

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:

Gender equality — Gender equality exists when both men and women are afforded equal social value, equal rights and equal responsibilities, and given equal access to resources and equal opportunities. It does not mean that men and women should be made to be identical, because they are not. Instead this means that men and women, their contributions to society and their problems should be valued equally. Although physiological and other differences between men and women do exist, these differences can not be used as the basis for limiting their opportunities in society.

It is important to note that “gender equality” refers to both *de jure* (formal and legal) equality, as well as *de facto* (practical) equality.

Gender disparities — These are differences that emerge between the situation of men and that of women. In this context, they can refer either to those differences that are the result of direct gender discrimination (for example, when women are not paid equal wages for equal work), or they can refer

to differences that have come about due to other social, historical or cultural factors (for example, if men have a much shorter average life span). In both instances, gender disparities need to be addressed by solutions that take into account both root causes and present-day manifestations of these disparities.

A gender perspective — Approaching a task or an issue from a “gender perspective” means that aspects of gender, although perhaps not paramount, are always taken into account. Employing a gender perspective demands that the following questions be asked: Are there differences in the way the given situation affects men and women? Will men and women be affected differently by the proposed action? Are there any indirect effects of this action that have greater implications for one gender or the other? A gender perspective is sometimes referred to as a gender “lens”: while it is only one of the many ways in which one should look at an issue or a policy, without this “lens” certain crucial factors and details will remain obfuscated to the viewer.

1.2 From Formal Equality to Practical Equality: Gender Relations, Roles and Stereotypes in Latvia

It is a generally accepted and true fact that Latvia, for the most part, has achieved *legal* or *formal* gender equality. In other words, legislation and other normative documents, with a few exceptions, do not enshrine gender discrimination¹. For many people, *it is therefore tempting to assume that gender discrimination does not exist in Latvia*. This, as in any other country around the world, however, is not the case: formal gender equality is only the first step towards true gender equality in everyday life. Before examining the gender inequalities that nonetheless persist, it is therefore crucial that we understand where they come from and on what they are based. A brief look at gender relations, roles and stereotypes in Latvia will help us not only to understand the root causes of the examples to be discussed in Parts II and III, but will also illuminate the path along which we will have to travel in addressing and reversing these inequalities.

While there are some biological differences between men and women, both sexes are in fact very similar to one another: under a scientist’s microscope, we are — in blood, in bone, in brain — almost identical. Why is it, then, that in so many everyday situations we seem to be worlds apart?

The answer rests with the fact that many gender differences, while seemingly “natural”, are in fact products of social and cultural traditions and structures that can change over time. However, many of these “differences” nonetheless become so

entrenched over time that they come to be seen as unchanging and inevitable — thus the inequalities they cause are by some members in society not viewed as inequalities at all, but rather as “the way things are meant to be.” These inequalities then become sustained in gender relations (the way genders interact with one another), gender roles (socially and traditionally dictated roles that women and men are expected to fulfil) and attitudes more generally (beliefs and opinions that are not based on fact, but on repeated performance or presumption). All of these elements then create stereotypes about genders that come to be viewed as “truths” by many.

It is important, however, to note that not all gender roles are negative, or have necessarily negative consequences. The objective should not be to advocate the complete replacement of the traditional set of static gender roles (for example, “women must be housewives”) with a “modern” set of static gender roles (“women must earn a living”). Instead, we should be trying to free up gender roles so that they are more fluid, adaptable and just in today’s changing socio-economic and cultural situations. At the end of the day, every person should be able to *choose* how to experience his or her gender based on personal desires and circumstances. Because we are part of a society, we may not always be able to act exactly as we like, but we should not be impeded from opportunities simply because we are either male or female.

