

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting**

Melbourne—Monday, 25 October 2021

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O’Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

**WITNESS** (*via videoconference*)

Mr David Zago, Program Manager, Household Surveys Branch, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting. We note that members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

We begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and pay respect to their elders past, present and emerging and elders from other communities who may join with us today.

I note that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome the Australian Bureau of Statistics. We invite you to make an 8-minute opening statement to the committee, and this will be followed by questions from committee members. Thank you for joining us today.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr ZAGO:** Thank you. My name is David Zago. I am the Program Manager for the Household Surveys Branch at the ABS. What I thought I would cover this morning was just basically the foundation kind of piece around how we support gender disaggregated statistics in the ABS. I wanted to talk about our 2020 standard for sex gender variations and sex characteristics and sexual orientation. This standard was updated in 2020, and provides guidelines to standardise the way that gender data is collected, processed and released. It also helps ensure comparability and harmony across collections, and it updates the sex and gender variables and introduces a couple of new variables around sexual characteristics and sexual orientation. It was also designed in such a way that we can actually derive measures of cisgender, transgender and gender diverse against the classification as well.

The key driver for updating that standard and doing that work was really to ensure that the people that respond to our surveys can do so in a way that really reflects their lives and their experiences and is respectful of those. We are also looking to build a stronger evidence base on diverse population groups to inform policy and program development and reporting and also to provide guidance, as I said before, to improve consistency and comparison across data sources. So the intention is that we are moving to implement this within the ABS, but it is also available outside for other people to use in their statistics.

Under that standard, sex is based upon sex characteristics such as hormones, chromosomes and reproductive organs. This is an example of one of the questions that we have in the standard, which is for collecting sex at birth—sex recorded at birth—which is actually our preference for collecting sex. So it will be a question like 'What is your sex recorded at birth', and the categories are 'male', 'female' and 'another term'. That third category is really provided to support a range of different circumstances across Australian jurisdictions, so that allows for options like 'indeterminate sex', 'unspecified'—things like that that might be recorded at birth and potentially later revised. There is also a statistical definition for 'gender'. Gender is obviously about societal and cultural differences in identity expression and experience as experienced by a man, woman or non-binary person. Again, we have some examples of questions that you might use in this space, which have categories like 'man or male', 'woman or female', 'non-binary', 'a different term', and also people could prefer not to answer.

Our recommendation generally for collection—and what we will be looking to move to in the surveys that I manage—is to collect both sex and gender. That supports greater disaggregation and analysis, and it means, as I said, we can use those variables in combination to support analysis of cis and trans groups, which is really

important. If only one can be collected we suggest that it relates back to the measure or policy in question. For example, in a health setting a medication may have a particular impact on males or females, so sex may be a more relevant measure there, whereas in other social policy spaces gender might be more appropriate for an issue like child care or unpaid work or other kinds of issues like that. And where possible—and we are doing this in some cases ourselves—we would also like to collect sexual orientation and variations of sex characteristics. That supports really a better understanding of that intersectionality between those variables and how that impacts on programs and policies as well.

As I said, we are working through the implementation of the standard on our household surveys. In doing that we are cognisant that there is a need to increase public awareness and comfort in responding to these kinds of questions, as well as a need from our side, to increase the knowledge and the skills of interviewers in asking these kinds of questions. So it is a shift and a journey that we are on. We are also building, our understanding of how we process and publish results, and in particular what this means for considerations around the confidentiality and privacy of results that we release. So that will be another factor that we will work through as we start to produce results. But we have added these questions to a number of our surveys, starting with some that are in the field at the moment—the mental health survey and the national health survey. We will collect all four variables and then move to different combinations depending on the topic across surveys. But you can see there that our preference is to collect sex at birth and gender where we can.

I just wanted to touch on one of our key resources in the gender analysis space. This is probably a place where we need to think about our use of gender in this particular product. A key source for us around gender inequality is our compendium publication, the *Gender Indicators* product. The limitation will be at the moment they are really focused on gender or sex in a binary sense. It provides national-level data only at this point across six domains, so it is across economic security; education; health; work and family balance; safety and justice; and democracy, governance and citizenship. It has a number of indicators under each of those categories and tracks those over time. That was first published in 2011, and it has been annual since 2017, but we are really looking to review that product at the moment. It is a really good source for discovery and navigating through the different data that is available on the ABS website. There is a lot of gender disaggregated information, but we think that product probably needs to be a bit more dynamic moving forward rather than just being an annual release. So while only national-level data is kind of highlighted through the indicators that we present in that publication, it actually allows you then to drill down to the primary source and actually find greater disaggregation where that is available too, so that is the kind of value in terms of a navigation product.

Some of the limitations around the data are that often only sex or gender is collected. Now, as I said, the preference is to move towards both. At this point sex and gender can often be conflated in data sources because of the way that it has been collected and the questions that are being used. Sometimes it is about how people respond, and that really makes it difficult in terms of interpreting some of those results at times. So, as I said, I think we are all kind of on a journey in that space. There is also at this point limited intersectionality, so limited opportunity to look at the kind of interplay between factors like gender and sexual orientation with other characteristics like disability or other kinds of factors too. And then obviously in terms of limitations in my space, sample size would always be an issue with any kind of characteristics that are at a lower prevalence, so that is a challenge for us at this point.

