

Bridging the gender data gap: Recommendations for improving UK census data

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Foreword



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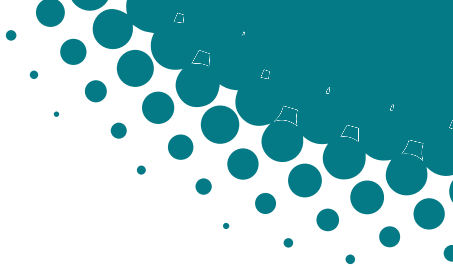
As the United Kingdom prepares for the 2031 Census, the need for reliable, inclusive, and conceptually sound data has never been more urgent. High-quality statistics are essential for tracking progress toward gender equality and designing effective policies to improve the diverse lives of our population.

Meeting this need requires gender statistics that go beyond simple sex-disaggregation. Gender statistics are designed, produced, and interpreted through frameworks that reflect the social and structural dimensions of gender – the roles, norms, and institutions that continue to shape women's and men's outcomes in different ways. Without this lens, much of the gender inequalities embedded in everyday life remains invisible in aggregate figures, limiting the effectiveness of data-informed decision making.

Ultimately, the census is more than a statistical exercise; it reflects our national priorities and collective imagination. To count what matters is to make visible what sustains us, including the unpaid labour that underpins our economy and society. Achieving a gender-equal future requires a transformation of how we design, govern, and democratise knowledge itself.

This report offers timely and practical insights into how the UK census can be improved to better support gender-sensitive analysis. We hope the findings support policymakers, statisticians, and researchers working to ensure that future data systems reflect the diversity of people's experiences, and are equipped to inform meaningful, evidence-based improvements to lives across the UK.

Julia Gillard



Acknowledgements

We thank the 170 participants from across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland who joined our workshop series, making this research possible. We are also grateful to the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council (ES/Z502753/1) for their generous funding. Finally, many thanks to our colleagues at the UK Data Service for their feedback on our proposed recommendations.

About the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London

The Global Institute for Women's Leadership is a world-leading research centre based at King's College London. Founded in 2018 by the 27th Prime Minister of Australia, the Hon Julia Gillard AC, who continues to serve as Chair, GIWL combines cutting-edge academic research with real-world impact. Its mission is to create a more equitable future of work by producing rigorous evidence, developing practical solutions, and shaping policy and public dialogue. Working across sectors and disciplines, both locally and globally, GIWL is committed to dismantling barriers in leadership, employment, and entrepreneurship.

About the Women's Budget Group

The Women's Budget Group is a leading 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.

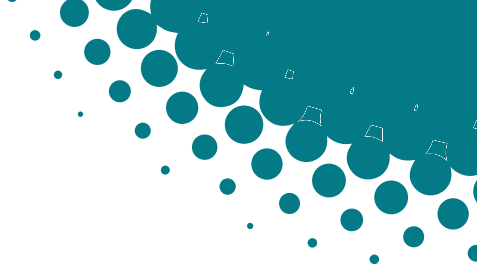


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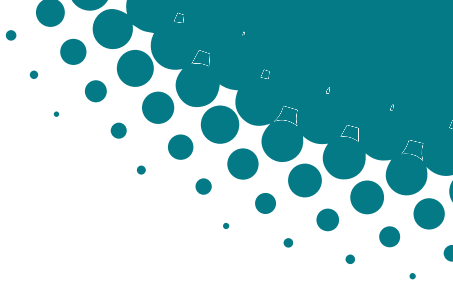
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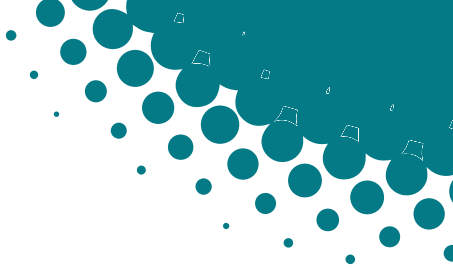
Introduction

Despite progress, gender inequalities continue to shape many areas of life in the United Kingdom (UK), including employment, income, unpaid care, and exposure to gender-based violence. Addressing these inequalities through evidence-based policy requires reliable sex-disaggregated data. The UK has taken steps to improve data production through measures such as the *Equality Act 2010* and the UK Statistics Authority's (2022) *Code of Practice for Statistics*, which have enhanced reporting across protected characteristics. Despite this, critical data gaps remain (Schmid et al., 2025), limiting the UK's ability to fully assess and address gender inequalities.

One of the most powerful tools for detailed analysis are national censuses. Conducted once every ten years, the census provides near-universal coverage of the UK population: 97% of households in England, Wales (ONS, 2022) and Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2022) and 88% in Scotland (Scotland's Census, 2022). As the UK most comprehensive survey, the census enables disaggregation across multiple demographic variables across different topics, making it a uniquely powerful resource for gender-sensitive and intersectional analysis (Thackray et al., 2023; UN Women, 2018).

This report documents the strengths and limitations of UK census data for understanding gender inequalities and puts forward recommendations for future improvement. Insights are drawn from a UK-wide workshop series delivered between 2024 and 2025 by the King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership (GIWL) and the Women's Budget Group (WBG). Engaging over 170 participants across the four nations, the workshops combined practical training in census tools with collaborative analysis and critical reflection on survey design.

