

Champions for Social Good Podcast

Closing the Gender Data Gap: A Conversation with Emily Pryor of Data2x

Jamie: Hello, and welcome to The Champions for Social Good podcast, the podcast for people dedicated to social impact. I'm Jamie Serino, Director of Marketing with the Corporations and Foundations division of Blackbaud. I'm here today with Emily Courey Pryor, Executive Director of Data2X, which is housed at the UN Foundation. Welcome, Emily.

Emily: Thank you so much, Jamie. Happy to be here.

Jamie: Yeah, we're really happy to have you on the show. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and about Data2X?

Emily: Sure. So my name is Emily Pryor, as you said, and I'm proud to be the Executive Director of Data2X. I started with Data2X really when we first initiated the program, and it's really been an honor to grow it and to see it develop over the years. Before I was running Data2X, I also managed our research program on women's economic empowerment, which was also based at the UN Foundation. And I worked as a senior advisor on the startup team for Girl Up, which is a campaign that listeners might be familiar with, it's a for girls by girls campaign, that's based at the UN Foundation. I've also spent some time in the private sector working for a biotech firm named Gilead Sciences, and also started my career at The American Red Cross Headquarters in Washington DC.

Jamie: That's great, a really impressive background. Can you tell us a little bit about Data2X?

Emily: Absolutely. So Data2X is a collaborative technical and advocacy platform that focuses on gender data specifically. And in more detail, we focus on improving the quality and the availability in the use of gender data in order to make a practical difference in the lives of women and girls. So we are working with UN agencies and multilateral agencies, with governments and civil society, academia and the private sector to identify gender data gaps and work to close those gender data gaps. And then, hopefully, at the end of the day, use that gender data to improve policies in decision making in support of gender equality.

Jamie: So can you tell us a little bit about what you mean exactly when you say gender data?

Emily: Sure, absolutely. That's a great question, an important question. So the gender data is... There's two aspects to gender data, first it means data that's disaggregated by sex, so understanding what primary school enrollment rates, for instance look like for girls versus boys. But it doesn't just end there, it's also data that pertains specifically to girls and women, such as maternal mortality rates. So just from a biological standpoint, that's not going to pertain to young men or men in the same way that it would for girls and women. So it also means something deeper in addition to some of these definitions about sex and specific aspects of biology. It also refers to something deeper, which is really the question of what kinds of data get collected, and aspects of data collection that can be gendered, or might lend themselves to bias in some way. And I think that's a really important element of what gender data, and our push for greater gender data is all about.

Jamie: Yeah. Can you tell us how we ended up in the place that we're at now? How has data become biased?

Emily: So I think it's important to know with all data collection, and I'm sure many of your listeners are experienced development practitioners, and work with data every day in their lives. Data is a part of a community, and it's a part of a culture. And people who design surveys, who carry out surveys, who analyze results, who report results, who use results, we're all part of a broader culture. And I think that what can happen, and what has happened over time, is that that contributes to and the various processes that we have for data collection and analysis and use are informed by our own understanding, and the structure within which

we live. And so, as a result of that, there are situations where we simply either don't have any data at all about women and girls, and boys and men, both independently but also in relation to each other. Or we have bad data, what we call bad data about women and girls. And we're really focused on both of those things, on identifying what those gaps are, highlighting the fact that this is a problem, that these exist, and educating people about what gender data is in the first place. And then, very importantly, trying to figure out how we close those gender data gaps, and how we encourage more use of good gender data for making better policies.

Jamie: Do you have any examples of where data might be biased or data might be missing for certain things?

Emily: Sure, absolutely. There are many examples. One of the things we first did when we started Data2X in 2012, was really set out to identify what the global gender data gaps were, and we did that by looking across sectors. So we looked at health and education, economic participation, political participation and human security. And we looked across all of those sectors and identified that there were 28 global gender data gaps that existed. So that information is available on our website, and we have it in an easy-to-digest table form, so I would encourage people to check that out because it's kind of a helpful crib sheet for understanding this challenge. But in terms of some specifics, in terms of both either having bad data, or having no data at all, some of the examples of this would be things like measurement biases that reinforce gender stereotypes.

