

Advisory Opinion

The Significance of Male-Female Sex Information for Enriching Gender Statistics



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Science Council of Japan

**Subcommittee on Inclusion from an Intersectional
Perspective on Gender and Generations, Sociology
Committee**

This Advisory Opinion is the outcome of the deliberations of the Subcommittee on Inclusion from an Intersectional Perspective on Gender and Generations, Sociology Committee, Section I, Science Council of Japan.

Subcommittee on Inclusion from an Intersectional Perspective on Gender and Generations, Sociology Committee

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I Background

The "Subcommittee on Inclusion from an Intersectional Perspective on Gender and Generations, Sociology Committee" (hereafter, the Subcommittee) has focused on issues surrounding gender categories in social surveys because information on respondents' gender is fundamental to the compilation of gender statistics. Gender statistics are an important resource and a means of discussion for clarifying the various issues that cause gender inequalities. In order to shed light on the degree and nature of gender inequalities, statistical information that takes gender differences into account is required. This raises the question on how to understand gender differences, and specifically on how to configure the answer options in the question item. There is also an argument that, since we are speaking of "gender" rather than simply male or female sex, the question should properly be asked under a "gender" question rather than a "sex" one.

At the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975, the importance of gender statistics was highlighted from the perspective of gaining a macro-level understanding of the social status of women and measuring the effectiveness of policies aimed at improving it. Even there, however, the debate between "gender" statistics and "sex-disaggregated" statistics was not fully developed. Sex-disaggregated statistics are subsumed within gender statistics, and both constitute critically important evidence for understanding the realities and challenges of pursuing gender equality and for demonstrating the effectiveness of various policies.

In discussions about gender versus sex disaggregation, both must never be positioned as opposing axes. Rather, in order to develop and enrich gender statistics aimed at achieving gender equality, while also making use of statistical information collected to date, the sex question in survey forms plays an important role. While it cannot be denied that the existing sex questions have shortcomings, the negative impacts of eliminating such questions altogether would be serious.

The question most commonly used in social statistics to date has been: "Are you male or female?" However, an issue has been raised that these two options alone are insufficient, since when seeking to understand the actual status of macro-level phenomena such as "inequality" across the entire population, there are individuals who have gender identity other than the male/female binary. Furthermore, consideration for those who provide statistical information — i.e., the respondents who answer the sex question — is also critically important from the standpoint of research ethics. For example, various surveys have offered only the two options of male or female, having been since it has been considered as natural that respondents will answer either of them. However, this has been

increasingly raising doubts. Some people may hold self-identifications other than the male/female binary, and cases of gender identity beyond that binary or sexual orientations differing from the majority have led to criticism that minorities are being disregarded. Further, that has led the claim by some people that the sex question should be completely removed. Beneath this lurks a movement to eliminate the said question from the perspective of human rights protection, and a risk of falling into a binary debate over whether enriching gender statistics or giving consideration for gender minorities should take priority.

Against this backdrop, this Subcommittee reaffirms its position, under the basic shared understanding that enriching gender statistics and showing consideration for gender minorities are compatible, that the significance of the existence of sex question would be far from negligible to realize gender equality.

II Current Situations and Issues

Focusing on developments related gender statistics in Japan: in 1994, the Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender Equality was established and in 2001, it was reorganized into the Gender Equality Bureau, Prime Minister's Office and the "Plan for Gender Equality 2000" was adopted in 1996. In 2003, the Headquarters set the target that "women should occupy at least around 30% of leadership positions by 2020" (the "30% by 2020" target) by using a goals-and-timetable approach. The Third Basic Plan for Gender Equality (2010) actively presented concrete target outcome, and the Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality (2020) explicitly incorporated the term "gender statistics" as part of strengthened implementation frameworks.

On the other hand, questions began to be raised about the classification of sex into only two categories as male and female and about the necessity of collecting sex/gender information. In response to the growing movement both domestically and internationally to respect the human rights of LGBTQ+ and other individuals, the statement that "it goes without saying that it is important to respect diversity" "regarding sexual orientation and gender identity" was incorporated into the Fifth Basic Plan's section on "Basic Perspectives and Issues to be Addressed". It was also decided that not only the aim of "surveying and publishing the state of development from the perspective of enriching gender statistics," but also the goal "understanding the current situation and examining issues concerning consideration for diverse sexualities" would be incorporated into the section on "IV Development and Strengthening of the Implementation Framework".

Few would dispute the importance of enhancing the development of gender statistics. On the other hand, from the perspective of respecting diversity, reviews of gender/sex question in administrative procedures and public documents at the municipal level are have been advanced. As the actual status varies by municipality, it is not easy to identify overall trends with concrete evidence. Whether to retain the gender/sex question are decided by the

policy of "reviewing any questions not directly necessary for official business." While each municipality is carrying out its own review of gender/sex questions, no guidelines common to all municipalities exists yet.

III Substance of the Advisory Opinions

In light of the above, the Subcommittee conducted hearings with four municipalities regarding their approaches to gender/sex questions and obtained the following findings. First, within the organizational structures of municipalities, as the department responsible for human rights protection and consideration for sexual minorities and the one responsible for compiling gender statistics are organized separately, frequent and they have not been working together frequently and organically in the current situation. As compilation of statics and human rights protection activities have been proceeded individually in their respective roles, it was not originally anticipated to examine the nature of the gender questions from the perspective of enriching gender statistics. Nevertheless, gender statistics are a means and effective source of evidence for evaluating policies aimed at achieving gender equality. At the same time, the existence of the persons concerned who make up those statistics must never be trivialized, and sufficient consideration must be given to respecting the human rights of each and every person.

In compiling gender statistics as a crucial means of achieving gender equality, the foundational data built from the sex questions is indispensable for understanding current conditions and for evaluation purposes, and the question of whether to retain such questions could undermine the very foundations of gender statistics. What must be emphasized here is that the recognition of diversity — which underlies the debate over whether to retain the sex questions — can and must coexist with the enrichment of gender statistics.

The Subcommittee would like to highlight the following three points for consideration:

1. Retaining the sex questions as the basis for gender statistics to provide evidence for policy evaluation
2. Providing thorough ethics education for those involved in statistical work, in order to ensure full human rights protection upon the development of gender statistics
3. Securing adequate staffing and budget allocations at the municipal level that take into account the need to develop and manage statistical information systems