This report comes at a pivotal moment. Preparations for the 2031 census (ONS, 2025a) are already underway, while the Office for National Statistics faces mounting scrutiny following the 2025 *Devereux Review*, which identified serious governance failings. Ongoing concerns around the reliability of key indicators – such as employment figures (Thwaites et al., 2025), wealth estimates (Adam et al., 2025), and the gender pay gap (Forth et al., 2025) – further underscore the urgency of strengthening the UK's statistical infrastructure. At this critical juncture, embedding gender mainstreaming into the census and wider data system is essential for supporting effective policymaking toward a more inclusive society and prosperous economy.



The value of UK census data

What is the census?

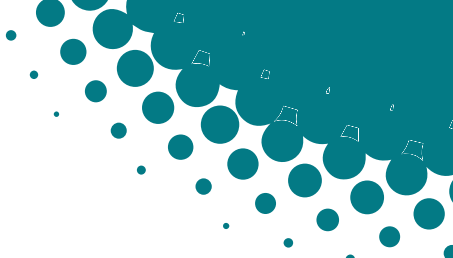
Since 1801, census surveys have been conducted every ten years to provide a snapshot of the count and characteristics of households and individuals across England, Wales and Scotland. A comparable census has been running in Northern Ireland since 1951. Despite recent debates about replacing the census with linked administrative data (RSS, 2023), the UK government has commissioned another census to take place in 2031 (ONS, 2025a).

There are currently three separate censuses across the UK's four nations, each administered by a different statistical authority: the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in England and Wales, the National Records of Scotland (NRS) in Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in Northern Ireland. While the questionnaires marginally differ between the devolved nations, all three provide essential data for tracking demographic and social change over time. Census topics broadly include employment, housing, health, and education, but exclude matters like income, leisure time, and crime. Census data is widely used by government bodies to plan and allocate public services and by researchers and campaigners to inform analysis and advocacy.

Why is the census useful for gender equality?

Although gender inequalities are widely acknowledged, they remain insufficiently integrated into policymaking. Census data can help close this gap by offering near-universal coverage that enables analysis of differences between women and men across a wide range of topics. Moreover, unlike sample surveys, which often underrepresent harder-to-reach groups or lack the statistical power for detailed subgroup analysis, census data support granular explorations of how sex intersects with other demographic variables such as race, disability, migration status, and geographic location (UN Women, 2018). Recent innovations such as the online flexible table builders provided by national statistical agencies have significantly improved access to census data, enabling users to define and extract customised datasets across topics.

Collected only once per decade, census data provide a valuable foundation for long-term trend analysis, but their infrequency limits the ability to capture rapidly evolving social and economic change. Data collection is resource-intensive and susceptible to external shocks. The most recent censuses were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which influenced both response behaviour and timing. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the reference date was 21 March 2021, while in Scotland it was postponed until 20 March 2022, complicating comparison across the four nations (ONS, 2025b). Despite these limitations, the census remains a cornerstone of gender equality analysis by providing the scale, granularity, and accessibility required to inform inclusive, evidence-based policymaking.



Gender statistics and sex-disaggregated data

Gender statistics emerged as a response to long-standing biases in the data value chain that render invisible the differences in women's and men's lived experiences and material conditions (UN Women, 2018; United Nations, 1995). While sex-disaggregated data are essential, gender statistics go further: their design, production, and use are grounded in concepts, definitions, and methodologies that explicitly aim to capture gender roles, power relations, and evolving patterns of inequality (EIGE, 2025).

In the UK, it is important to collect data on both sex (i.e. female and male) and gender reassignment (i.e. people who have or plan to reassign their sex), as both are protected characteristics under the *Equality Act 2010* – the primary legislative framework for equality in Great Britain. The latest censuses included questions on sex, though the guidance for how respondents should answer differed across England and Wales, and Scotland. Additionally, voluntary questions on gender identity were introduced, allowing responses such as non-binary without requiring sex reassignment status. This question, too, varied in formulation between nations (Guyan, 2022; ONS, 2023).

Inconsistencies in question design and concerns about data quality, however, led to the downgrading of the gender identity statistics from 'accredited official statistics' to 'official statistics in development' (ONS, 2025c). In response, the Government Statistical Service (2024) is working to establish harmonised standards for the collection of both sex and gender identity data – an essential step toward improving data comparability, accuracy, and inclusivity.

Delivering the workshops

Engagement with census data must be accessible to people throughout the UK, particularly considering we have not one but three censuses across the four nations. To broaden the use and facilitate the discovery of census data for gender analysis, our team delivered twelve in-person, interactive data training workshops across a range of cities in England (Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, London, Manchester, and Newcastle), Wales (Cardiff), Scotland (Aberdeen and Glasgow), and Northern Ireland (Belfast and Derry).



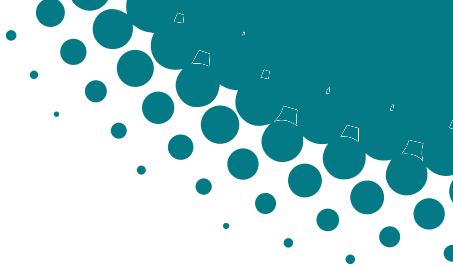
These workshops engaged 170 participants from across the UK's four nations, including representatives from local government, women's and grassroots organisations, academia, and the private sector, as well as unaffiliated individuals. Participants brought varying levels of statistical knowledge and were intentionally recruited to reflect a wide range of protected characteristics, professional and educational backgrounds, and regional contexts. The cohort also included individuals with lived experience in key census-relevant areas such as unpaid care and disability, ensuring that diverse perspectives were embedded throughout the process.

