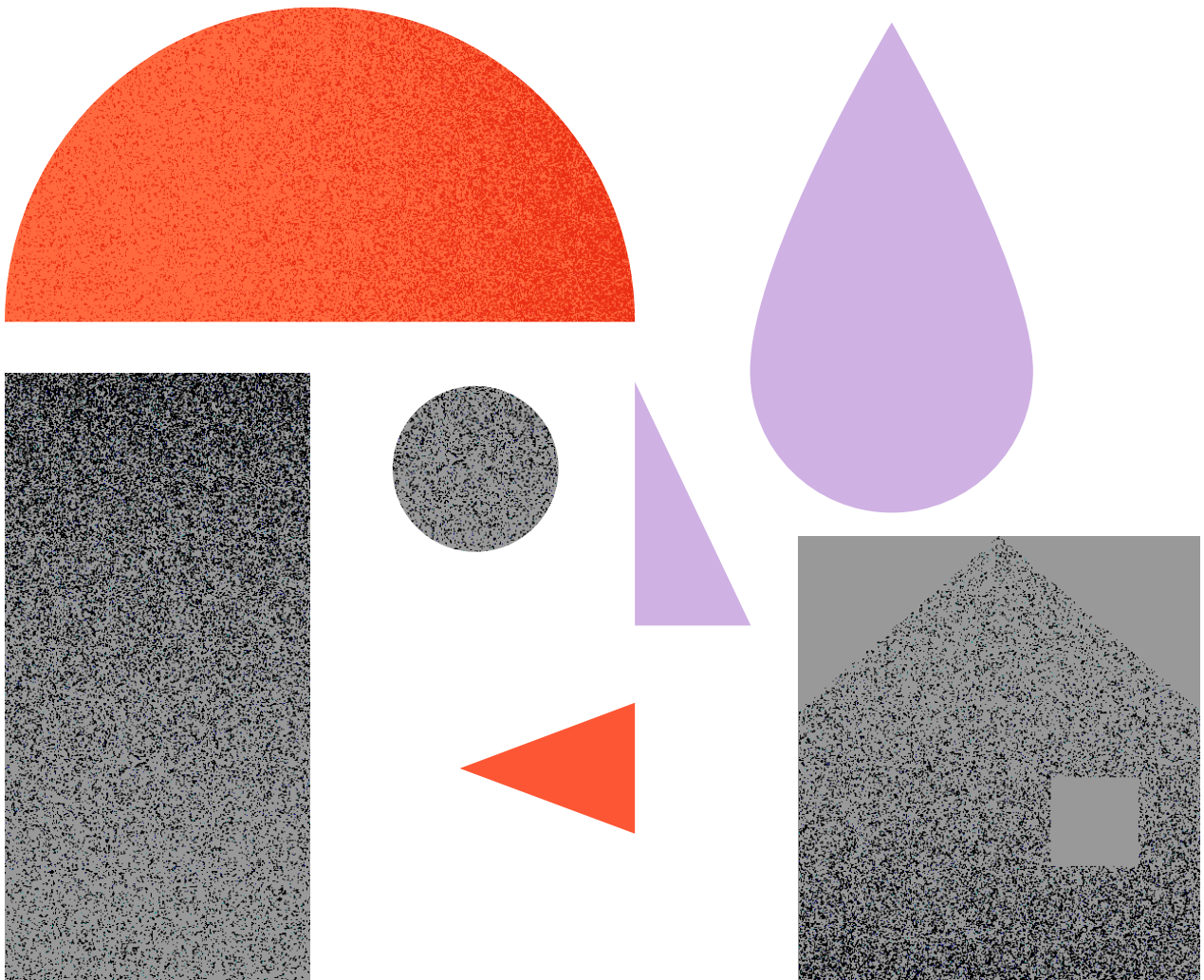


# CHANGE IN MEASUREMENT AND STATISTICAL PRIORITIES AND THE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE INITIAL LITERATURE REVIEW

**DRAFT SUMMARY FOR CONSULTATION AND REVISION, MAY 2025**



# INTRODUCTION

[Equality Insights](#) is a gender data program delivered by the [International Women's Development Agency \(IWDA\)](#) that uses inclusive data to drive progress on gender equality and inspire transformational change. For fifty years, governments have recognised that insufficient data and inadequate indicators limit visibility of barriers perpetuating inequality, and how these vary. This undermines understanding of these barriers and their implications among those in a position to address them, efforts to uphold women's rights in and through public policies, and progress towards gender equality. Despite significant international commitments to act on gender inequality, and increased appetite amongst governments for better gender data and development statistics to inform action and monitor impact, gaps in gender statistics continue. Data disaggregated by gender – and age and disability – is not routinely available to inform priorities, policies, programs and resourcing, and monitor implementation of global commitments<sup>1</sup>.

