

DATA FEMINISM

You have **2** free member-only stories left this month. [Sign up for Medium and get an extra one](#)

5 Questions on Data and Gender with Joni Seager



Catherine D'Ignazio

Follow

Feb 28, 2020 · 9 min read ★

By Catherine D'Ignazio with editing by Isabel Carter



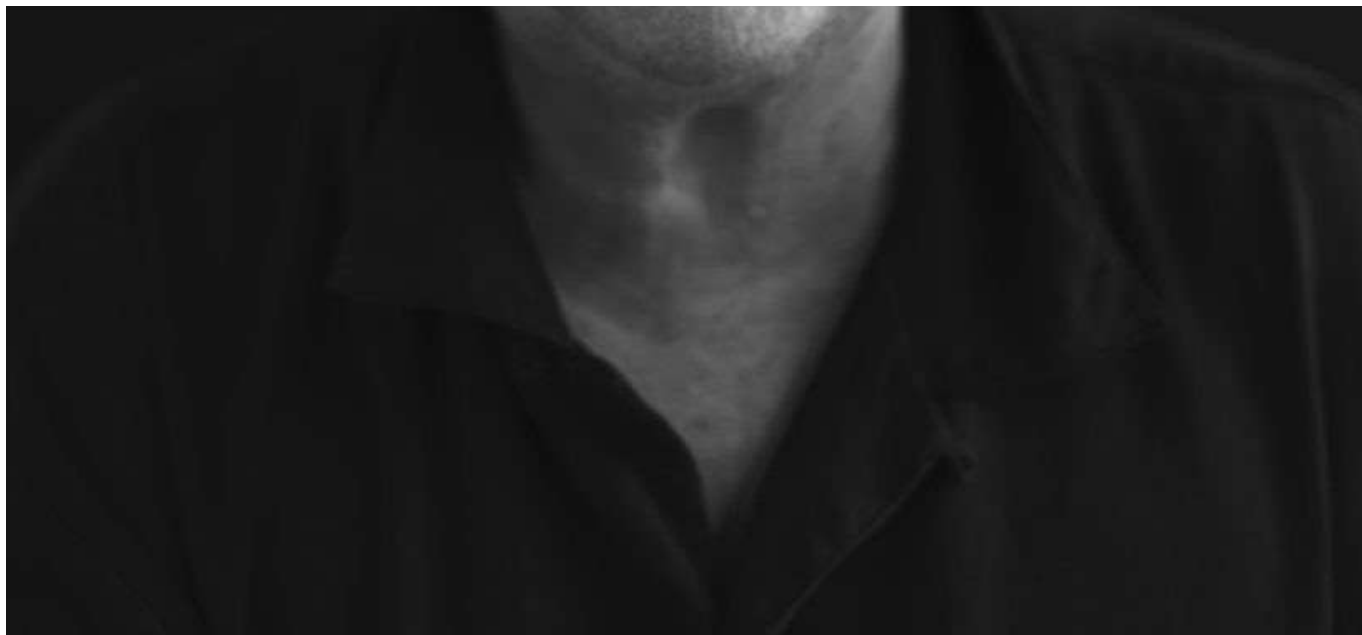


Image courtesy of Joni Seager

Feminist geographer Joni Seager is the author of *The Women's Atlas*, now in its fifth edition, a groundbreaking text that changed the way we think about, track, and visualize data on women and gender around the globe. Over 200 pages, Seager's *Atlas* illustrates the status of women in the world via maps on equality, motherhood, beauty, violence, lesbian rights, and more. As her work makes clear, data that includes information on peoples' gender and their gendered experiences remains severely under-collected, but where it does exist, it allows us to look more accurately and with more imagination at the lives of women and girls and the obstacles they face.

In *Data Feminism*, Lauren Klein and I discuss Seager's work in relation to data and power. We titled a whole chapter after something Seager said in relation to data collection: "What Gets Counted Counts." Part of data feminism is recognizing when feminism happens — a project may be feminist in form, content and/or process. *The Women's Atlas* falls squarely into the content category — the radical act is in choosing to map that which has been systematically neglected: women's lives and experiences around the globe. Below is a transcript of our conversation. It has been edited for clarity.

What provoked your interest in feminist geography?