As regards gender in Latvia, many people here today express a certain automatic, unthinking

¹ Despite the lack of blatant discrimination within legislation, it is nonetheless important that existing legislation be reviewed from a gender perspective to ensure that it *promotes* equality rather than merely prohibiting discrimination. See Conclusions and Forward-looking Strategies.

reaction towards the concept of gender equality as not relevant to Latvia — many feel these concerns are imported from the West and represent an attempt to produce problems where in fact there are none. Echoing the comments of one journalist in a 1997 article about a seminar on gender equality, “western feminist ideas [hardly apply] to the post-socialist situation in Latvia, which over the past 50 years has presented women with problems completely different than those of the rich Western world.”²

While on the one hand, this quote illustrates much of Latvia’s population’s discomfort with a discussion on gender equality, on the other hand this quote brings up an important point: While the struggle for gender equality is a global phenomenon with many common elements, it nonetheless needs to be indigenous — waged from within every country or region. This is important to remember. This quote also brings up Latvia’s Soviet history, which has undoubtedly coloured the way in which gender equality is perceived in Latvia. With this in mind, the remainder of this section will briefly describe the substance of some of the prevailing gender roles and stereotypes in Latvia, their origins and the way they have changed.

Various people — scholars and ordinary men and women — have commented that the Soviet era deformed the notion of gender equality in Latvia. What the Soviet system referred to as “equality” was actually a levelling of all differences (and choices) regarding gender roles, forcing women and men to do the same work outside of the home. (However, it is also important to remember that during this era, women were still largely looking after domestic responsibilities single-handedly). Some people feel that this era forced women to take on economic and social responsibilities that they neither chose nor desired, while men were “emasculated”, stripped of their traditional role as breadwinner and provider for the family. Many people view these as negative effects, and therefore express no desire to espouse “gender equality”, if this is what it means.

With the beginning of the nineties and the start of the transition period in Latvia, people were optimistic and hoped for great changes, which would hopefully include greater economic, social and political opportunities, and, in general, a better life. Because of the inevitable socio-economic upheaval and social stress brought on with the transition, these changes were slow to come, and for many, they have yet to arrive — and, because “gender equality” was associated with a Soviet past, this too was rejected in the hope for something “better.” For many people in Latvia this meant an attempt to return to the “golden age” or pre-Soviet times, and the gender roles that were part of this era: if the standard of living was better (the justification could go), then

gender relations must have been better as well.

These “better” gender roles stem from traditional concepts of men and women in Latvian folklore.³ For example, the traditional “dainas” (folk poems) portray women as the keepers of the home and the hearth, for which they needed to be strong, hard-working (also beautiful) and, of course, obedient to their husbands. Interpretations of this situation vary: while some have labelled this women’s subservience, others are quick to point out that women were in fact “stronger” and “held the real power in the home.” Regardless of what value is attached to these roles, however, they were undoubtedly clearly defined and, for the most part, accepted.

However, the socio-economic reality that has emerged during the nineties has been hardly compatible with ‘traditional’ Latvian gender roles. For example, because of harsh economic realities, both partners are often forced to work, yet are still unable to make ends meet. Alternatively, due to high unemployment, some fathers are at home during the day. Perhaps because the “good life” is still out of reach — and because “gender equality” has strangely come to be associated with hardship and a lack of choice — traditional gender roles are nonetheless still held up as the ideal. Therefore, in rejecting “gender equality” in present times, it could be that some people are in fact rejecting a life of hardship: When some women state, “I’d rather stay home all day”, is this really a statement *against* gender equality? It is important to look beneath what may mask itself as a desire to return to traditional values, but is actually a longing for a more stable, less difficult life.

When men express a desire to return to the past, and reject “gender equality”, this seems more understandable. On the one hand, the ways in which men are privileged through the maintenance of their higher social standing and value have been well documented: they can make the laws and policies that best benefit them, they can create and maintain a wage structure that keeps them earning more — they can, in short, do minimum work for maximum rewards. However, this paints a very one-dimensional picture of power structures. It is important to remember that many men, too, have suffered from the Soviet legacy and the transition that has followed: generally, their health has deteriorated, their opportunities to earn a living have shrunk, and as a result, they have experienced a huge sense of social dislocation. The psychological crisis this brings about should not be underestimated or explained away by “laziness” or “weakness of character” — it presents very serious personal and societal problems that need to be addressed. The point here is that men, too, have been searching for an alternative — and the myth of the traditional Latvian way is enticing to them as well.