Equality Insights is seeking to understand, practically and in detail, how change towards greater statistical inclusion happens (including how other stakeholders have achieved this), to inform efforts to influence formal and informal processes in multilateral spaces. This preliminary literature review was designed to uncover what is and isn't known about how statistical advances that align with human rights and sustainable development were made possible, to inform internal and external consultations about avenues for further enquiry, and support Equality Insights to progress this work. It was undertaken by Dr Liz Gill Atkinson, then Research Advisor at IWDA, in consultation with Joanne Crawford, Strategic Advisor, Equality Insights, and Alice Ridge, Senior Research, Policy and Advocacy Advisor at IWDA.

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE METHODS, SCOPE AND FINDINGS OF OUR INITIAL REVIEW ARE PRESENTED IN THE NEXT SECTIONS. AFTER READING, WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE FOLLOWING:**

**WHAT HAVE WE MISSED?** What other studies and sources should we draw on to advance our literature review and our understanding of knowledge gaps to respond to, and any hypotheses/assumptions to test?

**WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE AND APPROPRIATE PATHWAY FOR EXPLORING THIS TOPIC FURTHER?** Would there be value in a standalone research project – to support work of [the iCount Coalition](#) and inform further thinking, towards the statistical change? Are there other approaches that would move us forward further, faster?

**WHAT WOULD BE THE MOST PRODUCTIVE FOCUS FOR FURTHER ENQUIRY?** How can we ensure that any future investigations contribute the most helpful and effective evidence possible, to advance inclusion in statistical development?

**WHO ELSE SHOULD WE HEAR FROM?** Is there anyone already exploring this topic? We are always interested in collaborating and ensuring our work is complementary to other studies. Is there someone you know who has distinct knowledge of how change that seeks to advance development statistics through multilateral forums has been achieved?

**CONTACT DETAILS:** For more information about this project, or to share your thoughts on the above, please contact:  
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# METHODS AND SCOPE

The research question guiding this initial literature review was: **How is change that advances development statistics towards aligning with human rights foundations and inclusive development outcomes through multilateral forums enabled and achieved?**

The scope of this preliminary literature review was limited to English language articles that discuss the work of government, civil society, academic and other actors to enable and achieve change *that advances development statistics* through multilateral forums. This scope was later expanded to include studies examining how other significant human rights and development-focused resolutions and changes have occurred in multilateral forum; literature on the influence of norm dynamics in these forums; and tactics and strategies employed by transnational collectives advocating for such changes.

Articles were identified through Google and Google Scholar using a variety of search terms<sup>1</sup>. Both grey literature and peer-reviewed journal articles were reviewed and included. A summary of the resources and findings of the review are below.

## FINDINGS

Included in this review are empirical studies that draw on quantitative data, qualitative data and secondary data sources. These studies are positioned within international relations and international development literature, and comment on the success or otherwise of cases of advocacy towards significant change in multilateral spaces across a range of sectors and issue areas, including but not limited to statistical development.

Many of the cases discussed are underpinned by the conceptualisation of *norm influence*, including the roles of *norm entrepreneurs* and *norm spoilers*. Notable examples include Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goal and target negotiations, and backlash against the women's rights agenda in multilateral forums, both of which are well documented.

Studies that discuss norm dynamics and norm influence in multilateral forums center and extend Finnemore and Sikkink's conceptualisation<sup>2</sup> of norm influence as a three-stage process.

- **Stage 1: Norm Emergence** - Norm entrepreneurs (individuals with strong convictions and beliefs), attempt to convince a critical mass of norm leaders (states) to embrace new norms by raising awareness or creating issues.
- **Stage 2: Norm Acceptance** - Norm leaders attempt to socialise other states to become norm followers. Motivations for this stage vary but commonly include pressure to conform, desire to enhance international legitimation and efforts by state leaders boost self-esteem by aligning with thought leaders on the "right side of history." This stage ideally leads to a norm cascade.