I came to Clark University for my PhD work in the late 1970s when Clark was internationally known for its radical geography department, and what I found was that "radical" geography (at that time) didn't include feminism! There was zero feminist

consciousness among the Geography faculty, or in the graduate curriculum. There was only one woman faculty member on full-time staff at that time, and she was not interested in feminism. A few women graduate students were making feminism visible, but it wasn't taken up into the core of how this 'radical' department defined itself. None of the earnest lefty 'boys' had thought about it or cared about it. However by the late '70s I was very engaged with feminist politics in my 'civilian life,' as it were. So I would be a feminist in my private life, and then I'd come to school and not be a feminist. And I thought, 'This is ridiculous.' And at that moment, a wonderful atlas called *The State of the World* came out from a publisher called Pluto Press in London.

The *State* atlas was really a wing and a prayer from this left-y press. With very little data visualization experience to guide them, they created a dramatic publication to show topics of social justice in a mapping form. *The State of the World Atlas* was about 80 maps in double-page spreads. It was small. It was paperback. It was trade. You held it in your hand. It was bright. It was colorful. And everyone was so excited when it came out because there were maps on pollution and maps on gun flows, and maps on the arms trade, and maps on inequality, and maps on this, that, and the other cutting-edge topic. It really broke the convention of what mapping was. And, to the surprise of the publisher in London, it became a really big hit.

When the *State of the World* atlas came out, a friend and co-graduate student and I looked at it and we immediately said, 'Wow, there needs to be a women's atlas — and it needs to look like this. There needs to be this kind of women's atlas. This style. Paperback. Accessible. Colorful, engaging, radical, provocative. Flaunting conventions in all kinds of ways. There needs to be *this* for women.'

So we got in touch with the publisher in London. Of course, this was back in the day — no internet, barely fax. We would write letters back and forth. It was so quaintly slow. Pluto Press wanted to do a women's atlas to build on the success of *State of the World* but didn't really know how to do it, and we wanted to do a women's atlas but didn't really know how to do it. So we started from a radical vision of reimagining how we can present women's data, but only a vague sense of how to do so.

What were other people's reactions to this work at the time?

People would say to us — this is really what I still think of as the most interesting thing — we would tell people, “We’re doing an atlas on women.” And they would look kind of blank, and they’d say, “Uh, but what would you put in it?” They just couldn’t imagine how you could map anything on women.

But Annie [Olson] and I had a laundry list of more than 80 topics that we wanted to map. We didn’t start with — and this I also think is really important — we didn’t start with, “Well, what data exists?” and then, “Now let’s map it.” Because the global data that existed on women and feminist topics in 1980 was thin to mostly nonexistent. So instead, we started with, “Well, what would we like to know about women’s lives?” And then from that, “What can we map around it?” Which is still how I approach the *Women’s Atlas* today. And in large degree, it’s still the case now that the big international data collection/dissemination machinery still doesn’t cover a lot of the topics about women’s lives we want to reveal.

There are some topics that are really hard to “map” — like beauty, the role of beauty in women’s lives. A huge and nuanced topic; you’ve got to talk about the export of Western notions of beauty, and the terrible things that women do to their bodies to manipulate them in the name of conforming to norms of beauty, and women’s challenges to those norms. There are zillions of tracts and books written about “beauty”, and we could *talk* about it for hours and hours and hours. But what are you going to “map”? So, in cases such as this, we mapped surrogates. For example, we mapped the international beauty contests and the surge (in the 1980s and 1990s) of new countries sending contestants into these global contests. It not only is a surrogate for the industry of “beauty,” it also maps changing political economies.

What have been some of your struggles getting data disaggregated by gender?

Oh, there are a million stories, many of them everyday incidentals. For example, there was a story in *The Boston Globe* a couple of years ago about a big gun sale/fair in New Hampshire. They had two big pictures to anchor the story, and one of them was of a huge line of people outside the exhibition hall waiting to get in. And then there was a photograph of people at tables, examining guns. And the caption said something such as, “People by the hundreds line up for the opening of the gun exposition fair.” But, of course, it wasn’t ‘people’. It was men. It was all men. It wasn’t ‘people’ lining up; it was men lining up. Literally, I couldn’t find a single woman in either photo. And if the

caption had said that, it would have sparked a different kind of curiosity. That would have led to a whole other discussion about the enthusiasm about guns in this country.

