

## **PART III: Engendering Democracy, Governance and Participation**

### **3.1 Gender (In)Equality Within National Decision-Making Processes**

Despite the existence of democracy, decision-making processes and governance structures in most countries around the world are usually dominated by men. As a result, the way in which policies and normative documents may affect women differently are not always taken into account — a commonality of interest, needs and benefits between men and women is often presumed, although this presumption may not be borne out in reality. Alternatively, even if “women’s issues” are considered, they are often marginalized, neither given priority status nor addressed thoroughly or competently, thus treating women as a “special interest group” rather than half of the population. Male-dominated decision-making structures thus may fail to appreciate the wider effects that so-called women’s issues have on the human development of a nation as a whole. This can be evidenced in issues such as childcare, reproductive health and domestic violence — all issues that are often considered to be women’s issues, but are in fact of huge consequence to sustainable human development. It seems, therefore, that more balance in decision-making structures would not only be more representative and just towards women, but would certainly benefit society as a whole.

Since independence, Latvia has not witnessed gender-balanced participation in either **Parliament** (the Saeima) or at high levels of **national Government**. In three different parliaments since 1991, women have never held more than 17% of seats. Government is no more representative (see Figure 11). Ironically, while the number of women initially appointed in the current Government (four) was heralded by the present Government as an “achievement” for gender equality, this only underlined the reality of the abysmally low level of female representation. Even within the civil service, where women outnumber men in total, high level management positions (state secretaries, department directors and their deputies) are overwhelmingly held by men.<sup>19</sup>

Attention should also be paid to the portfolios that women in positions of political power are responsible for. Is it a mere coincidence that two of the very few female Cabinet Ministers that Latvia has seen since independence have held the position of Minister of Culture? What does this say about gender stereotypes, and the “traditional role” women

are often asked to assume as keepers of a society’s culture? Roles that women play in parliamentary commissions also need to be examined in regard to these stereotypes. Efforts should thus be made not only to increase women’s participation quantitatively, but also qualitatively.

At the level of **local government**, participation, while still not equal between the genders, has at least moved further towards this objective. In the 1994 Local Government elections, 37.5% of elected deputies were women; in the 1997 elections this proportion increased to 38.7%. In the 1997 elections in particular, it was also interesting to note that women’s representation increased as the size of the jurisdiction (and electorate) grew smaller (see Figure 12). As analysts of gender and governance have pointed out, this may be because the more governance is decentralized and localized, the more grassroots representation and participation in governance increases. In other words, the closer governance moves to the people, the more representative it becomes of the people active at the local level — and this, in Latvia and elsewhere, often means increased participation of women.

Furthermore, our behaviour, including at the polls, is undoubtedly influenced by our value systems and the stereotypes we hold. Because there exists motivation on the part of both men and women to cling to or reassert traditional gender roles, women are not elected to positions of power that appear to the average citizen to be symbolic (few people actually bear witness to the day-to-day work that a parliamentarian actually engages in). However, because of the work that women do at the community level, where their talents and leadership are substantiated by empirical evidence, they are more likely to be elected at this level.

Gendered conceptions of leadership, like any other stereotypes, will be slow to change — thus change in the gendered composition of elected bodies that have weaker, less direct connections to the electorate will also be slow to change. There are however, several actions that can be taken to promote and accelerate this process.

The most effective long-term option is awareness raising and the breaking down of stereotypes. The media can play a significant role here, not only in raising the profile of gender issues more generally, but also in specifically highlighting posi-

<sup>19</sup> Latvia Human Development Report 1998, UNDP 1999 p. 49.

**Figure 11**

	Number of Parliamentary Deputies	
	Men	Women
5 <sup>th</sup> Saeima (1993)	84	16
6 <sup>th</sup> Saeima (1995)	92	8
7 <sup>th</sup> Saeima (1998)	83	17

tive examples of women's leadership. More importantly, an increased amount of information needs to be generated about the possible gains of more representative governance — how will all law-making and policy-making be more effective through more balanced gender views? Advocacy groups (non-governmental organizations, research groups and independent think tanks) also need to be more active here. It is unlikely that the electorate will simply respond to calls for “more gender balance”, but pointing out specific benefits and losses associated with this balance will bring home the fact that *effects* of legislation and policy are always “close to the people”, even if some decision-makers remain distant.

