

INTRODUCTION:

Gender and Human Development in Latvia — A Necessary Intersection

Much work has been done globally to investigate the relationship of gender to human development: For instance, in 1995, the United Nations Development Programme devoted its annual global human development report to the theme of gender relations and disparities, and the significant impact these have on a nation's sustainable development. Similarly, economists and sociologists, policy makers and development planners around the world have examined the many ways in which aspects of gender matter to the progress of a nation. They have all reached a common conclusion: no nation or society can progress and develop without the participation of one or the other half of its population in *all* areas crucial to human development — be it childrearing or macroeconomic management.

In Latvia, the concept of sustainable human development has begun to find its way into the public consciousness. Aided in particular by the annual publication of the **Latvia Human Development Report**, questions of social justice, social capital and the links between good governance and sustainable economic, health and educational policies have begun to be debated openly and constructively, with some signs of impact. Latvia, too, has seen a marked increase in gender scholarship since the restoration of independence. However, much of this scholarship has been aimed primarily at academic audiences, and for the most part documents changes in statistical trends, highlighting symptoms and manifestations of gender inequality in Latvia. While such research is indeed necessary, what has been largely absent — and only beginning to emerge — is a public debate on how gender is one pivotal aspect of the nation's human development. Gender disparities, while sometimes noted, are not always comprehensively analyzed, and attention is not paid to why these disparities have come to exist, and what the short- and long-term impact of these may be, if not adequately addressed. One result of this is that national policy in Latvia has not come to reflect the way in which gender matters — politically, socially and economically — to the development of a prosperous and just nation.

The objective of this publication is therefore to highlight the ways in which gender matters to human development in Latvia. The publication

begins with a discussion of gender and why it matters as a concept. Part I also provides a necessary overview of the evolution of “gender equality” in Latvia, including a summary of existing gender roles and their impact: how is the concept of “gender equality” understood in Latvia, and in what is this understanding rooted? In order to understand the impact that gender inequalities can have now and in the future, we must first understand their causes.

Part II then looks at the basic building blocks of human development — economics, health and education — in the context of Latvia, and examines how gender matters to each of these. Some questions examined in this section include: How is poverty in Latvia gendered? Why should employment policies take gender into consideration? How can the education system contribute to a better understanding of gender in our society? Why do men need special attention in health policies? Part II also looks at gender-based violence and prostitution as issues that cross-cut these main human development indicators, and which can also have a significant impact on the human development of a nation.

Part III, in turn, takes on questions of democracy, governance and participation as other vital components of sustainable human development. While these areas often present the most striking examples of gender disparities in a society, at the same time they sometimes point to the most accessible means of resolving these questions. For example, while people who hold political power are historically unrepresentative of a society's gendered demographics, political participation through the work of non-governmental organizations has been viewed as particularly instrumental in promoting gender equality. Thus Part II begins with an examination of gender in politics in governance (including representation and effective institution building), and then turns to examine partnerships that serve to strengthen the national machinery, and thus society as a whole. These partnerships include non-governmental organizations, research institutions, media and international organizations.

Within the pages of this report, however, it is obviously impossible to account for all of the trends and developments of which gender is an important aspect — such a task is virtually endless.

Therefore, rather than merely describing gender disparities in the above-mentioned areas, this report explicitly seeks to make the links between the *manifestations* of gender inequality and the *causes and effects* thereof. In this way, the report aims to initiate a process of comprehensive and holistic gender analysis in regards to both the development and implementation of public policies in Latvia, and the societal context that supports these processes.

In order to properly contextualize these causes and effects, the publication also highlights some positive steps that have been taken towards more equitable gender relations in Latvia since the restoration of independence. Examples of innovative and notable contributions to addressing gender issues are offered throughout the report as a means of seeing how far we have come. At the same time, however, the report also highlights the main gaps that are left to be filled in this long-term process. These gaps most often emerge as systemic rather than isolated, pointing again to the need to acknowledge and address the roots of gender disparities in Latvia, rather than focusing on purely prophylactic remedies. Moreover, this acknowledgement requires a parallel recognition of the fact that redressing gender inequalities is not solely about justice or fairness to women (although this is undoubtedly a laudable aim): it is also about developing an understand-

ing of how gender inequality is detrimental to the prosperity of the nation as a whole — and this recognition must then be systematically applied to all efforts that seek to foster human development. This said, steps for remedying some of the most pressing gender disparities are also suggested. For the purpose of summarizing these recommendations, the publication ends with a chapter of conclusions and forward-looking strategies.

Given these aims, the process of preparing this publication has demanded little primary research, apart from attempts to update pre-existing information. During the process, some interviews were conducted with key players in gender issues, and a comprehensive literature and data review was undertaken by the author. Gratitude is again expressed to all who participated in this process.

Finally, it is hoped that this report will be used as a tool for furthering a dialogue on gender and human development in Latvia — by policy makers, politicians, non-governmental activists, academics, and members of the general public. In this way, this publication hopes to be a conceptual starting point for looking at gender and human development as not only a possible intersection, but as a necessary one along Latvia's ongoing path to sustainable progress and prosperity.

PART I: Conceptualizing Gender in Latvia

1.1. What is “Gender” and Why Does it Matter?

One of the main problems with implementing a “gender perspective” in national human development policies and practices is the fact that, still, the concept of “gender” is not fully understood by all policy makers, legislators, practitioners and beneficiaries. In fact it is fair to say that this term has come to be used throughout documents and discourse without pause to remind us all of what this means, and what its significance is. Gender is sometimes a confusing concept: while on the one hand seemingly self-explanatory and descriptive (the “male gender” versus the “female gender”), on the other hand the word “gender” has in the last decades come to be a shorthand for designating the complex social and cultural relationship that exists between men and women.

The most important aspect of “gender” is that it represents a set of social, cultural and traditional meanings. While “sex” refers to a man or a woman's biological identity, one's “gender” is the set of meanings that becomes attached to one's sex — and these meanings change according to time and place. The most difficult obstacle in addressing gender issues is the fact that some of these cultural

meanings of gender have become so ingrained in society that many people believe that they are indeed “natural” — fixed and unchanging. This can present a problem. For example, if it comes to be considered “natural” that a woman is primarily responsible for child-rearing, then policies and legislation do not come to reflect the importance of the father's role in the family. In turn, this can have negative consequences for a nation's human development: not only do children suffer from the lack of a father figure, but fathers too can experience a sense of dislocation, which can present a variety of consequences. At the same time, mothers can become overworked, unable to fully contribute to the economy or to look after their own wellbeing. If such gender assumptions about family roles were challenged, then the entire nation — women, men and children — would benefit. It is therefore crucial to understand the concept of gender as fluid: the meanings we assign to gender can — and do — change.

The word “gender” is used in other ways, too. In order to contextualize some of its uses in this publication, the following explanations are offered: