

# EXPLORING WOMEN'S INEQUALITY USING CENSUS DATA

## What to expect from this explainer

After reading this explainer, you will...

- understand what Census 2021 is, what it is used for, and why it's useful for feminist organisations.
- know what topics are covered by the census, what isn't included, and whether census data could be useful for your work or activism.
- have an initial understanding of where to find census data and how it can be explored.

## What is the Census 2021?

The census is a survey conducted every ten years by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). It gives a picture of every household and individual in England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland run their own censuses controlled by separate statistical authorities.

You can find out more about the Scottish census here: [bit.ly/3T23r9y](https://bit.ly/3T23r9y).

You can find out more about the Northern Irish census here: [bit.ly/3LaDtyQ](https://bit.ly/3LaDtyQ)

The census aims to build a snapshot of society - and how it is changing over time - by asking people questions about their households and home lives on a given day. The results of the census are widely used by policymakers involved in the planning, development and funding of public services.



## Why is the census useful for feminist organisations and activists?

You can make use of census data in all sorts of ways...



creating reports



local or national  
lobbying



grants or funding  
applications



social media  
content



targeting  
campaign work

Whilst we know that important societal inequalities exist along sex and gender lines, it is unfortunately still rare that these are meaningfully factored into policymaking. If feminist organisations and activists are able to explore and analyse census data ourselves, we may be able to reveal previously underexplored differences and inequalities. We can use our findings to call for intersectional inequalities to be factored into the planning, budgeting and delivery of public services, and to expose or prevent policy that discriminates on the basis of gender or other structural inequalities.

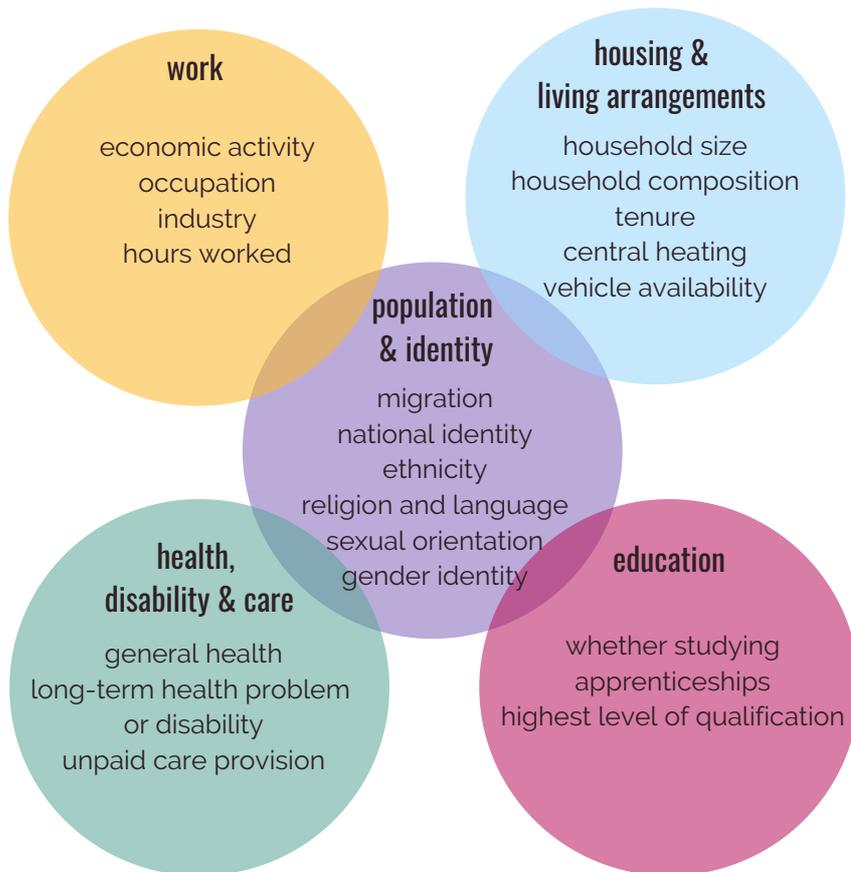
Census data can be explored at many different geographic levels, including country, region, local authority, constituency and neighbourhood levels (e.g. MSAO, LSOA). Therefore, grassroots organisations may find it especially useful for gathering information about the lives, needs and characteristics of women in their communities.

