A First for Census Taking: The Third Sex

by Carl Haub, senior demographer. O.P. Sharma, PRB consultant in Delhi, contributed to this blog post.

From the beginning, questions on one’s sex on census forms had two choices: male or female. But no more. In its upcoming decennial census, to be conducted in February, India offer the possibility of a third response – “other” (see partial facsimile of the census form below). The innovation has generated quite a bit of publicity in the Indian press. The group most affected by this change to the census form is usually referred to in India as transgenders/eunuchs, or hijras.

Hijras have a long tradition in South Asia. Their dancing and singing at births and marriages are seen as good luck by many as well as being somewhat annoying. They are given money on these occasions as well as in some holiday seasons. More attention has been focused on hijras since campaigns against HIV/AIDS got underway in India and they are usually considered a high-risk group. Much support and care for HIV-positive hijras has been provided by the Naz Foundation, headquartered in Delhi who welcomed the development as treating eunuchs as legitimate members of society.

The “third sex” is far from a recent concept in many parts of the world, having existed for thousands of years. References to a third sex (triteeyaprakrti in Sanskrit) appeared at least as early as the 2nd century B.C. In Pakistan in 2009, the Supreme Court ordered that eunuchs be given national identification cards identifying their special gender status. But the inclusion of a three-response question on sex in a traditional census enumeration must be a first. And, not long afterwards, Nepal announced that it will do the same in its 2011 Census, which begins in May.

All of this does lead one to wonder what census statistical tables would look like. Will all three sexes be shown? Or will male and female not quite add to the total? It will be an interesting year in many ways.

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