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<sup>1</sup> Multilateral forums, multilateral institutions, multilateral meetings, United Nations, international policymaking, advocacy, statistics, statistical development, statistical innovation, development statistics, gender equality, sustainable development, goal setting, indicators, indicator measurement

- **Stage 3: Internalisation** - Norms have either become norms or become taken for granted or so widely accepted that they are no longer a matter of public debate.

Across the reviewed studies, five key factors emerged as influencing the success (or otherwise) of norm change processes within multilateral forums:

1. Actors
2. Political and Social Context
3. Knowledge, Evidence and Framing
4. Institutions and Structures of Negotiating Processes
5. Time

## 1. ACTORS

Discussion of actors related to the role and contributions of norm entrepreneurs in international policymaking, as well as the collectives, movements and coalitions that enable norm emergence and norm acceptance. Norm entrepreneurs can be NGOs, transnational advocacy networks, officials within organisations, states, and powerful individuals within states<sup>3</sup>.

One well-documented example of how an individual norm entrepreneur can influence multilateral processes is that of Paula Caballero, a Colombian delegate at the SDG negotiations who was instrumental in securing the declaration of the SDG framework<sup>4</sup>. Reportedly driven by a strong belief in her ideas, Caballero first convinced her own government to adopt her proposal and then gradually sought and gained support from other government and non-government representatives. In the lead up to the negotiations, she reportedly invested considerable time in meeting with other countries to understand their priorities for the negotiations<sup>5</sup> and continued as a negotiator throughout the four-year negotiation period. This continuity was thought to be very important for the success of the negotiations<sup>6</sup> as negotiators who had been present throughout the negotiations were thought to have a sense of ownership over the outcome. Norm entrepreneurs, including government representatives, were also recognised as critical in enabling the adoption of specific goals in the SDGs, including environmental goals<sup>7</sup>.

Studies also discuss examples of transnational advocacy collectives working as norm entrepreneurs in advocating for and against norm change in multilateral spaces. However, the extent of their influence appears to differ by sector and issue.

In *'Restructuring World Politics'*, Khagram et al propose a typology of transnational collective action based on the level and type of organisation. This includes international NGOs, transnational advocacy networks (the most informal configuration), transnational coalitions, and transnational social movements (the most formal/organised)<sup>8</sup>. Some authors argue that a key determinant of NGO strategies toward multilateral institutions is their level of formalisation, and that NGOs with more formal structures are more likely to pursue insider strategies than those maintaining informal coalition structures, regardless of NGO budget, age or ideology<sup>9</sup>.

Many studies and reports attribute the role and contribution of transnational advocacy collectives to the success of international policy advocacy campaigns. Examples include cross-sectoral and cross-interest coalitions advocating for change to uphold human rights and development goals, such as transnational advocacy for the rights of intersex people (including collaboration with LGBTQI+ advocates)<sup>10</sup>; global political commitment to nutrition<sup>11</sup>; joint advocacy by sexual and reproductive health and rights and maternal,

neonatal and child health actors to advance global health outcomes<sup>12</sup>; and global declarations on trade and climate policy<sup>13</sup>.

Feminist writers have discussed their experiences of engagement with UN processes at national, regional and global levels and the strategies and drivers that have enabled their successful mobilisation. These include early recognition of the value of the official status provided through the Major Groups, and effective use of the Women's Major Group at Rio+20 and thereafter, particularly in the context of shrinking civil society space. Additional strategies include engaging on critical means of implementation issues; networking with like-minded actors to augment capacity to advocate on financing and other economic issues; mobilising flexibly and strategically across multiple forums; strengthening the negotiations capacity of newer and younger feminists; and using tested 'insider-outsider' strategies whenever possible.

However, the advocacy strategies used by national and transnational coalitions do not always facilitate successful advocacy in multilateral forums. Lucas et al, drawing on 467 interviews with non-state actors involved in 17 policy development processes at the UNFCCC and WTO meetings, reported that advocacy strategies were not found to be a factor influencing the success of policy goals<sup>14</sup>. Cooperation with other non-state actors did not improve the probability of success. Lucas also found that growing mobilisation of transnational advocates had not undermined the position of national governments as key decision-makers and that the type of advocacy strategy – for example, insider versus outsider – did not appear to make a difference. As explored in more detail in the following sections, Lucas argued that it is not so much the actions of non-state actors, but more the policy positions they take in relation to the policy context, that explains why certain organisations are successful and others are not<sup>15</sup>.

