the intersection of CRVS, COVID-19, and gender. One stakeholder noted: "They've been so fast to address COVID and they're already having publications," highlighting the CoE's commitment to strengthening CRVS systems that serve women and men, even (and especially) during times of crisis.

Increasing the pool of women CRVS experts

The CoE strives toward gender parity among CRVS experts. Within the CoE's publicly accessible [Directory of Experts](#), 42% of the experts were women by mid-2020, a proportion that has steadily grown as a result of the CoE's efforts to include more women among the experts listed. And in 2020, 60% of the CRVS experts contracted by the CoE were women.

THE WAY FORWARD

The CoE has achieved a remarkable feat by becoming **a credible leader at the intersection of gender and CRVS in the span of a few years**. Building on the momentum achieved over the past five years will be critical for sustaining the CoE's success and help to ensure health and well-being of women and girls. By extending its mandate, the CoE might be able to firmly entrench Canada as a global leader in CRVS, in specific sub-specialties such as gender, and in the wider field of data for development. One stakeholder succinctly stated: "There are huge inequalities in registration, and there are groups of people that are really left behind. It's 2020 and people are not being counted." What is required now is time to build on the CoE's foundational work on gender and CRVS through a second phase.

To build on this momentum and respond to new needs made apparent by COVID-19, the evaluation recommended the following for the CoE and CRVS leaders:

- **Consider a renewed mandate of 10 years for the CoE** (rather than five), as concrete change in the CRVS space takes time. Given the CoE's influence and momentum, supporting the CoE through to the end of the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health is a crucial strategy for achieving the 2030 target of universal registration.
- **Continue to commission and produce original and high quality CRVS research**, including information on the barriers and enablers of gender responsive CRVS initiatives, as well as a compilation of accessible tools and guidelines that countries can use
 - **Continue to collaborate with partners to create and scale up CRVS initiatives.** Continue co-creating knowledge products (with a gender lens), co-hosting conferences (with a gender session or theme) and communicating the impact of investing in gender-responsive CRVS systems.
 - **Continue to champion research and initiatives on gender**, as well as addressing cross-cutting issues that have distinct implications for women and girls, such as CRVS in conflict, emergency, and fragile settings.
 - **Continue to invest in the CoE's Directory of Experts.** Improve the platform by adding experts, upskilling existing experts, and nurturing new ones.
 - **Continue work to increase the proportion of women experts** in the Directory of Experts.
 - **Continue to extend supports to individual countries both directly from the CoE staff and indirectly through strategic partnerships.** Importantly, while the international community is convinced of the importance of gender considerations in CRVS systems, more effort is needed to engage with stakeholders not yet convinced of the value of CRVS.
 - **Dedicate resources to hire an internal leader for gender at the CoE.** To date, leadership has come from an IDRC staff person splitting their time between the CoE and other responsibilities. A leader with gender training would be ideal given the importance of CoE's work in gender and CRVS.

This brief was written by Cathexis Consulting Inc. It was part of the evaluation of the Centre of Excellence for CRVS (for the full evaluation report, see Cathexis Consulting, 2021). Financial and technical assistance was provided by the Centre of Excellence. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Centre of Excellence.

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