Furthermore, an increased number of women in political positions will help break down stereotypes that they do not necessarily belong there. Because changing attitudes takes time, this process may need a jump-start. One option for doing so is the introduction of an affirmative action plan or a so-called **quota system** for elected bodies. This means that a minimum number of seats are reserved for women candidates. A quota system has definite advantages. For example, if women held at least 30% of parliamentary seats, this would introduce more balanced-decision making processes and increase opportunities for women in politics, while also making their political participation visible. However, quotas are without a doubt controversial and inevitably met with opposition. It is therefore important to weigh positive gains against potential

hostility from opponents who view such a system as “unfair”. Thus, any affirmative action policy must necessarily be coupled with extensive public education efforts that thoroughly explain and illustrate the intended benefits.

It is also important to remember that a quota system removes the symptom but not the root problem, as the real barriers to women's participation are not located within laws which establish electoral procedures in Latvia, but rather in pervasive **societal attitudes** and **structural barriers** that keep women largely out of politics: unequal sharing of housework by men robs women of *time* needed to become politically active, while unequal pay in the labour market does not give women access to the same *financial* resources as men, thus again impeding access to political arenas. Furthermore, because women are placed in a position of being primary caregivers to children, they are less likely to risk both time and money for an uncertain political career.

Finally, it must be noted that the culture of politics is traditionally masculine, which erects a barrier in front of women that can be either blatant or covert. For example, as the female former Minister of State Reform noted in a newspaper interview, the real problem for women in politics was the fact that informal decision making structures featured very prominently — most of the real decisions were made outside office hours, when the boys play basketball or go to the gym together.<sup>20</sup> This culture can include the pervasiveness of an “old boys' network”,

**Figure 12**

	Local Government Elections, May 29, 1994		Local Government Elections, May 9, 1997	
	Men, % of deputies	Women, % of deputies	Men, % of deputies	Women, % of deputies
	Total	62.5	37.5	61.27
Large cities	74.6	25.4	80.99	19.01
Towns	68.1	31.9	70.47	29.53
Civil Parishes	59.4	40.6	58.78	41.22

<sup>20</sup> Philip Birzulis, “A Voice for the Muzzled Majority.” The Baltic Times, September 17, 1998.

### **The Social Democratic Women's Organization of Latvia**

In the 1998 parliamentary elections in Latvia, something unprecedented took place: for the first time, an all-women's party was listed on the ballots.

The Social Democratic Women's Organization of Latvia (SDWO) was formed on 24 July, 1998. Currently, 254 members have registered with the party, whose only criteria for membership are that members be the minimum age of 18, as stipulated by the law, and, unsurprisingly, female.

The organization was established in 1991 in partnership with the Social Democratic Workers' Party, and a policy of equal gender representation was agreed upon at that time. In 1995, however, the union reneged on this principle, and the Women's Organization splintered to try it on their own.

In the 1998 elections, 16 candidates were put forth from the party. These women received extensive training in issues such as public image and public speaking. As the chairwoman of the party admits, however, these women had to be *persuaded* to run — many of them had not "come out" at work regarding their party affiliation, and were also concerned with a shortage of time to prepare for the elections. In the end, the Social Democratic Women's Organization candidates received a total of 3000 votes — not enough to make it into parliament.

The party's chairwoman, however, is convinced that the next elections will show better results, and admits that Latvia may not be ready yet to accept female politicians. Because they are a self-proclaimed radical party, she also understands that much of society still hold stereotypical views about both social democrats and women, which only reinforce each other when placed together in the same sentence.

In the meantime, the party is busy analyzing and evaluating the results of the 1998 election and running a one-year training course called "Women Have the Right to be Leaders". They are also actively preparing legislative and policy recommendations and holding other events together with their sister NGO, The Institute for Women's Rights, which is also run by the party's chairwoman.

What do other female politicians think? Kristiane Libane at the age of 27 and as the parliamentary leader of the faction, Latvia's Way, was interviewed by the Baltic Times shortly before the 1998 elections. Here she stated simply that "some women make it and some women don't" — but admits that people in Latvia do not want to vote for women. According to Libane, she has not personally experienced any discrimination from her male colleagues.