There are these missed opportunities all the time.

I was just at a meeting in Nairobi where everyone was talking about “cell phone penetration” of poor countries. And it is absolutely the case that more people — men and women — now have cell phones, everywhere in the world. Access to cell phones is changing economic relations, social dynamics. It’s really an influential technology, and it is becoming more widespread. But in fact it’s not gender-equally widespread. There are *huge* gender gaps in cell phone ownership.

So when enthusiastic businesses or policymakers say, “Oh, yeah, cell phone penetration,” it’s like, “No, no. You are not having ‘cell phone penetration’ in rural Peru (or Zambia or Madagascar). You are having *male* cell phone ‘penetration’ (yes, that really is the terminology they use). And you’d better think about what that means.”

What does that mean for the men? Does that increase their empowerment? Does that increase an opportunity gap between men and women? Does it change the social dynamics where previously maybe it was women who decided what crops to grow, and now it’s going to be men because men have the information on their cell phone that says it’s going to be a tough weather year? I mean it just changes everything when only half the population has this technology.

But when organizations do those cell phone surveys, if they don’t ask men *and* women, or they don’t ask across the basic demographics like age and literacy, you’re just going to miss who’s getting cell phones, who’s getting empowered by cell phones, who’s getting the information that they need from cell phones, who’s getting ahead by having cell phones. And for those people who don’t have cell phones: why don’t they have cell phones?

So this new technology filters through a society through the existing prisms of class and literacy and age. And then in addition, there’s a very particular gender dimension to it. And if you just say, “Cell phone penetration increased by 78 percent,” it’s wrong. Totally wrong.

How does this apply to trans and gender nonconforming people?

Most of the data-based evidence on people outside the binary is anthropological or field work or self-reporting. It's not in official datasets yet. It's just in the last two years that now about 10 countries officially recognize people outside a binary gender identification. It's just now creeping into the official record, and it will be another generation before that turns up in datasets.

The macro data that you have is going to be either gathered by specific groups such as the ILGA — the International Lesbian, Gay Association — which collects non-binary information now, too. Data is going to reside with specialized groups, and it's going to be on very specific topics, and often on a very micro level. Or it's going to be a specific study. For example, particularly in Southeast Asia where there are several non-binary groups that are actually really well-known and recognized, there have been a couple of studies on their contributions to reconstructions after natural disasters. But it's very topic-specific.

I think what this means is that for those of us who are using data and manipulating data and reproducing data, we need to be particularly conscious of pushing that binary box when we can. Or at least pointing to it. For example, in my work on this atlas over many years, we had a lesbian and gay rights map. And in fact, all of the laws that protect or discriminate against lesbians and gays are exactly in that binary, right? So then what data users have to do is put in a placeholder in the text. You need to say, in effect, in a little speech bubble, "These laws are designed specifically for people who are identified as gay or lesbian. For people who don't fall into that binary, their presence will not be captured in the law." (The 5th edition of the *Women's Atlas* does include nonbinary and gender fluid identities in several maps).

And our other responsibility is generating more information.

To that point, what are the most urgent blank spots at the present moment around data and gender? And have they changed since you first did the Atlas?

When it comes to women's agency and their agency over their bodies, there's almost no information collected. For example, here's the difference. The U.N. used to have an abortion laws database. which the Guttmacher Institute has picked up. So you say, "I wonder what the abortion law is in Chile (or wherever)?" You can find that information. But what about those places where women need permission from their husbands to get

an abortion? And we know that's a lot of places. You can't find that in a dataset. So there's a dataset on what the law is. There's not a dataset on how is it actually playing out in real life. Or actual geographic access to abortion services? Or costs? All of the feminist consciousness we share around agency, authority, body politics — it's not yet in the data mainstream. And as a p.s., "big data" won't help. It actually erases many of the feminist nuances we're all interested in. But that's a conversation for another day.

Learn more about [Joni Seager's work](#) and check out [the latest edition of the Women's Atlas](#).

[Joni](#) [Seager](#) [Feminism](#) [Atlas](#) [Data](#)

[About](#) [Help](#) [Legal](#)

Get the Medium app