Emily: And one area where this is particularly prevalent is in the area of economic participation. And if you look at the table that we've put together on these 28 gaps, you'll see that that's one of the areas, economic participation is one of the areas where there are the most gaps. And that's because historically, women haven't been defined or looked at as a part of the formal economy, and as a part of the economic participation question when we're designing things like labor surveys. And so when you have that situation, and especially in many countries, the way that a survey might be designed, or who is asked the survey questions, or the way in which women actually participate in the economy is not easily captured by existing surveys. So for instance, many women in many countries, especially of more research-constrained settings, are engaged in more seasonal work, or less stable forms of employment, let's say, in agriculture, seasonal work in agriculture. And a lot of labor surveys might break down whether or not you're employed or not as either you're formally employed, right? So you have a job that you go to every day, or you're not. And so it can be actually quite difficult to find data and have good accurate data on how women are participating in the economy or not.

Emily: A lot of times that can be obscured in the data that's collected, because women's participation in the economy can be, especially in many places, can be very complex. Women will do a variety of ways of participating in the economy, some that might be goods that are for sale, but some are ways in which a woman is contributing to the economy but her work is unpaid. So it's unpaid work on a family farm, or in a family business, or it's work in the home caring for children, or for the elderly. And those kinds of questions and that kind of information about women's participation in economies is often missing from the ways that data is collected and analyzed and then used.

Jamie: Yeah. I think it's fascinating to look at that, and I think a lot of people don't realize that as they're looking at statistics like that. So what kinds of things does your group do to try to fix that? It seems quite complex and complicated, so what kind of measures do you put into place?

Emily: Yes, it absolutely is complex. And certainly this isn't new information, there have been many people for many years who have certainly been aware of this challenge, and wanting to work together to address it and change it, and I think that's why it's, frankly, really exciting that there has been a ground swell of support really building for gender data. I think we have more and more people paying attention to it. And, frankly, stopping and listening long enough to understand, "Wait a second, I always thought that labor statistics... I didn't really think about how labor statistics were collected, and whether or not women were represented. And now I'm stopping and thinking about it." Right? So that's one area of tremendous progress, and something that we've been really involved and engaged in trying to make that happen. So that's one area that I think is really encouraging.

Emily: Other things that we are doing, and we are only one part of this certainly, but we really felt that it wasn't enough to just identify gaps, or even educate people on what those gaps were and get the word out there. But also work on how we could forge partnerships with the agencies that are the big data producers and data collectors, to try to encourage and accelerate advances on this. And so one of our partnerships is looking at this issue of how women's work and women's employment are captured in labor force surveys, and this is a partnership that is with the International Labor Organization, and with the World Bank, and with the Food and Agriculture Organization, so these are all large multilateral agencies. And it really was about working with all three of those agencies, getting them all working together to really collaborate on how do you ask those questions. This is a mix of kind of very deep technical work, but also needing to be able to translate that work for why it matters, ultimately. So on the deep technical side, you have to think about when you're carrying out a labor force survey, every country is different, every context is different. But you also have to think about things like what is the ordering of the questions? How are people going to interpret or see themselves in the way that a question is worded? And then that's going to affect how they answer that question, right?

Emily: So there are a lot of very technical kind of challenges, and exciting challenges if you're a statistics person, in terms of how you effectively get this work done. And there are wonderful people who are working really hard on this issue. But then there's this additional step, which is how do you ensure that there is the will, there's the political will, that energy and resource is invested in figuring this out in the first place. So saying, "No, it's really important that we get this right, so we ensure that women are adequately represented in our labor force information." And then it's the, "How do we use that data that we get to make a change in the way that policies are made?" So if we have a better idea of how women are participating in the economy, or how they are not participating or how they are excluded from the economy, how do we build policies that better enable that participation? And that's a whole chain of events that are both technical, communication, and advocacy in nature.

