

# Gender, data and the labour market:

## Why data collection is not gender neutral

### Executive summary

Following the **Treasury Select Committee's recent evidence session with the ONS**, this briefing outlines the urgent need for **gender-sensitive economic data** to inform effective policymaking.

#### Key concerns:

- Declining response rates in the **Labour Force Survey (LFS)** and other key datasets limit the accuracy of labour market insights.
- A shift towards **administrative data** risks **systematically underestimating women's economic contributions**, particularly unpaid care work.
- Budget constraints could lead to a reduction in **survey-based data collection**, undermining the ability to measure gendered economic inequalities.

#### Recommendations:

- Ensure **continued funding for sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive labour market surveys** rather than relying solely on administrative data.
- Improve **integration of survey and administrative data** while recognising the limitations of each method.
- Re-establish a **Gender Statistics User Group** to ensure economic data accurately reflects gender disparities.

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### The importance of gender-sensitive economic data

Economic data is often presented as neutral, but it often overlooks gendered inequalities in work, pay and economic participation. Women's roles in the economy differ significantly from men's because their working patterns are shaped by structural inequalities in the home and in the labour market, including the unequal division of unpaid work, and women's over-representation in low-paid, insecure and part-time work. As a result, unpaid care work, gender stereotypes, gender pay gaps and unequal pay, impact where, how much, and in what conditions women work

- as well as how much they are paid. Disadvantage based on class, race, disability, age and other inequalities intersect with gender to create specific challenges for different groups of women. Without accounting for these disparities, labour market data **fails to capture the full economic reality for women**, leading to ineffective policymaking.

## Gendered gaps in labour market measurement

Recent scrutiny of the **Labour Force Survey (LFS)** has highlighted major issues in labour market data collection, including declining response rates, volatility and gaps in capturing workforce trends<sup>1</sup>. These challenges are not unique to the LFS. Similar issues affect other important datasets, such as the **Family Resources Survey (FRS)** and the **Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE)**.

Discussions at a recent **Select Committee** oral evidence session with the ONS raised several data issues that directly affect our understanding of women's work, including:

- **Low-paid self-employment** – Women are more likely to be self-employed in low-paid, precarious sectors, yet standard employment statistics often fail to capture these experiences. The **gender pay gap for the self-employed is 43%**<sup>2</sup>.
- **Main and second jobs** – Women are more likely to juggle **multiple part-time jobs** to balance work and care, yet secondary employment is often undercounted in data sets.
- **SIC Codes and Caring Professions** – The Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) system can obscure the nature of women's employment, particularly in care roles where they are overrepresented. An analysis of the classification shows that it provides a more detailed breakdown of traditionally male dominated roles compared to traditionally female dominated roles - a consequence of its reflection of the job market when it was first created. The classification fails to reflect evolving roles and seniority levels in women dominated fields, such as in nursing where different types of nurses are not easily distinguished, making detailed employment analysis difficult.

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution Foundation (2024) [Get Britain's Stats Working](#)

<sup>2</sup> IPSE (2024) [Women in self-employment](#)

- **Economic inactivity and its causes** – Women are more likely than men to be classified as economically inactive due to unpaid care work and long-term sickness<sup>3</sup>.

Beyond the Select Committee discussions, there are additional issues with economic data, including:

- **Use of household-level data** – income is not shared equally within households: household-based economic measurements obscure women’s individual financial situations and economic vulnerability, making women’s poverty and financial dependence invisible in national statistics.
- **Measurement of unpaid work** – Women do **50% more unpaid work** than men, yet official economic indicators often exclude this contribution<sup>4</sup>. For example, **women’s unpaid childcare alone is worth an estimated £140 billion annually, yet it remains invisible in GDP calculations**<sup>5</sup>.
- **Understanding wellbeing** – Standard economic metrics focus on employment and income but fail to account for broader wellbeing measures, such as unpaid care burdens and job insecurity, which disproportionately impact women.
- **Quality of local-level data** – Many key datasets lack the granularity needed to understand regional gender disparities in employment and economic security.

## The risks of relying on administrative data

The shift towards using **administrative data** to supplement or replace survey-based data collection presents both opportunities and risks. While administrative data can improve real-time insights, it has significant limitations.

Administrative data is **not collected randomly**, meaning its design and structure can overrepresent some groups and underrepresent others. For example, if mobile phone tracking data is used to calculate transport use it may overestimate use by richer passengers who may have both a work phone and a personal phone and underestimate use by poorer passengers who do not have a phone. Women, particularly unpaid carers and those in insecure work, are at

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<sup>3</sup> WBG (2024) [Women and the Labour Market](#)

<sup>4</sup> ONS, (2023) [Time use in the UK: 23 September to 1 October 2023](#)

<sup>5</sup> Young Women’s Trust (2020) [Young women’s unpaid work worth £140 billion](#)

risk of disappearing entirely from official statistics if we rely solely on administrative datasets, such as HMRC data to measure labour market activity. A recent academic study<sup>6</sup> referenced by the ONS highlights that administrative data collected for one purpose may not be suitable for the research questions survey data had previously been used to answer. Not only may administrative data not include key sections of the population, but it may not include all the demographic information needed to monitor equality trends.

Accurate data is essential if public bodies are to carry out robust **equality impact assessments (EIAs)**, which is a key way they can meet their legal obligations under the **Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)**. This requires not only that data is broken down by sex and other protected characteristics, but also that the questions asked, and the collection, presentation, interpretation and analysis of data reflect the reality of women's lives (for example covering unpaid as well as paid work). Without accurate data, policies risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

## Conclusion

As government departments face increasing pressure to cut costs, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) may reduce its use of surveys in favour of administrative data. While surveys are expensive, they remain the only method capable of fully capturing women's economic activity.

Women's unpaid and underpaid work, already systematically overlooked, would become even less visible in official statistics. This risks producing policies that fail to address the structural barriers women face, reinforcing the gender pay gap, limiting access to social protections, and weakening the evidence base for gender equality impact assessments.

Rather than cutting back on surveys, the ONS should focus on developing gender-sensitive methodologies that integrate administrative data with robust survey collection.

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<sup>6</sup> David J. Hand (2018) [Statistical Challenges of Administrative and Transaction Data](#), Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A: Statistics in Society

Ensuring women's work is counted is not just about statistical accuracy but good policymaking. Strengthening gender-sensitive methodologies is essential for a statistical system that reflects the economy and informs policies that work for all.

## Recommendations

To ensure that economic and labour market data reflect the experiences of women, we propose:

- **Adequate funding of the ONS** to ensure the continued delivery of surveys.
- **Improved integration of survey and administrative data** while recognising the limitations of each method.
- **The re-establishment of a Gender Statistics User Group**, bringing together **academics, civil society, and grassroots organisations** to provide expertise on creating gender-sensitive statistics that improve policy decisions.