The truth is that equality in parliament is still far from a reality. The SDWO feels that until 40% of the Saeima is made up of women, a quota system will be the only answer.

where connections are important, but it also concerns such aspects as timing of meeting and sessions, adversarial behaviour from men or even attempts to control women's self-assertiveness through sexist language and harassment.

It is therefore crucial that any strategies aimed at more gender-balanced decision-making also

take into account more pervasive but sometimes less obvious reasons why women are not equally represented. As with other gender-related issues, real solutions will demand a holistic, cross-cutting approach that looks beyond the manifestation of a problem to its root causes.

## **3.2 Institution Building and National Machinery for Gender Equality**

In order for legal equality to be adequately implemented, it is absolutely vital that there exist effective institutions that promote, support and monitor this. While civil society organizations can do this at the non-governmental level, any government serious about its commitment to gender equality must also establish new or enhance existing institutions to fulfil this purpose at the national level. Without such an institution, it is highly unlikely that effective policy specifically on gender issues will be developed, or that gender issues will be adequately integrated into all areas of policy (i.e. gender mainstreaming). In the case of Latvia, the lack of a

National Plan of Action on Gender Issues, or of any other policy or programme specifically addressing gender, is a testament to the lack of such an effective institution in this country. Similarly other policies and major programmes lack a comprehensive and expertly-informed gender perspective.

Mechanisms that have been adopted by other countries around the world, including in Central and Eastern Europe, for this purpose differ greatly: some governments establish entire ministries or national policy departments for gender issues, while others set up departments within existing ministries, or create ministries with a multi-fo-

cus, such as gender and family issues. Other mechanisms include parliamentary commissions or inter-ministerial committees at the Cabinet of Ministers' level. Advisory offices to the Prime Minister or to individual ministers on gender issues are further options still. While it may seem logical that the selection of mechanisms would depend largely on the extent of gender-related problems in the given country, it must be recognized that more often than not, this choice is more dependent on the political will of the particular government; its genuine commitment to gender equality will be reflected in its allocations of budgetary and other resources for institutions of this kind. Indeed, this is the kind of commitment necessary for change.

As mentioned above, until quite recently no official state institution existed in Latvia that addressed gender issues in any substantial way. However, since independence, various state organizations and institutions have been stepping in to implement or coordinate certain efforts as the need arose. For example, in the preparatory stage for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, various different government bodies were involved: while the then Minister of Welfare led the delegation to Beijing, the preparatory committee activities were coordinated by the then Minister of State Reform; the Cabinet of Ministers had overall responsibility for the production of a National Report, although this responsibility was delegated to NGO representatives. As was evident in the follow-up to Beijing, however, (or, more accurately, the lack thereof), the preparatory efforts were largely the result of individual interest amongst certain people in the Government — when the Government changed in an election that came on the heels of the Beijing conference, no one institution was delegated responsibility for this conference, and thus follow-up was never really undertaken within the Government. One important follow-up action — the creation of a National Plan of Action — was never implemented, although the need to do so still persists after four years. The institution presently responsible (see below) should make this a priority.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also taken on various responsibilities for gender issues. Most notably, this Ministry has heretofore been responsible for monitoring the implementation of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which came into full force in Latvian in 1992. Thus in 1997 the Ministry prepared a comprehensive report on the implementation of the CEDAW, as requested by the CEDAW committee. However, as this report was prepared by the Legal Department of the Ministry, it mostly focused on a legal approach to the convention — the manifestation of discrimination in daily life was only superficially analyzed. It is evident that such a report could have been more

comprehensive, had there been an effective institution for addressing gender issues more holistically.

In 1996, the National Human Rights Office was established, and to some extent this institution also took on responsibility for gender issues. For example, the Human Rights Office became the institutional focal point for a Nordic-Baltic conference on gender equality that was hosted in Latvia in August 1997 (see Part 3.3.3), and also coordinated various projects on aspects of gender equality, such as the production of a brochure on domestic violence. Furthermore, the Human Rights Office has integrated gender equality into other more general projects. For example, in 1996/1997, the Office produced a television series to raise public awareness on human rights issues, and gender discrimination was the focus of one episode. Despite these ongoing efforts, however, the status of the Human Rights Office is as an independent institution that can monitor the work of the State and make recommendations, but is not technically within the Government apparatus. Thus, the Office's ability to affect policy and legislation from the inside is limited. Another problem exists in regards to the capacity of the Human Rights Office. Currently there is no focal point for gender issues, thus limiting the possibility for pro-active involvement.

