

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

CENSUS (AMENDMENT) (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM FOR WOMEN SCOTLAND

About Us

Forwomen.scot is grateful for the opportunity to provide evidence on the Census (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill. We are a group of ordinary women from all over Scotland who have come together to protect women's and children's rights.

Comments on the Bill

We welcome the Scottish Government's proposal to include questions of both sexual orientation and gender identity in the 2021 Census. Both sexual orientation and gender reassignment are protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. Gathering data on both characteristics will enable:

- local and national government to better design, plan and deliver public services;
- public authorities to fulfil their obligations as part of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

We also support the Government's proposal to make asking questions about sexual orientation and gender identity voluntary. An individual's right to privacy must be upheld and no-one should be forced to respond to these questions unless they choose to.

However, we are of the view that the question on sex should continue to be compulsory. It is important for the planning and delivery of public services that we know how many male and female citizens there are. We are also clear that the questions on sex and gender identity in the 2021 Census must be separate.

Whilst not in the scope of this Bill, we are aware that discussions are already underway about the framing of questions for the 2021 Census and that National Records of Scotland (NRS) are considering adding a third option to the question on sex.

This is something we oppose. Human beings are sexually dimorphic, and an individual's biological sex is an unchangeable characteristic. The question on sex has been asked consistently since the Census began, which enables data to be compared over time. Other datasets produced by government agencies use Census data as a baseline, so retaining consistent categorisation on sex is vital.

Most importantly, knowing how many male and female citizens there are enables public authorities to properly plan and deliver public services. For instance, there are a number of sex-specific health screening programmes offered by the NHS. Cervical and breast screening are offered to women to check for early signs of cancer. Abdominal aortic aneurysm screening is offered to men during the year they turn 65. Women also live longer than men so it is valuable information to enable future budgeting for pension provision.

In general, we are concerned about the blurring of 'sex' and 'gender' across a range of governmental documents and more widely. We also hope that NRS will engage women's groups in their ongoing discussion and development of questions for the 2021 Census.