Jamie: Right, right. And so you brought up political obstacles and I imagine it's very difficult maybe working country to country as you were saying. So what kind of road blocks do you find, and how do you overcome them, maybe, when you're... So let's say a country's measuring education, but they don't even allow their women to be educated, and so that's a political situation. So what are those encounters like, and how do you overcome those?

Emily: Well you brought up education, Jamie, and I think that's a great example because it's actually an example of where gender data has been a powerful engine of change, I would say. So in the early... I'm sure you remember, I certainly do, although I'm dating myself. But when the MDGs, the Millennium Development Goals were getting started, one of the areas where that was very definitively focused on gender equality topic was on education, and on primary education, and increasing parity in education between boys and girls. But the reason that that was able to be a goal that was stated, and then measured, right? So you wouldn't wanna put a... It's hard to put a goal out there if you aren't really sure how you're going to measure progress on a...

Jamie: Right, right.

Emily: But a reason why that was able to be articulated and to be followed up on as a Millennium Development Goal was because the data existed, right? There had been a realization several years earlier that data needed to be collected by not only just in general having global rates of primary school enrollment, but that it needed to be disaggregated by sex. So that you could see, "Oh, wait a second, there's actually in this country, or in this region, it's 80% of boys being educated versus 20% of girls," let's say just as an example. And so the ability, the fact that that data existed then allowed for there to be a global commitment to increasing parity in primary school enrollment, which of course is what we have seen. We're not there yet on secondary school enrollment, but the fact that we made so much progress from primary school is really exciting. So I think that's just a great example that I love to praise the education community for in the first place, but also kind of use that as an example for why I think gender data is really so important.

Emily: I think in terms of your question about how you deal with what some of those political barriers can be, I mean they're certainly real. My take on that is that having the information and pushing for the information

oftentimes gives the tools that are needed in order to do something about the problem, right? So I think it's important to continue to push for the information, even if political barriers do exist. I think if you don't push for the information in the first place, then you don't have the data or the evidence to pinpoint the problem and get others talking about it within a given context. So this is where this issue of gender data is not something that's only within the domain of the data scientists and the statisticians, although they are critically important, and a group that we are really trying to influence, and see as a major audience for our work.

Emily: But also, this is where civil society gets involved, academia gets involved, policy makers get involved. And just one area where there's actually been, what I think is a really interesting example, that kind of talks about how all these different types of players come together is that... We were talking earlier about how understanding how women spend their time when we're talking about things like labor force surveys, especially in places where perhaps there's not as much of an interest in understanding how women spend their time economically, and how we really categorize women's more traditional economic activities that are paid, versus other activities that have important economic and societal values that are unpaid. Well, there's a really interesting example that we've just been learning about in Uruguay, where civil society, and academia, policymakers realized, knew that there was a gender inequity in terms of unpaid work, and that that was therefor impacting women's ability to participate in the formal economy, but there wasn't really any way to prove that, right? The data wasn't necessarily there to tell that story. Everybody kind of knew it to be true, but didn't have the data to tell that story.

Emily: And therefore there really wasn't a policy imperative to act. And so what they did was academia got involved, and they developed and implemented what's called a time use survey, which essentially tries to understand how people are spending their time. And the National University launched it in 2003, and then basically that data collection continued through 2013. And then utilizing all of that data, civil society and academia were able to work together to show they then have the numbers to back up that there was a care deficit, and that women were spending a disproportionate amount of their time in unpaid work, compared to men, and that this was affecting their ability to participate in the economy.

Emily: And so they were able to use this information to then push policy makers to put it on the national policy agenda. Then Uruguay passed the National Care Policy in 2015, that focuses on care for children, for the elderly, for people with disabilities. And that's a really big deal, and it's a really interesting, I think, a really interesting example of how you get different communities working together, advocating... Collecting the data in the first place, and then using and advocating with that data to try to drive a policy change. We don't know yet, I mean this policy was just enacted, I think it was at the end of 2015, so we can't point to results yet, but one of the goals of course is to try to improve the availability of care services to encourage and enable women to participate more in the formal economy. So it's something we're gonna definitely be keeping our eye on.