Whilst there is some ambiguity about how, when and to what extent transnational support for inclusive social change has been successful, the success of anti-rights movements is better understood. *Norm spoiling* refers to the process that actors undertake to directly challenge existing norms to undermine and weaken their influence<sup>16</sup>. Norm spoilers achieve this by securing widespread international support for alternative norms to institute normative change<sup>17</sup>. Women's rights norms have been both widely adopted and vigorously contested at the UN for several decades. There is evidence that norm spoiling has slowed the advancement of the women's rights agenda in multilateral forums – for example, by nearly derailing the 2019 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and during negotiations around several SDG targets, including 5.4 and 1.3<sup>18</sup>. Norm spoilers are often coalitions of diverse actors, such as the Vatican, certain governments, faith-based NGOs, and wealthy individuals, who form part of the anti-gender movement. These actors are united by shared anti-rights narratives<sup>19</sup>, though they do not necessarily share a common political vision.

Whilst there is discussion about the role of norm entrepreneurs in global goal setting and policymaking, their role in indicator selection and measurement processes is not well-documented. Fukuda-Parr writes that these technical processes are closed to most stakeholders and rely heavily on each country's technical capacity and expertise relating to statistical measurement. As such, this dynamic tends to shift power toward more technically capable countries that have the resources to support innovation, disadvantaging smaller or less resourced countries with narrower technical expertise<sup>20</sup>. Sen reported that having strong technical capacity and expertise in statistical measurement was critical in building the trust of official negotiators, and consequently, in influencing their perspectives<sup>21</sup>.



## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The political and social context can also facilitate inclusive and progressive international policymaking and is influenced by the relationships between national and international norms and the broader enabling environment. Finnemore and Sikkink state that when norms are emerging, little normative change occurs without significant domestic support for the change<sup>22</sup>. Many international norms begin as domestic or regional norms and become international norms through the efforts of norm entrepreneurs, who carry these norms from domestic into regional and global forums<sup>23,24</sup>.

Similarly, Lucas et al. found that demand for change in international climate and trade policy processes needed to be first endorsed by a national government, and that non-state actors aligned with their national governments were more likely to achieve policy goals. However, after the tipping point, as more and more states adopt the norm more rapidly, Finnemore and Sikkink argue that countries are more likely to adopt new norms regardless of domestic pressure. This may be due to either the desire for international legitimation (particularly amongst states that are experiencing domestic turmoil or insecurity about their international standing or reputation), or due to broader worldwide context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or Russia's invasion of Ukraine<sup>25</sup>. Although policymaking is often seen as a process that should be guided by evidence rather than interest-based politics, it is not always the case<sup>26</sup>.

Regarding feminist mobilising on the negotiation of the SDGs, Sen argued that the broader enabling environment and existing support for women's rights facilitated the success of social mobilising techniques<sup>27</sup>. This highlights the role that norms play both within, and external to, policymaking processes.

## 3. KNOWLEDGE, EVIDENCE AND FRAMING

The extent to which a new norm resembles or differs from the previous norm can influence the likelihood of the new norm being adopted. Finnemore and Sikkink argue that the adjacency or path dependence of norm emergence and the relationship to a new norm or an existing norm may influence the likelihood of adoption<sup>28</sup>. Lucas et al confirm this and noted that it was not so much the advocacy strategies employed by non-government actors that enabled success, but rather the degree of preferred policy change and whether national governments endorsed the demands<sup>29</sup>. Lucas et al found that issue positions are an important factor, as conformists (those that defend the status quo) had the highest chance of success, while reformists pursuing greater degrees of change had the lowest likelihood of goal attainment<sup>30</sup>.

## 4. INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES AND NEGOTIATING PROCESSES

The open and participatory nature of the SDG negotiations was seen as unprecedented in multilateral forums and widely recognised as critical to the adoption of the SDG framework<sup>31</sup>. It is well-established, including by Fukuda-Parr and other scholars, that participatory processes of debate among different actor coalitions are vital to progress and can enhance the legitimacy, accountability, and transparency of the policy process<sup>32</sup>.