That is all I really wanted to cover in terms of where we are with our standards. Like I said, that forms a fundamental statistical basis for us moving forward and how we would be looking to produce statistics in the sex and gender space, but I am happy to take any questions on any of that or anything else around our gender program.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I will open up to questions. I cannot yet see whose hands are up, but I pass to the Deputy Chair, Mr Danny O'Brien. Do you want to kick off, Danny, with any questions?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes, I am happy to, Chair. Thank you, and thank you, David, for that presentation. A question first-up: you talked about adding the sort of non-binary option, with 'male', female and 'other'. Is there any data yet as to what percentage that 'other' is?

**Mr ZAGO:** No. I think the first use of that question—I think we have used it further in the past, and I cannot remember what the data is there. I could take that on notice. But census will be a really good source of that

information. We have a third sex category—‘non-binary’ was used in the census. We will be reviewing that data and we will be producing some analysis. We will also be using those results to feed into the development of the standard and reviewing of it moving forward with census as well.

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** So that is the first time—the census just gone, 2021, is the first time that has been added?

**Mr ZAGO:** That is right.

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** The other question I had was: in the context of the inquiry we are undertaking on gender responsive budgeting, does ABS actually provide data specifically to the federal Treasury for this sort of purpose?

**Mr ZAGO:** We work closely with both OFW and Treasury on a number of projects, and we definitely consult with them around products like gender indicators and the kinds of things we will track there. I think they tend to rely on their own analysis of microdata largely in this space. So a lot of the files we have in this space—things like the time-use survey, a lot of our major surveys—they access the data themselves and do that type of analysis around some of the issues around unpaid work. We also have some really good sources around safety and security. The personal safety survey is a regular survey that has a fairly large sample that is drawn on in that space. So we definitely work with them around our sources, but I think they tend to do lot of their own analysis using our data.

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** Yes. Okay, that is great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Maas.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Mr Zago, for the presentation. The ABS has reported data on the basis of gender for some time now, and obviously, as you did take us through, that has changed a bit over the last few years in responding to changing views on gender. I am just wondering: are you able to provide the committee with some additional information about how that different data is being collected? Like, are there different products that are shedding light on gender differences, for instance?

**Mr ZAGO:** I think our traditional sources of that level of disaggregation are census and major social surveys. I think increasingly there is better use of administrative integrated data. There have been some projects around things like women in STEM that are actually quite useful in understanding some of the challenges in those spaces. I guess over the last period there have been some developments in terms of the sources we have available. We have things like, you might have seen, the weekly payroll, jobs and wages data coming through the COVID period, which is actually derived from single-touch payroll, so that is increasingly a really good timely source in terms of gender disaggregated information for men and women in a binary kind of sense. There are also a number of projects in the administrative space around, as I said before, safety, family and domestic violence. So I think increasingly we will be able to supplement the information we collect through surveys, which are limited by sample size, with these other sources that allow us to drill down a lot more into the kinds of issues that you are talking about. I think that is part of the change that has been happening over the last few years. That is why it is important to promulgate these kinds of standards and actually ensure that we can collect information from other agencies in a similar way.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Zago. I just would be interested to know, in your data collection, do you collect the information that says sex at birth as well as gender?

**Mr ZAGO:** With those surveys, were we have started implementing the standard; that is what we are collecting. So for the mental health and for the national health survey we will be collecting sex recorded at birth and gender separately as the two items. We will also be able to derive those other kinds of characteristics around sex and transgender.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you. Would you be able to further clarify the level of ability to tick those boxes, or are some not completing it thoroughly?

**Mr ZAGO:** The modes are vary, so increasingly we are offering web forms for a lot of our surveys, but in other cases like the mental health survey—that is a survey that is actually implemented with an interviewer. It is a semi-diagnostic of interview, so it is important to have an interviewer present for that. That is why there is a degree of bringing the interviewer workforce along with this as well and making sure that they are appropriately trained and sensitive and able to ask those questions in a really good way.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks, Chair. And thanks for coming this morning and providing this evidence. It is really valuable. Just looking at those areas where the ABS has reported on gender over many years, we can see that there have been some places where there has been lots of progress on closing the gap in outcomes between men and women, and of course there are areas where the gap between men and women has not been closed. So I am interested in seeing if you have any insights on what the data has told us.

**Mr ZAGO:** I probably need to take that on notice in terms of a summary. We do not tend to produce a report card as such. It is not really the approach that we take with these indicators. It is more about being able to produce the data to inform those kinds of discussions rather than making those judgements ourselves. So look, sorry, I have not got a balanced view overall, but I agree with you: there is progress in some spaces and some places where it has been really hard to make changes. But how those balance out is not something for me to comment on.