Jamie: Yeah, that's a great example, I think that really ties it all together. So Data2X's role, is it one of education and advocacy, or are you providing sort of survey tools, or doing your own surveying? I just wanna better understand your role within something like what you just described, or just in general as you try to fix this inequality issue.

Emily: Sure. So we work as both on the technical side, and also on the advocacy side. And we're a small entity, we're not one of these large... We're not a UN agency, and we're not a large think tank. We're a relatively small team and we're working with many data producers and data collectors to try to bring people together, to convene partnerships where we see that there might be a need to get people around the table with each other, and enable that to happen. But in some cases, we also are providing technical input, or technical expertise, or commentary on a given design challenge. We also, on the advocacy side, and this was a relatively new area for us, we really are trying to deepen our work in advocacy as we move forward, because as I said at the top of the podcast, when we started out we really were focused on, "Let's define the gaps in the first place. Let's do that kind of fellowship work, and sit down and do that desk review and put all of that information together into one place. And then let's start trying to get technical partnerships together to address those gaps."

Emily: But it doesn't stop there, you can have technical solutions, but if you don't have the mechanism to translate those technical solutions into a format that a policy maker can use and act upon to improve policy, then we won't have fully achieved the circle that we're trying to draw here. And so we are really starting... We started last year, but this year it will be intensifying more, really more of a concerted effort around advocacy, which is going to include certainly education work, like what we're doing right now, of having conversations, hopefully reaching new communities of people to care about this and pay attention to it in their own work. But also really trying to ensure that these gender data solutions that we're working on through our partnerships are... And not only through our partnerships, but what we're hearing about from other people's work, that that's highlighted and understood, and being maintained as a topic at the highest levels of political discourse. Because ultimately at the end of the day, one of the big things that is obviously needed is investment in data collection, and investment in gender data collection.

Jamie: Right.

Emily: One of the reasons why we don't have great data, where some of the biggest data gaps are, are in countries where there is the least amount of money for data collection, but those also happen to be countries where gender inequities are the most stark. And so there really needs to be a global level commitment to the importance of development data collection writ large. But within that, the understanding, and the awareness, and the vigilance, frankly, about the importance of keeping our eye on gender data. And understanding that what's required for good gender data isn't business as usual, it's really examining our biases and asking questions differently, and analyzing and using that data appropriately.

Jamie: Yeah, so I think there could be a big moment for you guys here now, so International Women's Day, March 8th, so the theme women in the changing world of work, I think this ties into everything you've been talking about here. March 13th, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, so that's happening, focusing on women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work. I think there's a little bit of a convergence here, and possibly a big moment for Data2X. So I'd like to hear a little bit about what you have to say about that, and just in general, I guess, the continuation of what you've been discussing here that gender data does indeed tie in to women's economic empowerment.

Emily: Yeah, I mean it absolutely does. I think women's economic empowerment has really caught on as a major topic of interest, as well it should. I think historically, perhaps, a lot of development action on women was focused in health and education arenas, where we undoubtedly will always need it, and still need it. But that was a bit... Maybe not at the exclusion of, but the action was not always taking into account women's economic participation. And so it's really exciting to see that. And incidentally, our same team who started Data2X was also the team working on women's economic empowerment, and we did a lot of research to that effect. And we put out a report a few years ago, it was 2013, it's called "A Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment" which I think is really very relevant still today, in terms of the way that it defined the problem, and really kind of looked at what seemed to be the most promising and proven approaches for empowering women economically.

Emily: And I think the gender data issue is hugely relevant within women's economic empowerment, as we've discussed, it's one of the areas where we have some of the biggest gender data gaps, is in the realm of women's economic participation. And also it's one of the areas where the reasons behind why we have those data gaps has a lot to do with ingrained bias. And those are kind of pernicious challenges that we have to continue to highlight, not only as Data2X, but all of us, and to really understand, and to see how if we aren't changing the way that we collect information about how women participate in the economy, we could be making mistakes, right? So what I mean by that is that we have this political moment, it's fantastic that this issue is being highlighted at global levels, and that there's so much energy behind it. But you can see how you could have instances where a government can say, "Okay, we really wanna focus on empowering women economically, and getting them into the workforce." So what we need to do is invest in training programs for women, in order to get them into the economy.