In each session, participants received training on how to use the census flexible table builders and how to create basic data visualisations using spreadsheets. Beyond building technical skills, the workshops were designed to support critical reflections on the limitations of national data and the potentials for feminist analysis; enable networking amongst individuals with shared gender equality agendas within each region; and employ co-production processes to identify where the census does and does not support the data interests of women and other marginalised groups.

To maintain engagement and track the real-world application of workshop content, we administered two follow-up surveys: one immediately after the events and another six months later. These surveys collected feedback on the training experience, documented subsequent uses of census data by participants, and explored how the acquired skills were used in advocacy, policy work, or research.

Following the workshop:

- **92%** agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident downloading and analysing census data.
- **99%** agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop was useful in gaining a better understanding of accessing and using census data.
- **99%** would recommend the workshop to their friends or colleagues.



Principles guiding the workshop design

A core aim of this project was to promote data democracy; the principle that those affected by public data should have a say in what is measured, how it is interpreted, and how it is applied. Realising this vision requires the involvement of a broad range of organisations, spanning from those embedded in affected communities to those directly involved in the production and governance of statistics.

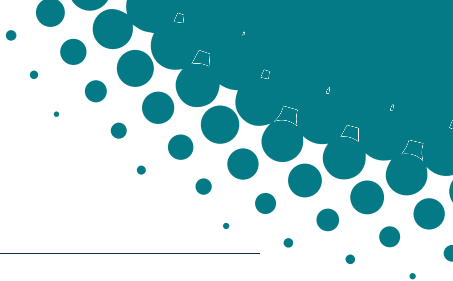
Currently, the infrastructure to enable meaningful collaboration across this spectrum is underdeveloped in the UK. To bridge this gap, dedicated initiatives are needed to establish clear, consistent, and sustainable pathways for engagement. These would help ensure that public data serves the public interest and is grounded in the realities, priorities, and lived experiences of diverse populations.

Embedding principles from feminist participatory action research (Reid & Frisby, 2008), the workshops were explicitly designed to *centre participants' lived experiences*, particularly as they related to gender, race, and class. These experiences shaped not only discussions, but also the selection of key issues and census data for analysis. By foregrounding participants' own concerns and situating them within local contexts, the project actively challenged assumptions about whose experiences, needs, and interests matter in data development.

A central aim of training participants in the census' flexible table builder was to *enable intersectional analysis*. The plenary sessions moved beyond a singular notion of gender equality to critically engage with how gendered experiences differ and are shaped by race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, religion, age, and other axes of marginalisation. This framing not only informed the technical aspect of data use but also shaped reflections on how gender data gaps are deepened for certain groups. For instance, participants co-identified how statistical agencies' groupings of LGBTQ+ people, combined with statistical disclosure controls, limits the potential for evidence-based advocacy and policymaking in this domain.

To *support the meaningful participation of diverse views and backgrounds*, we undertook steps to remove common barriers to engagement. The workshops were promoted as suitable for all levels of experience with census data and quantitative analysis. Further, we wanted to ensure that data training was made available across the UK four nations. We sent targeted invitations to regional grassroots groups that might not otherwise have access to similar training opportunities. To ensure financial and geographic accessibility, we offered bursaries to cover the costs associated with participation, including travel, accommodation, and childcare. This aimed to move beyond the physical barriers to participation to promote the inclusion and interests of diverse voices in meaningful discussions about the data.

Within the sessions, small group work was prioritised to make space for a wider range of voices and to mitigate the challenges some participants may face when contributing to larger discussions. Each group was then invited to share their reflections and findings back with the plenary, using lay terms rather than technical jargon to ensure the accessibility of the discussions across differing levels of data literacy.



“

I really liked the cross-sector learning element...similar challenges play out, at different scales, with different impacts, so it helps to build that big picture and facilitate learning from different sectors on the same issues.

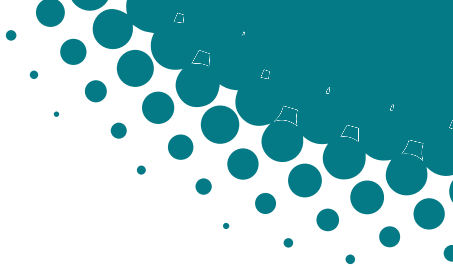
~ Workshop participant

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The workshops were intended to *explore new forms of representation*. Participatory workshops are increasingly recognised as a means of counter-practice, wherein marginalised voices can represent themselves and guide the co-production of knowledge in contrast to traditional boundaries between researchers and the researched (Marzi, 2023). In the present case, participants contributed to the selection and analysis of the data and were encouraged to communicate their findings in a format meaningful to their networks. In addition to the ability to opt-in to share their findings for publication in an anonymised, partially identifiable, or fully identifiable way, this process ultimately provided each participant with final agency over their representation.

Reflecting on the uneven power dynamics that can emerge when academics instruct others, particularly when London-based institutions are perceived as prescribing solutions to the rest of the UK, the project was deliberately structured to mitigate these hierarchies. The project was strategically designed to be delivered as a partnership between GIWL and the WBG. The WBG's established relationships with grassroots and policy communities across the UK lent legitimacy and trust, while GIWL's affiliation with King's College London ensured academic rigour and policy relevance. By pairing grassroots legitimacy with academic credibility, and resourcing the process with public funding, the workshops fostered an environment where feminist critique, collaborative learning, and policy-relevant insights could be meaningfully generated. This, in turn, helped build the relational trust necessary for co-producing knowledge across differences of expertise, geography, and institutional power. Our role as researchers was intentionally supportive rather than directive: participants set the agenda, defined their priorities, and decided how and where their work would be shared. Our responsibility was to amplify their findings, particularly in policy spaces they may not have had access to independently.

