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Measuring sex and gender

Status Update on Task Force 9: Sex and Gender

Note by U.S. Census Bureau*

Abstract

This paper provides an update on the work of the Committee on European Statisticians (CES) Task Force 9. For the first time a Task Force has been convened to provide recommendations on the collection of information on sex and gender for the 2030 round of Censuses of Population and Housing. While sex has previously been recommended as a core demographic variable and is routinely collected, some UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) countries have recently started to also collect information on gender or gender identity. That is, most collections of information on sex, sometimes called gender, have typically included binary – male/female – response options. While the concepts of sex and gender are often confounded in data collections, some censuses now include a question on gender that allows respondents to express themselves more fully beyond simply binary options. The Task Force has been meeting since the Fall of 2022 to further consider the diversity of national circumstances across the UNECE countries. The Task Force’s focus is on outlining concepts and definitions related to sex, gender and gender identity; the rationale for sex as a core topic in addition to the collection of information on gender; the collection experiences in countries that have introduced non-binary response options (question wording, response options, classifications standards); and, issues to consider before making changes to the census (e.g. policy, public opinion, legal context, disclosure control and quality assurance). The Task Force’s work will culminate in May 2025 with recommendations for the 2030 round of Censuses of Population and Housing.

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NOTE: The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

I. Introduction

1. Every ten years the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) issues a set of recommendations to guide countries in conducting their censuses. The recommendations are developed by a number of Task Forces overseen by the CES Steering Group and reflect the diversity of national contexts in areas such as methodologies, resources, data needs and priorities, cultural environment, and long-term strategic directions of National Statistical Office (NSOs). Revisions from the previous decade reflect the ever-increasing pace of change in technology, techniques for collecting and processing data, available data sources, user demand, public perception, and societal changes. The recommendations on sex and gender are one such area where revisions and expansions are necessary to reflect changes in the population. In some countries social constructs are changing such that the opportunity to report one's gender or gender identity is desired by the population. On the other hand, there are places where gender is a very sensitive topic.

II. Background

2. Historically we have used the term sex to measure gendered difference and concepts, for instance labor force participation and education differences. In so doing measurement has contributed to the conflation of the concepts of sex and gender. In many data collection systems, it may remain important to maintain sex as a binary option to have historical data trends for a variety of impactful reasons. For instance, to be used as weighting controls to calibrate sample surveys along with the need for population denominators to construct a variety of percentages and rates that reflect health outcome. Thus, it's likely necessary to continue to collect sex (although it was previously labelled or thought of as gender) as a dichotomous variable to ensure continuity. Additionally, factors that impact census enumerations like policy, public opinion, legal context, and disclosure control and quality assurance, might be just some of the factors that countries need to consider when untangling the conflation of sex and gender in future data collections.

III. 2020 Recommendations related to sex

3. The information on sex in the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing recommendations is concise.¹ The report points to the fact that sex as a core variable is fundamental – along with age and marital status – to aid in understanding various socio-economic and demographic issues. Thus, this information must be as complete and accurate as possible. The recommendations advise that if information on sex is missing, an imputation based on other individuals or household entries should be undertaken.
4. While brief, the recommendations do acknowledge that some countries have started to see the need for additional sex or gender response categories to allow persons of cross-gender or indeterminate sex to self-identify in surveys. This was gathered from the online survey of countries used to gain information about their census activities to build the 2020

¹ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing. New York and Geneva, 2015.

recommendations. Only one question related to sex as a core topic and pointed towards the increasing awareness that sex or gender as a binary variable may not reflect the population's desire to be able to report their gender in a non-binary way. The survey asked "Were there any serious issues raised about the collection of data on sex? For example, complaints about how the question can be answered by people who have undergone gender reassignment or by people who do not identify with one or other of the response options? Response categories were "No" and "Yes, specify below the issues" with a write in option.² The survey results show that one hundred percent of countries collect the sex of every census respondent. Related to the sex specific survey question, "No country reported that there had been any serious issues raised about the collection of data on sex (that is on males and females only) although both Canada and the United Kingdom commented on concern expressed by some user groups about the lack of transgender/transsexual categories."³

5. As a result, the 2020 recommendations go onto point out that while some countries do wish to attempt to record gender or gender identity information in a census, it is important to recognize that particular attention needs to be given to issues of data quality. It's pointed out that rigorous testing should be undertaken before attempting to ask questions. This will likely reduce the possibility for response errors that can exponentially impact small and unique populations. The recommendations conclude that perhaps it's better not to collect the data at all if there are data quality concerns and disclosure risks.

