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Gender-Responsive Standards Initiative

Importance of the term gender-responsive

Submitted by the WP.6 Chair

Summary

Bearing in mind the application of the terms “gender-responsive” and “gender-sensitive” in the work on gender mainstreaming, the experts and leadership of the Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies (WP.6) wish to clarify the use of these terms in relation to the work of the Gender-Responsive Standards Initiative (GRSI) and the Team of Specialists on the topic. This document is submitted for information.

I. Introduction

1. There has been in the past confusion of the terms “gender-responsive” and “gender-sensitive” mainly due to a lack of clear definitions. That being said, the socialization of the term “gender-responsive standards” has entered into nearly all relevant standards organizations today and is clearly understood, thanks in large part to WP.6 and its GRSI.

II. Difference between gender sensitive and gender responsive

2. In the glossary of terms and tools of the World Health Organization (WHO) guide on gender mainstreaming, it indicates that¹:

- “Gender responsive is a policy or programme that considers gender norms, roles and inequality with measures taken to actively reduce their harmful effect.”
- “Gender sensitive is the level 3 of the WHO Gender Responsive Assessment Scale, which indicates gender awareness, although no remedial action is developed.”

3. Gender responsive programmes go beyond raising awareness and take action to address gender inequalities. In this way, “gender responsive” implies action and not just passively noting a situation.

4. The word “sensitive” is a highly gendered term, often used negatively to imply women are unreasonably affronted by something. It can imply that women are sensitive and require special treatment thereby perpetuating existing stereotypes and inequalities.

II. Impact of a name change

5. WP.6 began working on gender-responsive standards in 2016. After long debates, the most appropriate term for the proposed work was confirmed to be “gender-responsive standards.” At that time, nearly no standards development organization or national standards body had used any terms in this context.

6. In 2018, the Working Party adopted *Recommendation U on Gender-Responsive Standards* and developed within the annex of this recommendation, the *Declaration for Gender-Responsive Standards and Standards Development*.² The *Declaration* outlines specific actions which must be taken by the signatory to ensure that standards and the standards development process are gender-responsive. This is much more than raising awareness, it is an engagement to action. The *Declaration* was opened to signatures in 2019 and to date, seventy-seven standards development organizations from around the world have signed this declaration and have been actively progressing work under the gender-responsive standards name.

7. Over two hundred experts from around the world participate within the GRSI and have integrated the main points of *Recommendation U* and the *Declaration* into their own organization’s vocabulary, including the term “gender-responsive standards.” The GRSI and the *Declaration* were the catalyst for unprecedented global conversation, action and collaboration on gender equality in standards development and standard. The term “gender-responsive standards” has been adopted by major international standards development organizations such as the International Organization of Standards (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) and they have been promoting the *Declaration* and gender-responsive standards to their national members.

8. Any change from “gender-responsive” to “gender sensitive” would put WP.6 out of synch with the organizations that are implementing the guidance and recommendations that it has created. It would open questions on the perceived leadership role of WP.6 in this area

¹ Gender mainstreaming for health managers: a practical approach. World Health Organization, Department of Gender, Women and Health. 2011, page 135, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241501057>

² ECE/CTCS/WP.6/2018/2, paragraph 57, Decision 10.

and probably be interpreted as a divorce from the work at international and national standards organizations because the aims implied in the name change would no longer be the same. It would most likely be perceived as retrograding the work on gender equality in standards development and standards.

9. A change in terminology would also pose a potential risk that the two hundred experts from around the world who have been supporting the work of the GRSI and who have been instrumental in helping to establish ECE WP.6's leadership with regards to gender equality in standards development and standards may feel that their efforts may be more impactful elsewhere. It would be extremely difficult for WP.6 to retain the level of impact it has had to date via the GRSI should it start to lose the support and involvement of the network of experts it has built since the initial meeting in 2016. The change from gender-responsive to gender-sensitive may also make it more difficult to attract new signatories to the *Declaration*, further limiting the potential impact in this critical area.

III. Conclusion

13. For these reasons, the Bureau of WP.6 and the leadership of the GRSI confirm the appropriate term to be used to describe its work is “gender-responsive standards” and not “gender-sensitive.”