## Is census data useful for my work or activism?

The best way to decide if census data could be useful for your work or activism is to explore the data yourself (more on that later!). However, the information below should give you an idea of which topics are covered by the census, which aren't, and some other factors that could be important to consider before undertaking your own analysis.

### What does the Census 2021 cover?

The main topics likely to have resonance with feminist organisations are listed below, but you can explore the full question list and the topic summaries on the ONS website ([bit.ly/3lhH9Eb](https://bit.ly/3lhH9Eb)).



### What isn't covered by the Census 2021?

Although the census is useful for many aspects of feminist research, it is limited by the exclusion of several topics that are pertinent to issues of gender inequality. For example, the census does NOT include specific data on the following topics:

- ✗ incomes and earnings
- ✗ childcare
- ✗ violence against women and girls
- ✗ social security

You may still find useful data even if your interest area isn't directly included in the census. For example, VAWG organisations often use census data, combined with other sources of data, to arrive at an estimation in the number of women who are affected by VAWG in their local area

### What are some limitations of Census 2021?

In addition to the exclusion of certain topics, the 2021 census has a number of further limitations. These do not mean you won't be able to use census data to inform your work; just that you'll need to factor them into your analysis at all stages. Limitations include:

- Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC) designed to prevent the identification of individuals may hinder you if you're looking for very detailed information within a small geographic area. Records may be swapped between small areas or not released at all. This means you may need to choose between searching a more detailed geography or using more detailed variables,
- The fact that the Census 2021 took place during the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the pertinence of the data, especially regarding attempts to identify changes and long-term trends. For example, the question on how people travel to work is likely to have been deeply affected by the changes in people's behaviour due to the pandemic.

## What are the different types of census data?

Different kinds of census data are released at different stages, and the type of data you'll work with depends on the information you're looking for. See below for a quick breakdown of the main types of census products, or head to [bit.ly/3TcJ2P2](https://bit.ly/3TcJ2P2) for more detailed information.

- **Univariate data:** data based on a single variable. For the census this is summarised by topic summaries and area profiles (see below).
- **Multivariate data:** data about two or more variables, obtained for the census via pre-defined datasets and the flexible table builder (see below). This is the kind of data we are most likely to use in the women's sector, as we usually want to see topics disaggregated by sex.
- **Other types** (e.g. alternative population data, microdata, flow data): follow the link above for a more detailed explanation of these types of data, but you may like to explore these census products if you are looking at topics such as migration, students and term-time addresses, or workplace populations.

## Where can I find Census 2021 data?

There are three key platforms where you can access Census 2021 data. These are:

- **The ONS** (Office for National Statistics) website: [www.ons.gov.uk/census](https://www.ons.gov.uk/census)
- **Nomis:** [www.nomisweb.co.uk/sources/census\\_2021](https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/sources/census_2021)
- **The UK Data Service:** [www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/help/data-types/census-data/](https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/help/data-types/census-data/)

The ONS website tends to be the easiest to use as it provides some handy, accessible tools for exploring the data (see below), but Nomis is also very useful for creating local area profiles. We recommend exploring them all to find out which works best for you. You can also contact us via our website [www.wbg-localdata.org.uk/](https://www.wbg-localdata.org.uk/) to find out about our free training.

## What tools are available to analyse census data?

The ONS has developed some new tools that make interacting with census data much easier and more inclusive. In particular, from spring 2023 the flexible table builder tool will allow users to make their own datasets using combinations of different variables. See below for links to explore the main tools on offer.