IV. Related gender identity research

6. After the 2020 recommendations were issued for countries to guide their censuses, further UNECE work continued to expand our understanding of nonbinary sex/gender reporting and future work plans of National Statistical Offices. In early 2019 the CES carried out an in-depth review of measuring gender identity by Canada and the United Kingdom.⁴ Additionally, as part of the UNECE Work Session on Gender Statistics (Neuchatel, May 2019) a session was dedicated to measuring gender identity. The session demonstrated that there was considerable work going on in some UNECE countries and emphasized the importance of continued international collaboration around research and testing. From this a Gender Identity Task Team was organized with members from seven countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Gender Identity Task Team was charged with monitoring related gender and gender identity research and testing, developing, and maintaining an online repository of documentation and research. The Task Team members provided information on terminology, standards, development and testing of questions and legal context. The materials are meant to be a resource for all countries and the online repository can be made available by making a request to the UNECE.⁵

² UNECE Survey on Country Practices for the 2020 Round of Population and Housing Censuses. Downloaded from Task Force portal - Population and Housing Censuses - UNECE Statswiki on 4.5.2023

³ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Measuring population and housing: practices of UNECE countries in the 2010 round of censuses. New York and Geneva, 2014. p. 121.

⁴ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Conference of European Statistics Meeting. In-Depth Review of Measuring Gender Identity. Prepared by Canada and the United Kingdom.

⁵ Task Team on Measuring Gender Identity - Task Team on Measuring Gender Identity - UNECE Statswiki

V. Status of Task Force 9: Sex and gender

7. With agreement from the CES Steering Committee, Task Force 9 was convened for the first time to make recommendations about the collection of gender (with more than male, female response options) in population and housing censuses. The Task Force is currently represented by ten member countries along with participants from the UN Statistical Division (UNSD) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). There have been several meetings which point to the breadth of country experiences related to sex and gender measurement. For instance, the Canadian Census⁶ and the Census of England and Wales⁷ both included a question on gender identity in their last round and recently released data. Canada has moved to the collection exclusively of information on gender, asking “What was this person’s sex at birth” along with “What is this person’s gender?”⁸ This transition from collecting information on sex to collecting information on gender sheds light on the fact that these concepts individually are hard to measure. It is widely recognized that in the context of changing societal norms about gender, it’s difficult for researchers to determine if respondents are providing a biological type of sex or gender when asked “What is your sex?” The United Kingdom took a different approach asking “What is your sex?” followed later by “Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?” This approach keeps the sex question intact while allowing respondents to provide a gender identity. While gender identity was not included in the 2020 Census in the U.S., research is underway to determine the feasibility of adding it to the American Community Survey (ACS), the largest household survey. What has been clear from the Task Force discussions is that in Canada^{9 10 11 12}, the United Kingdom¹³ and the U.S.^{14 15} extensive testing along with standards and collection guidelines exist. And while not all Task Force members are currently collecting gender information in their censuses, some are currently collecting information in surveys and/or receiving input from LGBT groups that enrich the Task Force discussions about how to collect these data.

VI. Conclusion

8. In the next months the Task Force will prepare questions for the online survey that will support the 2030 recommendations. The survey questions will complement the Task Force’s key research objectives of outlining concepts and definitions related to sex, gender and gender identity; the rationale for sex as a core topic in addition to the collection of information on gender; the collection experiences in countries that have introduced non-

⁶ The Daily — Canada is the first country to provide census data on transgender and non-binary people (statcan.gc.ca)

⁷ Gender identity: age and sex, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

⁸ Modernizing the Government of Canada's Sex and Gender Information Practices: - Canada.ca

⁹ Participate in the consultation on gender and sexual diversity statistical metadata standards (statcan.gc.ca)

¹⁰ Gender and sex at birth variables (statcan.gc.ca)

¹¹ Filling the gaps: Information on gender in the 2021 Census (statcan.gc.ca)

¹² Gender diversity status of couples: New information in the 2021 Census (statcan.gc.ca)

¹³ Sex and gender identity question development for Census 2021 - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

¹⁴ Recommendations on the Best Practices for the Collection of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Data on Federal Statistical Surveys (whitehouse.gov)

¹⁵ Measuring Sex Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation for the National Institutes of Health | National Academies

binary response options (question wording, response options, classifications standards); and, issues to consider before making changes to the census (e.g. policy, public opinion, legal context, disclosure control and quality assurance). Important information from countries includes whether country specific census information is collected by enumeration or if it comes from a Population Register. Also important is knowing what type of information is collected on sex and/or gender: binary (male/female) or non-binary response options along with the specific wording of questions, response options and the opportunity for open-ended responses. It is important to learn if countries have statistical standards or harmonized. Gaining insights into whether the national language(s) includes different words for sex and gender will help to understand confounding of these terms. Some countries have shared that one component of census data collection that contributes to data quality is ensuring the public understands concepts and terms being measured like gender and gender identity. In other words, to conduct a successful census and arrive at quality data it will likely require education on the difference between sex and gender. Finally, information will be gleaned about disclosure and quality assurance methods for small populations as well as strategies for data publication. It's expected that survey results will be captured, and responses evaluated from late 2023 to late 2024. Findings will be noted in a Task Force report and will eventually culminate in 2030 recommendations.