Recognizing the evident need for one institution to coordinate gender issues (something that had in fact been formally recommended by national and international consultants and activists since 1993), in December 1998 the Ministry of Welfare requested that the Cabinet of Ministers appoint one. Thus, as of 1 January, 1999, the Ministry of Welfare has been made responsible for coordinating policy matters pertaining to gender at the national level in Latvia.

This decision begs some analysis. On the one hand, this is a very positive step, exhibiting political will on the part of the Government to take the issue of gender inequality seriously. On the other hand, however, it is necessary to examine what the likely results of this new situation will be. In a report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1997, an international consultant on gender equality included a basic terms of reference for a state institution that would coordinate these issues<sup>21</sup>. At the most elementary level, the responsibilities of this institution would be to consult with all ministries and departments in the Government to ensure attention to gender equality in all policies and normative documents, to recommend additional policies and actions required by the Government to ensure both *de jure* and *de facto* gender equality in Latvia, and to work in some sort of promotional and advocacy capacity for awareness raising in society more generally. Additional functions would ideally include organizing and attending national and international events on gender equality, and establishing and maintain-

<sup>21</sup> Bonnie Keller, Report on Gender Equality in Latvia, 1997.

ing meaningful contacts with NGOs and civil society, in order to facilitate participatory policy making practices. Even if the given institution were not directly responsible for all of these tasks, it would have to actively coordinate and monitor actions completed by partners within the government or those actions delegated to non-governmental institutions.

In the present situation, one civil servant has been hired by the Ministry of Welfare to undertake these responsibilities. A separate unit has not been created, but this person will rather work as a focal point within the strategy and policy department of the Ministry. Given the extent of the tasks to be performed, it seems unlikely that the allocated resources will be sufficient for the effective realization of objectives. Furthermore, other Government institutions that had heretofore performed individual tasks associated with gender may now be tempted to simply defer to the Ministry of Welfare, thus overburdening an already meagre resource base.

This paints a very pessimistic picture of the possible efficacy of the new institutional arrangements, and given that these arrangements are still nascent, it is wholly possible that the results and impact will be far more positive than one can currently expect. However, any success depends upon a number of factors that need to be addressed as soon as possible. In the first place, a **National Strategy for Gender Equality** must be adopted by the government so that priorities are clearly established, activities outlined and responsibility of all government actors — and not just the Gender Focal Point — are clearly understood by all. Within the context of such a strategy, it is absolutely necessary that the Government adapt a cross-cutting policy of gender mainstreaming. This means that while the Focal Point may be able to suggest some policies that pertain very specifically to gender equality, all other Government bodies will need to adapt a gender perspective, integrating gender concerns into the work that is already being done. This will involve reviewing existing policies and analyzing how they hinder gender equality, and then either making necessary amendments or drafting new policies. Along these same lines, it must be communicated clearly and without question by the highest level of Government that this new function of the Ministry of Welfare is one of *coordination*. In order to emphasize this point, it may be necessary to establish an **Inter-ministerial Commission on Gender Issues**, where

the focal points from all ministries could meet regularly for the purposes of coordination and information sharing. Furthermore, because the Gender Focal Point and focal points within other ministries are not likely to be high-ranking ministry officials, it is suggested that meetings of the Interministerial Commission be attended not only by the gender focal points at the operational and implementation level, but also by high-level ministerial officials who are in the position to advocate and make important policy decisions. Finally, in order for the Focal Point function to be effective, it is absolutely crucial that additional resources be identified for the purposes of capacity building for both the Focal Point and other governmental partners.

Whatever the outcome, it is of paramount importance that the Government does not consider its work to be done after appointing this new Focal Point. Other structures may be necessary, and should be considered — for example, the Interministerial Commission which is suggested above. Another significant step, given the lack of substantive capacity on gender issues within the Government, would be the establishment of a **National Advisory Board on Gender Issues**. This Board would be made up of experts from the academic community, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders who are involved with gender issues in Latvia. While such a board would not have decision-making or implementation capacities, it could play a vital role in advising both the Interministerial Commission and the Gender Focal Point on key policy items. Not only would such a dialogue increase the quality of policy-making, it would also contribute to the capacity building of the Government in gender issues, and promote more participatory practices of governance.