Emily: Well, maybe that assumption is happening because... We would assume, because there isn't good data on this, that women aren't already doing a lot of things in the economy, which is how it would appear in a lot of places, because they're not turning up in those formal statistics. But in reality, a woman is producing food for her family, which has an economic benefit, right? It's an unpaid work benefit, but it's happening. In addition to the food that she's producing on her farm for her family, some of that food on the farm is going to the market for sale. But that's informal work, not easily captured in terms of her participation in the market economy. At the same time, she's caring for her children, and perhaps for some elderly relative, which has an economic and societal value and benefit, but it's not captured as such. So, she's doing all of these things, right? Which are a form of participation in the economy. And if you planned a training program for her to attend, when would she do that? When would she possibly have time to go to a training program?

Jamie: Right.

Emily: So, the assumption might be, "Well, let's put some resources into a training program to get more women in the economy." And then no one comes. And then what's the result? So, if you rewind that scenario, and you had better data about how women are already participating in the economy, or ways that it could be better where you could adjust her scenario so that she can participate more in the formal economy, you would be making much different investments. You might be making investments in child care, you might be making investments in, "Well how do we improve the seeds that she has for her family's farm? How do we give her more productive assets? A piece of farming equipment that would increase her yield?" That kind of thing. It could be the same dollar amount of investment, or some different dollar level of investment, but a more targeted investment, based on good data that has the same end result and then ultimately a better end result for women's participation.

Jamie: Yeah. And so that leads me also to ask that... This probably crosses over into other areas as well, do you find yourself sort of crossing paths with people that are fighting this fight based on maybe race, or some other line where there's also inequality?

Emily: Absolutely. I think this is a much broader issue around what we would call disaggregation across several different categories. And so race and ethnicity is certainly a huge factor here, and understanding the intersection of what we would call the intersectionality of different characteristics. Age is another one, we certainly focus on age in terms of girls and women. But there's been certainly a significant push going on in terms of making sure that information about older people is being captured in data collection in a way that it hasn't been previously. So this is undoubtedly not only an issue of just gender, but of other areas as well, and we're very much in support of that.

Emily: And I think this is also an area where I think there on this question of greater disaggregation, and understanding more. One of the things that is hard sometimes about disaggregation when you're talking about statistics is that it requires such large sample sizes, in terms of getting all the disaggregation characteristics that you're looking for, right? And so that's a technical challenge that also has pretty significant financial implications to it as well, right? So I think that that's sometimes a challenge, it's a real challenge. I think we're up to the challenge, there's a lot of smart people in this world that are focused on this and working on it. But I also think it's an area where it's really interesting, and it's something that we're focused on as well, trying to understand what new data sources, or different kinds of data sources can tell us about communities in a more granular way, in a more real-time way as well. And so I think it's being open to both of those, being open to not only improving official and traditional sources of statistics, but also on how we utilize new data sources and technologies as well.

Jamie: Yeah. Actually, I was gonna ask about that as well, that cell phones, for example, and as more and more individuals have them, that that ends up being the way to reach people, because all of the examples that you give, it just a lot of times, it leads back to, "Well, we can't reach these people." Or, "We don't know how to reach them." And that's why they're not surfacing. And so I guess the increasing number of people that have cell phones, that ends up being one of the platforms. So I'm glad you mentioned technology there. So is that

something that's being leveraged? Or are there are there other sort of technology trends that you find are being leveraged so that you can reach the right people?

Emily: Yeah, and so absolutely, I think it's both utilizing technology as a form of data collection, but you're right, you very importantly point out it's also certainly an important platform for then reaching people with a programmatic message, or a policy message, or things like that as well. And we absolutely are, and this is an area where we are seeing advancements in terms of tools for capturing gaps in data that might be missed by conventional data sources. So for example, using things like satellite imagery and call detail records, credit card transactions, look in Twitter and social media posts, we actually have what I think is going to be an exciting new report on big data and the well-being of women and girls, and it's gonna be coming out on March 21st.