Finally, the series was designed to recognise and support a *wide range of action*. By focusing on co-production and capacity building, the workshops empowered participants to utilise intersectional data in a format strategic to their own context, rather than to ours as researchers. Many participants had existing experience with gender equality work in grassroots, government, and academic settings, but not all had access to or confidence using census data. The training helped bridge this gap in quantitative skills so participants can continue their advocacy and analysis beyond the workshops, helping challenge the structural exclusions in evidence-based decision-making.



Data gaps and participant analyses

Despite the analytical possibilities enabled by the census for exploring gendered dimensions of social and economic life, participants in our workshops encountered persistent and consequential limitations. These omissions are not merely technical; they have direct consequences for policy design, resource allocation, and the UK's commitments to gender equality. These silences echo decades of feminist critiques of national accounting and mainstream economics, which have long privileged monetised, market-based activities while marginalising the unpaid, reproductive, and care work that sustains economies and societies (van der Vleuten & Verloo, 2012; Waring, 1989).

Identified data gaps

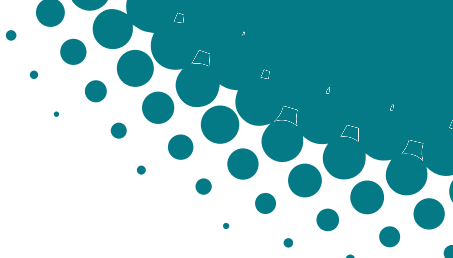
In what follows, we elaborate on three key domains where these silences are most acute: income, industry, and unpaid work. We consider their broader implications for feminist economic policymaking and the UK's domestic and international commitments.

1. Income invisibility and the politics of economic autonomy:

Income data, central to understanding economic inequality and informing social policy, was excluded from the 2021 UK census due to concerns over response rates and accuracy (HM Government, 2018). While such concerns may have methodological validity, the absence of this data from the census has significant gendered implications. This issue is not unique to the census but broadly prevalent across surveys pertaining to sensitive topics like income. Evidence from Germany suggests that higher and lower income earners are less likely to report their income, and when they do, are more likely to misreport their income (Valet et al., 2019).

Still, participants in our workshops consistently identified this gap as a major barrier to undertaking intersectional analysis of economic security and inequality. Without income data disaggregated by sex and additional characteristics, such as ethnicity, age, disability, carer status, and family type, it is not possible to fully understand the dynamics of economic autonomy or target interventions at the most financially precarious populations.

This omission limits our capacity to investigate the distribution of income sources, such as earnings, pensions, social security, and investments which vary markedly by gender and life course stage. Feminist economists have long argued that income is not merely a measure of productivity, but a proxy for power, access to resources, and capacity for self-determination (Folbre, 2006). The absence of reliable, accessible income data thus reinforces gender-blind



policy design and masks the cumulative disadvantage experienced by women across their life course.

While the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has initiated the development of experimental administrative-based income estimates using tax and benefits data (ONS, 2022a), these remain difficult to access, poorly integrated with demographic data, and of limited use to the wider public and research communities. Until such systems are made more transparent, disaggregated, and accessible, critical tools such as gender budgeting, which rely on comprehensive and intersectional data, will remain significantly constrained in the UK policy context.

2. Industry aggregation and gendered distortions:

Industry data is another critical area where the census exhibits gendered limitations. Workshop participants highlighted how female-dominated sectors, such as health, education, and care, are disproportionately grouped into broad industry categories using the UK Standard Industrial Classification. This level of aggregation masks substantial variation in job roles, qualifications, pay levels, and working conditions. As such, it becomes difficult to assess persistent gendered occupational segregation or to design sector-specific interventions to address inequalities.

In contrast, legacy industries historically dominated by men, such as mining and engineering, often remain represented with disproportionate granularity, despite their shrinking economic footprint. This asymmetry reflects longstanding feminist critiques of economic knowledge systems that prioritise market-based production while marginalising care and social reproduction (Bakker, 2007; Waring, 1989). Such classifications embed symbolic and statistical devaluation of feminised labour, treating male-dominated sectors as more complex and economically significant.

The implications of this are twofold. Firstly, this under-recognition reinforces the perception that women's work, especially in public service and care sectors, is homogeneous, low-skilled, and less worthy of policy attention. Secondly, it hampers our ability to examine how occupational structures shape and reinforce gendered pay gaps, job insecurity, and limited career progression, factors particularly salient in the context of public sector austerity and post-pandemic recovery planning.

3. Unpaid work and the erasure of childcare:

Perhaps the most profound structural silence identified by participants is the continued failure of the census to measure unpaid childcare. Although unpaid adult care is captured¹, the omission of childcare constitutes a critical blind spot, especially considering the

¹ The UK census 2021/2022 capture time spent outside of paid employment looking after, giving help or supporting anyone who has long-term physical or mental ill-health conditions, illness or problems related to old age within or outside of the carer's household.



disproportionate responsibility borne by women in this domain. This omission renders invisible a substantial sphere of economic and social activity that underpins both the paid economy and the welfare state (Bakker, 2007; Hoskyns & Rai, 2007; Luxton & Bezanson, 2006; Picchio, 1992; Women's Budget Group, 2020).