Finally, in order to relay a consistent and credible message that gender issues are being seriously addressed, it is crucial that government institutions strive for better gender equality within their own structures. This does not mean that more women need to be hired — as many Ministers are quick to point out, gender ratios in ministries usually strongly favour women. However, this does not mean that women are working in the highest echelons of Government, nor that employment policies support and promote women's advancement or the creation of stronger families. In order to catalyse change in the society, Government institutions must also lead by example.

## 3.3 Building Partnerships and Engendering Dialogue

### 3.3.1 Non-governmental Organizations

As many development experts have noted, the democratization of society is clearly reflected in the development of civil society, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the most significant element of this. On the basis of common interests, ideas and values, individuals are better able to address common problems and exercise their rights to participation in the development of their nation by uniting in organized groups — in this way they realize democracy in daily life.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, NGOs play a crucial role in the sustainable human development of a nation: they serve to monitor the actions and decisions of the State, fill in gaps in the State's activities where possible and necessary, and perhaps most importantly, bolster the sense of social belonging and self-worth for individuals active in them. They can also play an important role in the dissemination of information and creation of social and professional networks, while also serving as a training ground for the development of management, organizational, advocacy and other skills that can be transferred both to other sectors and laterally within the NGO sector.

NGOs that deal with gender issues are crucial to society for all of these above-mentioned reasons. They can lobby governments at both the national and local level to develop or amend policies and legislation as they pertain to gender (for example, on equal opportunities in employment, social assistance to families, commercial sex work, etc.). They can also provide services that the Government has failed to or is unable to provide (for example, crisis intervention centres for gender-based violence, or family support groups). Finally, they can provide a social network for both men and women that can help alleviate feelings of social isolation and establish contacts with other men and women with similar interests, hobbies or problems. For instance, a community group for single mothers might not only enhance practical skills for these women to better their chances within the job market, but could also serve as an informal source of information and help raise self-esteem. Participating in civil society is a reciprocal link where participants contribute to society, but also reap a variety of rewards in return.

Technically speaking, there are very few NGOs in Latvia that are considered to specifically address gender issues: while a recent survey (1998) reported that 15-20% of the population is involved in some type of NGO, less than 0.2% of the population belong to a "women's organization" (which of course also automatically limits gender issues to

women's issues)<sup>23</sup>. However, some NGOs, while not explicit in their attention to gender issues, integrate these concerns into their objectives and activities in various ways (for example, in addressing human rights issues generally, or in providing services to single-parent families). Because gender is something that cross-cuts virtually all aspects of development, attention to gender can be a part of most NGO activities. Thus, the proportion of NGOs actually addressing gender issues in some way may be considerably larger than those overtly dealing with "women's issues".

NGOs currently working on gender issues specifically are active for the most part in providing specific services to women through self-help groups, business support groups, crisis shelters and women's clubs. In other words, the main trend in "women's organizations" is to address consequences of gender inequality, rather than its root causes. While both types of organization are necessary, more development of the latter type would help to create more meaningful dialogue about gender in society in general. There are, however, a few NGOs that proactively address issues of gender equality through advocacy, lobbying and public awareness (such as the Women's Rights Institute and the research organization, The Centre for Human Rights and Ethic Studies). Another welcome recent trend is the establishment of several men's groups. For example, The Stopini Health Club, a grass-roots community-based organization in a suburb of Riga, has groups not only for young mothers and youths, but for fathers as well.

While many NGOs are making a vital and welcome contribution to addressing gender inequality in Latvia, various aspects of the NGO sector require further attention. These include cooperation and information exchange within the NGO sector and cooperation between the NGO sector and the State.

For example, activists and outside observers have pointed out that one of the main problems in Latvia is the lack of coordination and cooperation between NGOs with similar interests and objectives. Many meaningful steps have been taken to address this problem, and particularly over the last two years, various councils and collectives have been formed to unite organizations around common goals, in either the short or the long term (for example, in 1997 the Association of Social and Health Care Organizations was established. Similarly, it is now more common for two or three NGOs to unite

<sup>22</sup> Latvia Human Development Report 1998, UNDP, 1999, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> Baltic Data House, "Towards a Civic Society" 1998. It is important to note that of the 15-20% of the population active in NGOs, a large portion is comprised of trade union members. These members excluded, only around 5% of the population belong to other types of NGOs.