Emily: And so definitely follow us on Twitter, @Data2X, to have more information, because we're planning to e-launch the report. And so I think it's gonna be really exciting. When we started looking into big data as an area just of interest to us when we started writing about data gaps back in 2013, there really was not anything out there. A lot of people were certainly talking a lot and doing amazing things in terms of big data for development overall, but gender as a topic, or as a unit of analysis, really wasn't part of that dialogue at the time. And so we, with the support of our funders, put some energy and financing behind that to do a series of pilots on really trying to figure out what big data could help tell us in terms of women and girls, and really closing some of those gender data gap. So we're really excited about this report and would love for you, Jamie, and for everyone listening to this podcast to go and check it out, and spread the word.

Jamie: That's great, yeah, that sounds awesome. So is there anything else that you'd wanna add? What does the next couple of years look like? And anything else that we should keep our eyes open for?

Emily: Yeah. So the next couple of years, I think, are gonna be really exciting. We've spent time building these partnerships in a variety of areas; big data which I just talked about has been one, women's economic empowerment has been another. And we have several others on a variety of topics, so I would say please continue to follow our work, and see what advancements our partners have been able to make. But also in terms of following the chain of people starting to really wake up to this topic of gender data and start to take action. And I'm really hoping that what we see is higher level and greater level policy commitments and financial commitments to gender data as a topic for both collection and analysis in youth. I'm really hoping that what not only Data2X is able to create, but others are able to create as well, is just a higher level of dialogue, of really the kind of the "So what?" question of, "Okay, so we have this gender data, what does it do for us?" Continuing to tease that out is gonna be a big area of focus for us.

Emily: And a big area of tracking for us too, because I think that there are probably areas where it has had an impact, it just hasn't gotten as much conversation and dialogue about them. So that will be, I think, another really important area for us. Certainly seeing what the effect of more attention and thought of gender data and gender data collection will have in the process of monitoring the sustainable development goal, I think that's gonna be really important, an important theme to watch. And I'm excited to see what that might tell us about our level of achievement, with the sustainable development goal. And I think the last part, just to bridge back to a question you asked earlier about disaggregation. What I'm hoping too is that this focus on gender data, and what I oftentimes think of, that gender data seems like this complicated thing, and it's not without its complications. But my premise is that this is a community of people who are incredibly smart and creative, and I think we're up to this challenge.

Emily: And if we're up to the gender data challenge, then we're up to the challenge for several other categories of differences in terms of age, and disability, and race, and ethnicity, we're up to all of those challenges of having greater information about all different groups of people, especially people who have traditionally been excluded from some of our data collection methods. And I think what I'm hopeful for is that this gender data movement might be a proof case for how we can do this, how we can leverage political will, creativity, technical smarts and abilities to really solve this problem, and that it might provide some really great clues for solving some of these other challenges as well.

Jamie: Yes, great. It's an inspirational note to end on. Emily, I wanna thank you so much for joining us today. I love this topic, one of the reasons is that it's both like a root cause to certain things, and then it's also, like you talked about, the measurement angle here, and measuring progress. And so reminding everyone we have to measure properly here to learn root causes of things, to put policy into action, and to measure any kind of progress we're making. So thanks for enlightening us today, I really appreciate it.

Emily: Absolutely, and thank you so much for having us, and for being gender data revolutionaries with us.

[laughter]

Jamie: Well now I am. For our listeners, I hope you enjoyed this episode of Champions for Social Good. To learn more about Data2X, you can visit Data2X.org, follow @Data2X on Twitter. And you can also follow Emily @emilycpryor. You can also find Data2X actively engaged in Twitter discussions using #GenderData. Make sure to subscribe to the podcast so you don't miss an episode. And keep up with the conversation between episodes by following us on Twitter @jamieserino, @MicroEdgeLLC, and @blackbaud. Thank you for listening.