The Open Working Group (OWG) – one of two parallel negotiation processes in the SDG negotiations – was deliberately designed as a break from traditional negotiating formats. It sought to mitigate a divide between majority and minority world countries and the impact of countries voting in regional blocks<sup>3334</sup>. The format was open to diverse stakeholders, including the public, states, and NGOs, and was widely believed to have ‘given voice’ to less-powerful countries and depoliticised the negotiations<sup>3536</sup>. Studies report that without this multi-stakeholder process that broke the tradition of negotiating by regional blocks and the dependence on the secretariat, the outcome would likely have been different<sup>37</sup>.

Burke and Olsen<sup>38</sup> also identified the structure and working modalities of the OWG as one of three factors that enabled stronger emphasis on environmental concerns within the SDGs. Similarly, feminist scholars highlight that effective participation in institutional processes is a key driver of feminist mobilisation and of the extent to which women’s rights actors can shape policies and monitor their implementation<sup>39</sup>.

The literature also highlights the importance of engagement across institutions at a range of levels, including national, regional and global, due to the potential for norms to emerge and shift between these levels of engagement<sup>40</sup>. The strength and effectiveness of the institutions themselves also plays a key role in enabling progressive development agendas to become established norms. ActionAid reported that governments and multilateral institutions have become increasingly limited in their capacity to solve global crises, as transnational corporations have grown in size and influence<sup>41</sup>.

It was widely reported that the processes for developing the SDG goals and indicators were very different. Whilst the goal setting negotiations were widely recognised as being transparent, open and inclusive, the process to develop the indicators was closed and technocratic<sup>42</sup>. The process of moving from goals to targets to indicators involves a transfer of power from policymakers to technical experts and statisticians<sup>43</sup>. Several studies claim that it is in this shift from goal setting to indicator selection that the ambition and aspirations of goals can be undermined or can slip away. Razavi writes that this occurred in relation to the inclusion of indicators that measure women’s rights and gender justice in the SDGs<sup>44</sup>.

## 5. TIME

A common finding across studies is that successful advocacy for statistical development and change that advances human rights goals, including in relation to processes of indicator selection and measurement, requires multiple years of groundwork and engagement at national, regional and global levels. These efforts often span multiple and sometimes parallel processes within UN agencies.

Intersex Australia, for example, outlined engagement at national, regional and global levels over nine years, including sustained activism in UN meetings in the years leading up to the historic UN resolution in 2024 that upholds the rights of intersex people<sup>45</sup>. Groundwork for the SDGs originated in the Rio+20 discussions in 1992 and culminated in three years of high-energy and open stakeholder consultations and negotiations between 2011 and 2015<sup>46</sup>. Van der Pol reported that it took eight years of advocacy before the statistical framework for measuring the sustainability of tourism was endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission<sup>47</sup>. CBM International also documented a timeline of advocacy at multilateral institutions towards strengthening disability rights legislation and implementation since 2014<sup>48</sup>.

# CONCLUSION

The SDG negotiations and the factors that influenced the goal and target setting processes are well-documented. Also well understood are the tactics and strategies used by conservative norm spoilers to advance anti-gender norms and undermine the women's rights agenda in the SDGs and multilateral forums.

Global goal and target setting processes, as well as advocacy for international resolutions on upholding human rights, global health and other development outcomes, can be enabled by all or some of the following:

- Norm entrepreneurs building consensus around a new norm
- Open and transparent negotiation processes that enable diverse stakeholder participation
- The similarity between new and existing norms (new norms similar to the status quo are more likely to be adopted)
- Support from an advocate's national government
- What is happening in the broader social and political environment.

Norm influence at these levels of negotiation tends to be driven by political factors, rather than driven by evidence.

In contrast, the factors that influence processes for negotiating indicator selection and measurement are not well documented. What is known is that these negotiations typically occur in closed meetings, involve different stakeholders from those that negotiate goals and targets, such as statistical and technical data measurement specialists, and have been used by norm spoilers to undermine the ambition of the goals and targets that they seek to measure. The shift from political to technical influence and power when selecting indicators has been observed. However, empirical evidence regarding pathways of influence and change in this transition from political to technical processes, through formal data and statistics mechanisms, is scarce.

More information is needed to test assumptions about established pathways to achieving norm change in global goal setting processes, the key factors that influence this, and whether and how these relate to advocacy for change that advances statistical development. A better understanding of the factors that influence indicator selection and measurement is critical. As Fukuda-Parr and McNeill claim, the selection of indicators is where power really sits and the process of setting and measuring goals is hidden behind what are reported to be strict and closed technical processes involving very different stakeholders<sup>49</sup>.

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