Another important point to remember is

² Anda Leiskalne, “Journalists are taught about Gender Equality”, *Vakara Zinas*, 11.03.97.

³ See Keller, 1997, Eglite, 1997.

that Latvia is no longer a homogenous culture: In 1997, only 55% of the population was made up of Latvians, the remainder composed of other ethnic minorities. Thus, even if a “return to the past” was possible or appropriate economically (which it is not), it presents even further problems in Latvia’s modern socio-cultural context: if the Latvian women of the “*dainas*” are held up as an ideal, as keepers of culture and tradition, this simultaneously serves to dislocate “other” women (of different ethnic backgrounds) who are not part of this tradition. In a way, then, these traditional gender roles are not only inappropriate, locking women (and men) *into* roles that may not choose, but they also serve as a way to lock other ethnicities *out* of the process of nation building — which is negative for both social integration and human development⁴.

If we look at attitudes towards men and

women today, then, it seems disingenuous to accept at face value that people would simply prefer the “gender inequality” of traditional times. It should be noted here that many young people do not express a yearning for the past: when interviewed, many young men and women have stated a desire to share domestic and breadwinning responsibilities with their present or future partners. Therefore, it is crucial that we ask: who benefits from the adherence to traditional gender roles, and more importantly, who is losing out? The following sections of this publication will seek to illustrate and explain how and why the losers are many. In conclusion, challenging stereotypes and gender roles evidently become one vital step for turning losers into winners — for creating a nation of people that can reap maximum and equal benefit from the processes of sustainable human development.

PART II: Human Development From a Gender Perspective: Economics, Education, Health, Violence

When the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released the first global Human Development Report in 1990, it asserted that human well-being was dependent not only on monetary figures, as traditionally construed, but also on other indicators that reflect quality of life. Thus in order to compare the level of human development in different countries, UNDP developed a Human Development Index, which could measure a country’s development situation more holistically, using indicators that reflect three basic aspects of sustainable human development: economics, education and health.

Gender is a crucial aspect of all three of these indicators. Part II of this report therefore examines how gender matters in each of these areas:

How does gender impact various aspects of these issues? How does a lack of attention to gender issues exacerbate problems? How can more attention to gender contribute to solutions? Furthermore, Part II looks to steps already taken in Latvia to integrate gender concerns into economics, education and health, while also pointing to gaps in policy and necessary actions.

The final sections of Part II also look at violence and prostitution as cross-cutting issues that crucially affect and are influenced by human development processes. Although these are relatively new subjects of public debate in Latvia, current efforts and possible steps for future actions are discussed in relation to these two important aspects of gender and human development.

2.1 Gender and Economics: Money, Time and other Resources in the Formal Labour Market and Within the Home

Latvia’s transition to a market economy has brought about changes in both macroeconomic and microeconomic structures. These have included changes in the labour market — what people do, how and how much they are remunerated — as well as changes in the economics of individual households — income levels and division of work. Because sustainable economic growth, the eradication of poverty and a labour force that can adapt to

change are all crucial for sustainable human development in Latvia, maximum efforts should be made to ensure that policies and activities in these areas have a maximum impact, and benefit a maximum number of people. It is therefore crucial that these issues be analyzed from a gender perspective — not only to ensure equitable distribution of and access to resources, but also to promote full participation of both men and women in activities that foster sus-

⁴ The author is grateful to Irina Novikova’s article “Fashioning Our Minds: Mass Media Representations of Minority Women in Latvia” (1998) for highlighting some of these connections.