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## Economic Commission for Europe

### Conference of European Statisticians

#### Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses

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#### Revising the Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses for the 2030 round:

##### Sex and gender

## Preliminary progress report of the Conference of European Statisticians Census Task Force on Sex and Gender

### Note by the Conference of European Statisticians Task Force on Sex and Gender\*

#### *Summary*

This document provides an update on the work of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) Census 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 United Nations 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 response options.

The Task Force has been meeting since late 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 more than two gender 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

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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.



assurance). The Task Force's work will culminate in May 2025 with recommendations for the 2030 round of Censuses of Population and Housing.

## 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 are designed to 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 must 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, and even being thought about in new ways, such that the opportunity to report one's gender or gender identity is desired by the population. On the other hand, gender can be a very sensitive topic.

## II. Concepts

2. Historically we have used the term 'sex' to measure gendered differences in outcome variables such as labour force participation and educational outcomes. Differences in social and economic characteristics like these are driven by social constructs of differing roles and abilities of people based on their gender not on their biology (sex). 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 with binary options (male/female) to have historical data trends for a variety of important 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 outcomes. Thus, it is likely necessary to continue to collect sex (although it may have been previously labelled or thought of as gender) as a dichotomous variable to ensure continuity. Additionally, factors that impact census enumerations, such as 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

3. The discussion of the variable 'sex' in the 2020 Censuses of Population and Housing Recommendations is concise<sup>1</sup>. The Recommendations point 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 acknowledgement resulted from countries' responses to the 2013 online survey of countries used to gain information about their 2010-round census activities, which were used to build the 2020 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

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

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<sup>2</sup>. 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.”<sup>3</sup>

5. As a result, the 2020 Recommendations go on to 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 is pointed out that rigorous testing should be undertaken before attempting to ask questions. This will likely reduce the possibility for response errors that can have a disproportionate impact on statistics referring to small and unique populations. The Recommendations conclude that perhaps it is better not to collect the data at all if there are data quality concerns and disclosure risks.

#### IV. Work after the 2020 Recommendations

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, led by Canada and the United Kingdom<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, as part of the UNECE Work Session on Gender Statistics (Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 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: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The Gender Identity Task Team was charged with monitoring related gender and gender identity research and testing; and with 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 UNECE<sup>5</sup>.

#### V. Origin of Task Force 9

7. With agreement from the CES Steering Group on Population and Housing Censuses and the approval of the CES Bureau, Task Force 9 was convened for the first time to make recommendations about the collection of both sex and gender 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 Census and the Censuses of England and Wales included a question on gender identity in their last round and recently released data.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> [Task Team on Measuring Gender Identity - Task Team on Measuring Gender Identity - UNECE Statswiki](#).

## VI. Country-specific experiences

8. Statistics Canada has moved to the collection of information on gender by default, asking “What was this person’s sex at birth?” along with “What is this person’s gender? This approach is consistent with the Government of Canada’s policy direction on modernizing sex and gender information practices within the federal government<sup>6</sup>. The 2021 Census of Population included for the first time a question on gender and the precision of “at birth” on the sex question, allowing all cisgender, transgender and non-binary individuals to report their gender. Canada is the first country to collect and publish data on gender diversity from a national census. Of the nearly 30.5 million people in Canada aged 15 and older living in a private household in May 2021, 100,815 were transgender (59,460) or non-binary (41,355), accounting for 0.33 per cent of the population in this age group<sup>7</sup>.

9. This transition from collecting information on sex to collecting information on gender highlights 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 is difficult for researchers to determine whether respondents are providing a biological type of sex or a socially-constructed gender when asked “What is your sex?”. Statistics Canada researchers are the first to evaluate distributional differences between sex and gender reporting in national data collections and compared to administrative data. In the future these findings will be important for both qualitative reasons – pointing to how people think about their sex and gender as independent constructs – as well as quantitatively in terms of calibration tools and data quality.

10. England and Wales took a different approach, not asking about “sex at birth” but instead asking “What is your sex?” followed later in the questionnaire with “Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?” Response options for the latter question were “Yes”, “No” and a write-in response. This question was voluntary for all persons 16 years and over. Overall, 45.7 million (94.0 per cent of the population aged 16 years and over) answered the question. In total 45.4 million (93.5 per cent) answered “Yes” and 262,000 (0.5 per cent) answered “No.” The remaining 2.9 million (6.0 per cent) did not answer the question on gender identity. Of the 262,000 that answered “No”, 118,000 (0.24 per cent) did not provide a write-in response, 48,000 (0.10 per cent) identified as a trans man, 48,000 (0.10 per cent) identified as a trans woman, 30,000 (0.06 per cent) identified as non-binary, and 18,000 (0.04 per cent) wrote in a gender identity<sup>8,9</sup>.

11. England and Wales’ census questions maintain the typical sex question, upholding continuity with previous censuses and providing the opportunity to compare to previous sex distributions. However, when looking at how people responded to the sex question by how they responded to the gender identity question, findings show that approximately two thirds (66.16 per cent) of trans women answered female on the sex question, with a similar pattern for trans men (67.50 per cent) answering male on the sex question. While further research is needed, this may suggest that it is more common among those groups to answer the sex question based on their current gender identity rather than their sex (at birth)<sup>10</sup>.

12. While gender identity was not included in the 2020 Census in the United States, research is underway to determine the feasibility of adding sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) questions to the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is the largest demographic survey conducted by the federal government, with an annual sample of approximately 3.5 million households divided into 12 monthly panels. The planned research will involve cognitive testing that will help inform a subsequent field test. Cognitive testing will focus on question wording, response options, question placement and translation issues along with methodological concerns. One of the primary focuses will be to evaluate the

<sup>6</sup> [Modernizing the Government of Canada’s Sex and Gender Information Practices: - Canada.ca.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [The Daily — Canada is the first country to provide census data on transgender and non-binary people \(statcan.gc.ca\).](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Gender identity: age and sex, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\).](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Gender identity, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\).](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Gender identity: age and sex, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\).](#)

ability for one respondent to answer these SOGI questions for other members of their household, also known as proxy reporting, while maintaining quality data.

## VII. Task Force Progress

13. While countries are working at different paces and taking different routes to collect information on gender identity, what has been clear from the Task Force discussions is that Canada<sup>11 12 1314</sup>, England and Wales<sup>15</sup> and the U.S.<sup>16 17</sup> have undertaken extensive testing and as such, standards, best practices and collection guidelines do exist. And while not all Task Force member countries 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. For instance, the National Statistical Institute of Italy (ISTAT) in collaboration with the National Antidiscrimination Office (UNAR) is currently carrying out a project on labour discrimination against LGBT+ people and diversity policies, which began in 2018. It includes a mixed method design using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Information is collected from different target groups of LGBT+ people. The three Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) surveys are based on respondents' self-identification as LGBT+. Results from the first two surveys were published in 2022 and 2023. The third survey is underway now and focuses on trans and non-binary persons<sup>18,19</sup>. Specific questions on SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics) indicators were discussed, tested, and analyzed<sup>20</sup>.

## VIII. Future Work

14. The Task Force prepared questions for the CES online survey of national census practices and experiences in the 2020 round, which will support development of 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-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 whether countries have statistical standards or harmonized data. Gaining insights into whether the national language(s) includes different words for sex and gender will help to understand potential confounding of these terms. Some countries have shared that one

<sup>11</sup> [Participate in the consultation on gender and sexual diversity statistical metadata standards \(statcan.gc.ca\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> [Gender and sex at birth variables \(statcan.gc.ca\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> [Filling the gaps: Information on gender in the 2021 Census \(statcan.gc.ca\)](#).

<sup>14</sup> [Gender diversity status of couples: New information in the 2021 Census \(statcan.gc.ca\)](#).

<sup>15</sup> [Sex and gender identity question development for Census 2021 - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#).

<sup>16</sup> [Recommendations on the Best Practices for the Collection of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Data on Federal Statistical Surveys \(whitehouse.gov\)](#).

<sup>17</sup> [Measuring Sex Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation for the National Institutes of Health | National Academies](#).

<sup>18</sup> [LABOUR DISCRIMINATION \(istat.it\)](#).

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2023/05/report-discriminazioni-15maggio.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Gender Identity Representation in Data Collection: New Approaches from Italy. Note by National Statistical Institute of Italy – Istat. De Rosa, Eugenia, De Martino, Valeria, Scambia, Francesca. Presented on 22 May 2023 at the Economic Commission for Europe Conference of European Statistics Group of Experts on Gender Statistics. Geneva Switzerland.

component of census data collection that contributes to data quality is ensuring that the public understands concepts and terms being measured, including sex, gender and gender identity. However, even with education and improved questions the reality is that answering questions about sex, gender and gender identity can be very personal and motivated by a range of reasons for a given answer. Finally, information will be gleaned about disclosure and quality assurance methods for small populations as well as strategies for data publication. It is 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 a new section in the 2030 Recommendations.

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