**Ms RICHARDS:** I might just ask another question if that is all right, Chair. Again, perhaps going back to some of the questions and insights that Mr Maas was trying to garner, I am interested in understanding whether the ABS has encountered any challenges in accommodating non-binary gender identities in its data collection or presentation. I am interested in understanding how that has gone in practice.

**Mr ZAGO:** Leading up to the census and to the update in the standard we did a lot of consultation with not just government and academic experts, but also people in the sector and people within the trans community to make sure that where we got to was the best compromise we could at the time in terms of being respectful whilst meeting information needs. I think that the challenge is probably more in a statistical sense in terms of maturing, how we use that data moving forward, how we process and what that means for things like some technical challenges around issues like demography and being able to continue to produce some of the traditional kinds of estimates we have done in that space. So I think it is also about the science of statistics and demography kind of catching up as well, so there are more challenges, perhaps, in that space. We definitely through that testing recognised that, as I said before, there is a need to bring the community along as well and make sure that we are asking these questions in a way that is respectful but also in a way that is understandable to the general population as well. So they are some of the challenges, I guess.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Hibbins, do you have any questions? No? I believe Mr Newbury is on Zoom. Mr Newbury, do you have any questions? No? Ms Taylor?

**Ms TAYLOR:** Yes. Thank you. This is really helpful, isn't it? It is just so interesting. I was just wanting to zone in. In the last 18 months, with COVID, you have had kids at home and so the share of labour has sort of shifted. There has been a lot written on this topic, I believe, and I am just wondering really what trends or changes the ABS has observed in this regard. And do you have any insight as to whether these kinds of changes might shift? Have there been any comparisons, for instance, in the period when restrictions lifted for a while and then they came back on, or is that still to come?

**Mr ZAGO:** Through the COVID period we ran a survey called the Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, which actually collected some information around unpaid work and working at home and caring for children and others, so there is some information there. I have not got the trends at my fingertips, but I think it was not a surprise in the results in terms of the burden of unpaid work falling more heavily on women still through that period. We have a couple of time points in that series that I could direct you to. At the same time we also have our more fulsome time use survey, which was conducted last year, and that will be going into the field again next year. That is the first time that that survey has been conducted since 2007, so we are expecting

to see some interesting trends there and whether there will be any of those kinds of shifts that you are talking about. So I think we will have some really good reference points during and post COVID for that kind of comparison to see what has happened there. But as I said, there is also the household impacts of COVID survey, which collects it at a kind of more summary level. The time use survey is a much, much more detailed survey where we actually have people record what they are doing in a diary for two 24-hour periods in a lot of detail, and that is the kind of premier source of that kind of information.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Richardson? No? Okay. I just had a couple of questions myself. Firstly, one was in relation to compilation of data and how you could use the data compiled and produced by the ABS to support the incorporation of gender perspectives through the budget cycle. Have you got any thoughts around that?

**Mr ZAGO:** I think, as I said, the gender indicators project is a really good way to navigate the different sources of information across the ABS. Gender-disaggregated data are fairly readily available across lots of different sources. I think the challenge is often just navigating and discovering those. I think that is the value of a compendium product where you can actually point to those. In some cases you will have good information available through the detailed data spreadsheets and things that are available through the website; in others it is really about getting access to microdata to be able to do that really deep analysis and to make the cuts of data that might be appropriate for the policy or program you are looking at. Is that the kind of answer you were looking for?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. That is helpful. Thank you. I also just wonder which international jurisdictions you would consider to be leaders in the compilation and production of gender-disaggregated data.

**Mr ZAGO:** We work with a number of international groups in the OECD around gender reporting. I think there are some spaces where Australia is considered the leader. In surveys like time use we are seen as a gold standard around the world. I think it is hard to characterise overall where we sit. There are lots of spaces where I think we are doing really well, and, like I said, time use is probably one of those.

**The CHAIR:** And are there are other spaces that you consider other jurisdictions are perhaps doing better?

**Mr ZAGO:** I cannot think of anything off the top of my head. The other space where we do really well, as I said before, is around personal safety and family and domestic violence. We have got a really full program in that space and a world-leading household survey and a lot of other really good sources and regular sources through our crime victimisation survey, and also increasingly there are administrative data and integrated data options there too. I cannot think of anything specifically that we are particularly deficient in when compared to other countries.

**The CHAIR:** No worries. Are there any further questions from any of the committee members?  
Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Just one other question—I just wonder if you can actually supply the committee with a sample of a questionnaire or the questionnaires that you use?

**Mr ZAGO:** Yes. I think most of our questionnaires, once a survey has been completed, are available on the ABS website, but we could put together a pack of ones that might be of interest to the committee.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Many thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Are there any other questions? No. Well, we are almost at time, so we thank you very much for your contribution before our committee today and for taking the time to make your presentation and answer the questions from the committee members. You will be forwarded the Hansard transcript for you to verify. The committee will now take a short break before consideration with its next witnesses. We thank you for your time.

**Mr ZAGO:** Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**