

Gender-Responsive Standards

In May 2019, the International Standards Organization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) signed the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) declaration on gender-responsive standards and standards development.¹ As part of their gender action plans, the respective technical management boards of the ISO and IEC formed a joint working group on gender-responsive standards in February 2020. The mandate of the working group is to create tools for ISO and IEC committees to ensure that standards and standards development are gender responsive.

Fifteen members—from the U.S., Canada, Norway, Japan, France, Sweden, and Great Britain—are active in the work. The group consists of experts on gender issues, standards developers, and employees from standardization bodies.

I have had the privilege of co-leading this group from the ISO side. During the two years we have worked together, it has been clear that the level of awareness within the standardization community is low, but also that there is an interest in finding out more.² The focus of the group has therefore been to develop tools and checklists that can be used by people involved in developing standards. The first tools have only recently been made available to the ISO and IEC communities. As a next step, we will develop training materials and include the knowledge on how important

gender responsiveness is when writing standards in the trainings of committee managers and chairs.

The working group has held seven meetings since its formation; in June 2022, the group's mandate was extended for another two years. The extension was key, as there is still a lot to be done. While the initial outputs (a checklist and a report, available through ISO and IEC) are a first step, we will be refining these tools and hope to add training materials for our technical communities. This summer, in September of this year the group added new members, and by doing so added representation from more countries and other backgrounds.

Early on in our work, we defined a gender-responsive standard (GRS) as a standard that reflects an understanding of physical differences and gender roles and equally addresses the needs of women and men.³ As our work continues, we hope to provide more tools to address not only product standards but also process and service standards. The final report and the additional materials we hope to develop will be available in late 2023.

PERSONAL THOUGHTS

Having worked with gender-responsive standards both internationally and within the Swedish standardization system, here are some of my personal thoughts on the subject.

We all know that standards have made great contributions to the development of international trade, but they have also made it easier to exchange knowledge, goods, and services. With a standard, the user or buyer knows what to expect from a product, and the producer can produce what the market needs even if the market is on another continent. In the same way gender differences exist all over the world and if the standards don't take gender issues into account, the resulting outcome may not meet the buyer's expectation.⁴

What if there is a difference in the needs of men and women? What if the size, the strength, and the expectations differs if you are a man or a woman? What if the standards do not take these differences into account?

Unfortunately, I do think this has been the case. Many standards do not take the size, strength, or needs of the user into account. Many standards are written for men, not out of malice toward women, but for other reasons. For example, the data input on which the standard is based may not have been sex disaggregated, or no women were present when developing the standard, or no one thought about it.

So, developing gender-responsive standards has a lot to do with awareness and attitudes. We must ask ourselves the right questions and assume that there are gender implications involved with all standards. That's where we need to start.

But what are the biggest challenges, and what can we do about them?

One challenge is defining the problem. What does *gender* really mean? I will not volunteer a definition, but for many, it is not only a question of male and female. I, for one, find it difficult to talk of gender and in the next sentence define it as male and female. In many cultures and countries, gender is so much more than being a man or a woman.

So why are we still looking at gender from a male/female perspective? The answer, I think, is simple—we need to start somewhere, and to reach a common understanding, we must start at the level where most people in

most cultures agree. Once we have started, we can only go further.

Having said this, gender is also a question of inclusivity. An inclusive standard that caters to all needs and embraces the idea of design for all will be relevant to all, regardless of how you define gender.

Another challenge is that gender issues tend to be catered to by experts or “missionaries” in the field. In not one of the groups that I work with do men comprise more than 5% of the membership, and all the participants are already “believers.” To have an impact and make change happen, we need to be more inclusive and speak so that the “unconvinced” will listen and understand.

This is not a criticism of gender experts—I strongly believe that we need to involve them—but the key here is to mix them with “non-experts.” So, when moving forward, I suggest you involve someone who doesn't care about this topic or doesn't believe that standards need to be gender responsive. The ones that do not understand the need for gender responsiveness will help us understand what and how we need to communicate for the greater audience as the need to be convinced first.

A third challenge is that, when developing a standard, data is often used. I am sure you have heard the reasons why size matters in standards (the most common example is that of personal protective equipment or seat belts⁵). From now on, we need to find less obvious examples, cases where the product itself is “neutral” but the needs of male and female users differ, or where the service functions better (or only) for one sex.

As for the data, do we know whether the data we are using is disaggregated, or is the data biased? I have started collecting examples from all the committee representatives I meet. If we keep asking questions, the examples will come.

Then there is the issue of representation. At the Swedish Institute for Standards (my employer), we have not focused on representation. While we believe in diversity,, we do not

think that more women in our groups would automatically lead to more gender-responsive standards (even if there are more male experts than female experts on our committees). Some fields/subject matters are not, in and of themselves, diverse. We would probably have to look hard to find a female mining engineer. And having found her, we cannot take for granted that she will want to carry the flag for gender responsibility or knowledge within the group.

I believe that we need to consider the attractiveness of our groups. Making them more diverse will probably lead to “better” standards, but it is not a given that broader representation will lead to gender-responsive standards.

With today’s information overflow and global challenges such as climate change and political unrest, it is hard to get attention. In this context, how or why would writing gender-responsive standards be important? What difference would they make? Why should we prioritize gender-responsive standards when so many other issues are “burning,” for women and humanity in general? I have no answer, but I think standards as mutual agreements are a cornerstone for equality when they truly cater to all needs.

Even sustainability might be seen as a challenge. I would argue that the involvement of women, the possibilities for women, and the rights of women are critical to all the sustain-

ability goals, and many studies indicate the same.⁶ If true equality existed, so many of the other goals would come naturally. That is why I think working on gender-responsive standards is working on sustainability, and even one of the key success factors.

Right now, there are many organizations and institutions working on gender issues and developing materials to help raise awareness. This is great but is also important that we cooperate with each other. Building knowledge by sharing knowledge will be essential. We need to spread the word on how vital the work on gender-responsive standards is.

I am involved in many of these groups, and I hope that all these joint efforts will continue and even grow. Can I count on meeting some of you there?

NOTES

1. <https://unece.org/trade/wp6/thematic-areas/gender-resp-stds-decl>
2. JSAG gender-responsive standards – final report (from a survey conducted in December 2020)
3. JSAG gender-responsive standards (2022-06) – final report to the technical management board of IEC and ISO.
4. <https://www.iso.org/benefits-of-standards.html>
5. Read more in Standards Council of Canada’s excellent report <https://www.scc.ca/en/about-scc/publications/general/when-one-size-does-not-protect-all>
6. <https://www.imf.org/Publications/fandd/issues/2019/03/closing-the-gender-gap-dabla>



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