### ONS MAP TOOL

explore here:  
[bit.ly/3YGEceg](https://bit.ly/3YGEceg)



### FLEXIBLE TABLE BUILDER

explore here:  
[bit.ly/3KqQCTs](https://bit.ly/3KqQCTs)

### NOMIS AREA PROFILES

explore here:  
[bit.ly/3YHT7EQ](https://bit.ly/3YHT7EQ)



## What skills do I need to analyse census data?

Many people - especially women - are put off from exploring quantitative datasets due to a lack of confidence using numbers. Take a look at this [OECD report](https://bit.ly/3JilKmv) ([bit.ly/3JilKmv](https://bit.ly/3JilKmv)) detailing how it's girls' lack of self-confidence that holds them back in maths rather than any lack of ability. The reality is that you need very few existing data skills to explore the census - particularly due to the introduction of tools such as the flexible table builder from the ONS.

Data and statistics are tools that we use to measure and explain, but understanding the significance of the data comes from a deep understanding of the subjects. Qualitative data is as important as quantitative analysis and the two should complement each other. This is why we run free courses for grassroots women's organisations so that you can gain confidence in data skills and explore topics that you have gained practical expertise in. We can teach you to open a spreadsheet and look at some numbers, but your local expertise will be invaluable to the work!

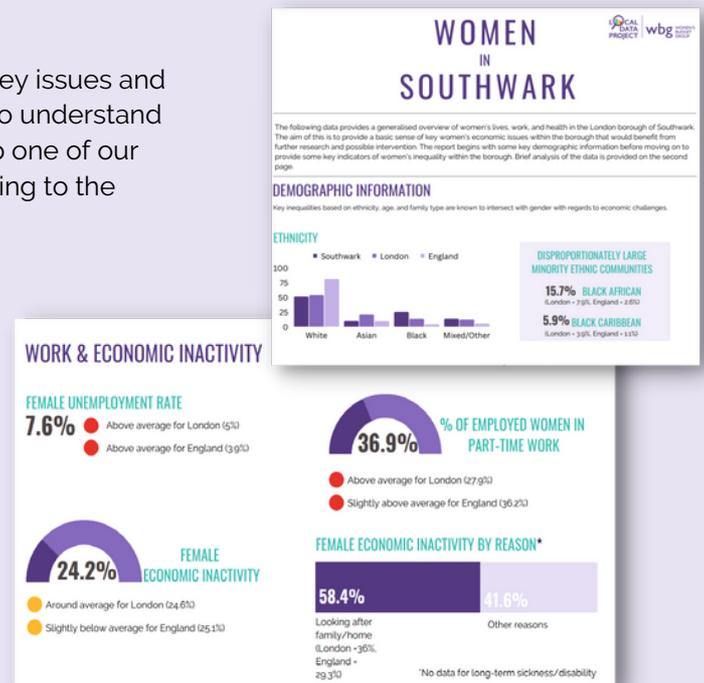
## Case study: using census data to analyse women's lives in London

At the Women's Budget Group we recently used census 2021 data to help us put together a local analysis of women's economic and health indicators across seven London boroughs.

The purpose of this work was to give us an overview of key issues and inequalities faced by women in different boroughs, and to understand variation across the city. We used this information to help one of our partner organisations secure targeted, place-based funding to the women's sector in key areas.

Measures we looked at using census data included demographic information (e.g. ethnicity, median age), labour market data (e.g. employment, economic inactivity, hours worked) and health indicators (e.g. number of people whose daily activities are limited by a long-term health problem or disability).

We put our findings together in a report using graphs, charts and graphics where possible to ensure that the data was clear, engaging and accessible.



## Where can I find out more?

If you don't yet feel confident enough to explore the census on your own, [get in touch](#) to enquire about our free feminist data skills training. These inclusive, accessible sessions are designed to help even the most novice data user get comfortable looking at the figures behind key social issues. Head to [wbg-localdata.org.uk/what-we-do](https://wbg-localdata.org.uk/what-we-do) for more info.

Finally, [don't forget to sign up to our mailing list](#) at [wbg-localdata.org.uk](https://wbg-localdata.org.uk) to be the first to hear about new events, training and resources offered via our Local Data Project.