Estimates suggest that the economic value of unpaid childcare in the UK is equivalent to approximately 14% of GDP, yet this labour remains uncounted in official statistics (Mullan, 2010). The failure to record such work reinforces the historically entrenched view that care is not economically valuable, despite its indispensable role in sustaining human well-being, enabling labour market participation, and reproducing the workforce (Fraser, 2016).

Furthermore, participants pointed to the census' failure to distinguish between different forms of unpaid care: active care (e.g. feeding or physical assistance) versus supervisory care (e.g. being available to provide help when needed). Many carers, particularly women, may not classify supervisory responsibilities as 'care' despite their clear impact on leisure, labour market engagement, and wellbeing with potential implications for data reliability.

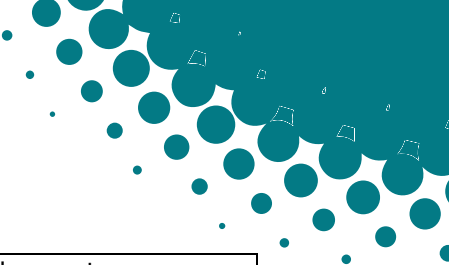
The lack of data on 'sandwich carers' – those who provide care for both children and older adults – further obscures the compounded pressures experienced by middle-aged women in particular. National estimates suggest that 2% of UK adults are in this dual role (McMunn et al., 2024), with women providing more hours of care over longer periods and more likely to reduce working hours or exit the labour market entirely (McMunn et al., 2019, 2020). These patterns remain analytically invisible without comprehensive, disaggregated, time-use data. Pressures to provide informal care to both children and adults are set to intensify with our ageing population, lending urgency to improving measures to capture these dynamics.

The gaps identified in this analysis are not merely shortcomings in data availability; they are reflections of what the state chooses to see, value, and govern. As feminist economists have long contended, counting what matters requires challenging dominant paradigms of economic measurement and embedding care, equality, and lived experience at the heart of data systems. Reforming the census to capture the full diversity of gendered economic life is therefore not a matter of statistical improvement alone, it is a political and ethical imperative.

Below, Table 1 provides fuller comments and feedback from workshop participants on the variables that they would have either liked to have used, or else would have liked to have been presented differently.

Table 1. Data gaps identified by workshop participants.

Variable	Comments
Age	• Would have liked the age of children to be disaggregated. • Would have liked to filter ages differently, e.g. as pension paying age. • Would have liked to split the age group of 16-24 year olds as it is too large and hard to pin down student demographics, wanted to see 16-18 and 18+ .***
Care	• Would have liked to see childcare as a separate category from adult care.***
Disability	• Would have liked to see greater differentiation in type of disability, e.g. between mobility impairments and mental health conditions etc., as well as the barriers faced in daily lives.* • Would have liked to see neurodivergence covered somewhere, and a more explicit explanation of what is included in disabilities.
Education	• Would be useful to have Level 4 qualifications differentiated more, as it currently includes anything from a bachelor's degree to a PhD. • Would be useful to have education as an occupation/sector more granular so it would be possible to specify higher education. • Question over where 16-24 year olds doing Level 4 qualifications were filling out the census – was it at parents' home or in student housing?
Employment	• Interest in knowing whether people had multiple forms of employment. • Interest in knowing when people left sectors or were made redundant. • Interest in knowing about entrepreneurs, and women business leaders.
Expenditure	• Interest in knowing how household income is spent, and the amount used for running a home and looking after children. • Interest in knowing if people are paying into pensions.
Health	• Interest in greater details on health, including menopause, mental health, bone health, and substance misuse.*** • Interest in access to health services, such as GP appointments.
Household composition	• Wanted to know whether single parent households were men or woman led. • Interest in knowing whether those who cannot speak English well or at all are in the same household. • Wanted age of children to be disaggregated, e.g. to preschool, primary school, secondary school and older.
Housing	• For residents in communal facilities, it should be possible to disaggregate people in prison from other groups. • Interest in knowing data on homelessness.
Income	• Interest in knowing income or income bracket/range.*



	• Interest in knowing the sources of income, e.g. employment, investments, pensions etc.* • Interest in whether people have investments, percentage of income available for investing.
Leisure	• Interest in data on leisure activities/time-use.
Location	• Interest in selecting only Wales as a geographic area.
Marital status	• Interest in selecting if someone was a widow/widower for partnership status.
Migration status	• Interest in granularity on migration status, length of stay etc.* • Interest in nationality and previous nationality.
Occupation	• Wanted greater granularity in occupation/sector categories. There was specific interest in tech, creative industry and performing arts, health and social care, libraries, education.*** • Interest in disaggregating working in health and working in social work; between performing and visual and digital arts; higher education from rest of education etc.*** • Wanted to know if workers were 'skilled, unskilled or highly skilled'.
Sexual orientation	• There was no easily available data on sexual orientation.*
Travel/flexible working patterns	• Found a possible discrepancy in numbers of men and women who mainly work from home – the commuter method suggested more women work from home, but distance travelled shows more men work from home. • Wanted more information on number of trips, number of passengers, mobility, time of journey, distance to everyday services, trip chaining, number of bikes or scooters in household, last journey in miles, mode of travel, and reason for travel.*
Violence/abuse	• Interest in data on experiences of violence and abuse.*

*Asterisks represent multiple requests

Participant analyses

Through participatory workshops and follow-up surveys, we asked participants to identify key areas for gender-focused research, within the limitations outlined above. Their priorities reflected long-standing feminist concerns around the distribution of paid and unpaid labour: employment (48%), care (17%), and health (14%) emerged as central themes (see Figure 1). Participants also prioritised intersecting demographics, including age (17%), family structure (16%), and geography (12%) (see Figure 2), aligning with intersectional feminist frameworks that emphasise the multiplicity of lived experience.

Figure 1. The workshop participants' themes of interest. Data collected through evaluation survey.

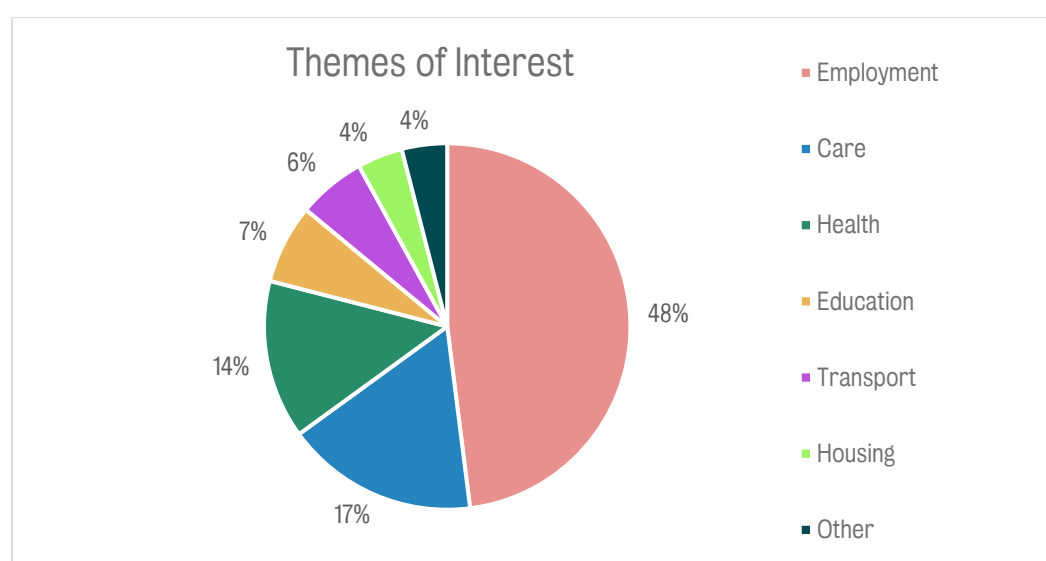
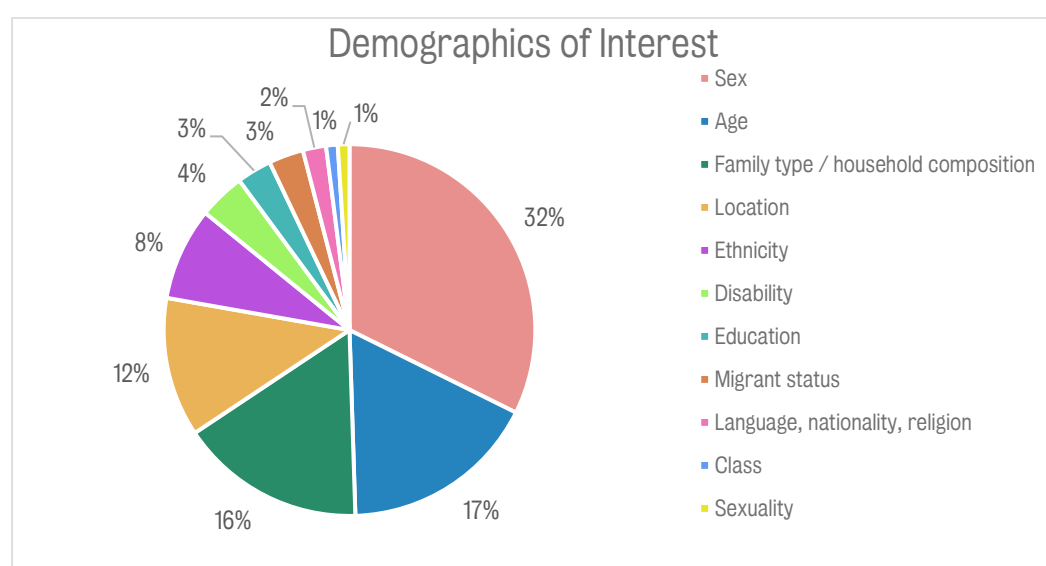
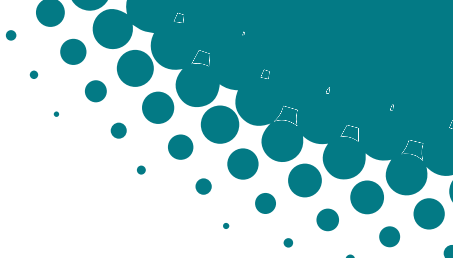


Figure 2. The demographic attributes of interest to workshop participants. Data collected through evaluation survey.





The participant-led analyses underscore both the possibilities and limitations of current datasets in capturing gendered economic realities. These examples reveal how official statistics, when used critically, can highlight persistent inequalities, but also how structural silences within the data continue to obscure women's labour.

1. Unpaid Care and the Invisibility of Intersecting Responsibilities

First, in England and Wales, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid adult care, comprising 59.2% of those who provide it. This gendered burden persists into later life, with 53.7% of carers aged 65 and over being women, challenging assumptions that care responsibilities naturally shift to spouses or state services with age. In some cases, gender disparities may even widen, particularly where adult and childcare responsibilities overlap in so-called 'sandwich care'. Yet the limited scope of care data in the census makes this hypothesis difficult to explore, revealing a critical gap in the visibility of overlapping and intergenerational care roles.

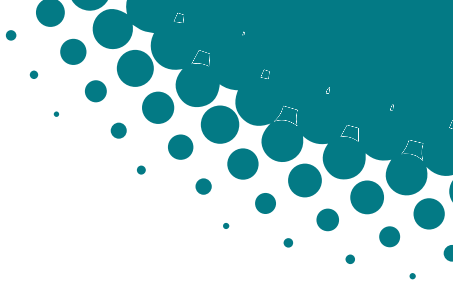
2. Misrecognition of Unpaid Labour as Inactivity

Second, in Nottingham, 3,266 women provide more than 50 hours of unpaid adult care while being classified as 'economically inactive'. This striking figure reflects a systemic misrecognition of care work as non-economic, reinforcing the broader invisibility of women's unpaid contributions to social reproduction. The lack of census data on unpaid childcare further deepens this silence, obstructing attempts to fully understand the structural drivers of gender inequality in the labour market (Sikirić, 2021). Without comprehensive measures of unpaid reproductive labour, gender-sensitive policy design remains incomplete.

3. Gaps in Occupational Classifications

Third, occupational data also reveals how gendered disparities manifest through data categorisation itself. In the 'artistic, literary and media' occupations, for example, the proportion of men increases with age, from 48.4% among those aged 16–24 to 62.2% among those aged 65 and over. This suggests potential gendered barriers to career longevity or access to cultural capital in precarious creative fields. Yet the ONS' broad categorisation of feminised industries masks important distinctions: poets, dancers, and musicians all fall under the same umbrella category, despite vastly different skill requirements and working conditions. These flattening classifications obscure the complex dynamics of gender, labour, and precarity, limiting the potential for nuanced, sector-specific analysis. As discussed in the previous section, this reflects a structural tendency to render women-dominated sectors less granular and less visible in national statistics.

Taken together, these examples illustrate both the analytical power of participatory, feminist engagement with official statistics and the deep epistemological limitations embedded in current data infrastructures. They show how official statistics can, and must, be reclaimed and reimagined to reflect the full spectrum of gendered labour, particularly the economic realities of care, reproduction, and feminised work. Without such transformation, the invisibility of this labour will continue to distort how we understand the economy and whose work is counted within it.



Recommendations for inclusive data systems

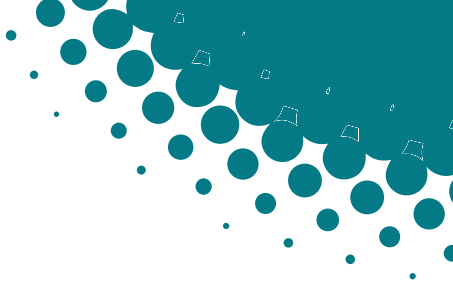
In light of these findings and reflections, we propose the following seven recommendations for improving the UK census. These are grounded in feminist economic theory and informed by our participatory research process. At a time when the ONS is under pressure to reorient its priorities and practices, this is an opportune moment to embed gender-sensitive approaches into census design and wider data systems to ensure more robust policymaking and a more inclusive economy.

1. Include or link income data with demographic microdata:

Robust individual-level income data are essential for analysing gendered economic inequality, assessing the distribution of financial resources, and identifying financial precarity across different life stages and demographic characteristics. One option is to include income questions in future census rounds using broad income bands to reduce sensitivity and protect response rates. Alternatively, enabling secure, privacy-protected linkage between census demographic data and administrative income records (e.g. from HMRC or DWP) would allow for individual-level, disaggregated analysis while preserving data integrity and confidentiality.

2. Review and expand employment-related statistics:

Conduct a gender-sensitive review of employment data collected through the census to better reflect the diversity of women's paid work. While key variables such as employment history, economic activity status, hours worked, and commuting time are already included, there remains a need to expand and refine data collection to more fully capture working patterns. This includes recognising multiple jobholding, informal work, and contract type. Additionally, more granular occupational classifications are needed, particularly within highly feminised sectors like health, education, and social care, where broad categories currently obscure distinctions in role, responsibility, and pay. Improving detail and disaggregation in employment data will support the design of more inclusive labour market policies and ensure that women's economic contributions are accurately reflected in national statistics.



3. Capture unpaid childcare and overlapping care responsibilities:

Expand the census to include simplified, standardised questions on unpaid childcare, supervisory care, and overlapping responsibilities such as ‘sandwich care’ (i.e. providing care for both children and adults). This would make visible the full extent of women’s reproductive labour, particularly among mid-life carers, and allow for more accurate time-use and care burden analysis. Recognising these dual roles is essential to understanding how unpaid care constrains labour market participation, economic autonomy, and wellbeing, especially for women.

4. Co-design data to rebuild trust and improve accessibility:

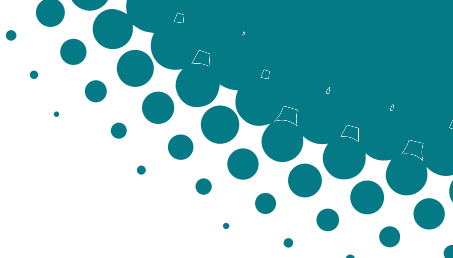
Establish participatory mechanisms for co-designing census questions, interpreting outputs, and producing inclusive user guidance. Involving civil society, gender researchers, and community groups in shaping data systems ensures that statistics reflect diverse lived realities and policy priorities. To improve accessibility, user guides for tools like the flexible table builders should be written for non-technical audiences and available in multiple formats. Ultimately, embedding participatory practices in statistical development not only enhances usability but also rebuilds trust in official data, which is an essential condition for the legitimacy and effectiveness of gender-responsive policymaking (Daniore et al., 2025).

5. Restore funding and credibility to the UK’s national statistics system:

Reinstate adequate funding and rebuild trust in the UK’s official statistics by addressing long-standing resourcing and governance issues at the ONS. Gender-responsive policymaking depends on the reliability of core statistics, including labour market, income, and wellbeing data. Ongoing problems with key datasets such as the Labour Force Survey and Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, alongside the downscaling of social indicators, risk eroding the capacity for meaningful gender analysis. A well-resourced, accountable, and transparent national statistics agency is essential for advancing inclusive economic policy and safeguarding the public interest.

6. Mainstream gender analysis across data products produced by statistical agencies:

The recent UK census marked the first time users were able to define and generate their own datasets through the flexible table builder. This innovation was essential to enabling the intersectional gender analysis conducted in this project and marked an important move towards more participatory and user-driven data access. This functionality, however, remains confined to specific tools, while other data outputs and tools, for example the ONS’ ‘Explore local statistics’ continue to omit sex-disaggregated data.



The ONS, NISRA, and NRS should ensure that all census products consistently include sex-disaggregated data and apply a gender lens in both their analysis and presentation. Applying a gender lens means going beyond presenting statistics by sex. It involves interpreting data in ways that account for the social, cultural, and economic structures that differentially shape experiences and outcomes by gender. Embedding this approach throughout census products would help integrate gender equality considerations at every stage of communication, enhance public understanding, and empower a wider range of users to engage meaningfully with gender-sensitive data.

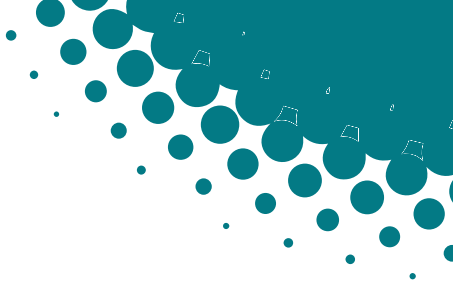
7. Develop a national gender data strategy rooted in feminist economics:

The UK should establish a coordinated, cross-sector gender data strategy that outlines what data should be collected, how frequently, and for what purpose. This strategy should be grounded in the principles of feminist economics, which centre on material inequality, unpaid care, well-being and intersectional justice, rather than market productivity.

A national strategy would provide a coherent framework for identifying and addressing gender data gaps across all areas of public policy, from employment and income to unpaid care and gender-based violence. It should include clear commitments to collect, disaggregate, and publish data by sex, gender reassignment or identity, and other intersecting protected characteristics such as age, race, disability, and migration status.

Developing this strategy in partnership with women's organisations, statisticians, gender research scholars, and statistical agencies would ensure it reflects lived realities, responds to diverse community needs, and aligns with the UK's legal and international obligations on gender equality and inclusive data governance.

Together, these recommendations form the basis of a feminist reimagining of national data infrastructure to better reflect what people do, what sustains their lives and how these are shaped by structural conditions.



Conclusion

This report has demonstrated that gender data gaps in the UK census are not simply technical oversights but structural omissions that reflect deeper epistemological and political biases in how the economy is defined and governed. Drawing on feminist economics and user engagement, we have highlighted both the potential and limitations of census data in making gender inequalities visible, particularly those related to income, unpaid care, and occupational segregation.

To move toward a more just and inclusive data system, we have proposed seven user-informed recommendations. These include embedding questions on unpaid childcare, integrating or linking income data, improving occupational classifications, identifying sandwich carers, co-designing statistical processes with civil society, mainstreaming gender equality and developing a national gender data strategy. These changes would not only close critical gaps in representation but fundamentally reorient the values underpinning UK data governance.

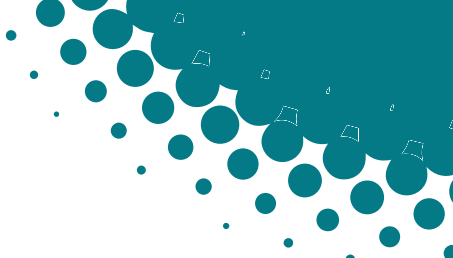
Ultimately, the census is more than a statistical exercise; it is a reflection of national priorities and political imagination. Achieving a gender-equal data future will require more than technical reform; it demands a transformation in how we understand, govern, and democratise knowledge itself.

As the Office for National Statistics works to restore credibility following recent challenges, this is a timely opportunity to embed gender-sensitive approaches to data production. Doing so within the census and across the wider data infrastructure is essential to strengthening policy, rebuilding trust, and supporting a more inclusive society and prosperous economy.

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