### **Young People Making a Difference**

In many societies, including Latvia, policy-makers, legislators and social commentators often have the tendency to regard young people as a "risk group," rather than as an important source of social capital. Young people are often associated with problems such as drug use, crime and other characteristics of the "sub-cultures" they belong to. What is less often discussed is the important contribution young people make to democratic processes and human development in Latvia.

As regards gender issues, young people are active in many sectors of civil society promoting various aspects of gender equality. For example, in 1997, the Council of Latvian Youth Health Centres was created, which coordinates the work of nine youth health centres across Latvia. Young people, who are specially trained for these purposes provide peer education for other young people in schools and clubs on topics including sexual relations, health matters and sexual violence. The Youth Group of "Papardes Zieds" (Latvia's Association for Family Planning and Sexual Health) provides similar services, and networks with other youth groups in Europe and around the world. As one representative of this group pointed out at a recent meeting, young people are not only the future, they are also the present. It is important that society not only address the specific needs of young people, but also recognize the important contributions that they make.

for the purposes of joint project implementation, or holding training courses and seminars). Several women's organizations have actually led this process by forming the Cooperation Council of Latvian Women's Organizations in 1992: Through the consolidation of their efforts, the member organizations' aims include: the promotion of a discussion on gender issues in society; the development of a feeling of solidarity amongst women through raising women's self-esteem; ensuring information exchange between women's organizations; and advocacy on women's issues in terms of legislation and policy. However, not all civil society organizations see how they may benefit from adopting a gender perspective in their work, and women's organizations tend to be marginalized as a narrow interest group. It would therefore be beneficial to the sector as a whole, and in turn for society, if more transfer of knowledge were to occur laterally within the NGO sector. Not only should "women's organizations" be sharing information and coordinating their efforts, but they should perhaps increase efforts to transfer ideas about gender sensitivity and the enhancement of gender equality to other parts of the sector. For example, organizations dealing with health care could greatly benefit from gender-sensitivity seminars or seminars addressing how men's violence against women should be of particular concern to health professionals. Similarly, trade unions, adult education organizations or other groups dealing with professional issues would be enhanced by paying specific attention to gender issues. Furthermore, a coordinated effort across the sector could make more efficient use of scarce resources. The NGO Centre in Riga and its affiliates around the country could play a very important role here.

Secondly, there is a need for more effective cooperation between NGOs and state institutions. Since the restoration of independence in Latvia, the lack of national machinery for addressing gender is-

issues has meant that the State has relied heavily on NGOs for fulfilling various tasks. For example, the preparatory work for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, was delegated for the most part to women's organizations. Similarly, virtually all official state delegations to the major global UN conferences over the last decade have included NGO representatives to help fill what is often a substantive gap in government delegations. However, this trust and reliance on NGOs has not yet been translated into commitment of resources by the State, or in some cases, support and recognition of the important contributions and work of NGOs. As a result, most NGOs, and certainly those involved in gender issues, are insufficiently funded and are unable to fill all of the vital gaps in the state machinery.

As of 1998, new regulations have come into effect whereby government institutions (state and local) can delegate functions to approved non-governmental organizations. It is vital that Government make appropriate use of these by designating and financially assisting competent NGOs to take on various responsibilities. In order to raise mutual trust between state and non-governmental partners, it is also important to monitor these efforts closely, and to disseminate information regarding best practices and lessons learned. In terms of gender equality, potential areas for delegation of responsibility include the provision of specific social services, such as crisis centres for victims of violence, organization of events and implementation of research projects. It should be noted that while such delegation has already been occurring (for example, in the preparatory activities for the Beijing Women's Conference), it is crucial that this delegation be accompanied by moral and financial support, as well as recognition for results achieved. In other words, while the Government may delegate operations, this does not mean it can shy away from tangible commitments towards the objectives to be achieved.

### 3.3.2. Data, Research and Information Collection and Dissemination

In order to promote and maintain a meaningful dialogue on gender issues, up-to-date, accurate information and thorough analysis thereof is essential. Research helps us to better understand various circumstances, and when sufficiently balanced, can produce a holistic picture of the current situation, of emerging improvements, and of areas that are stagnant or worsening. While quantitative research can produce a statistical portrait of gender equality, qualitative research and analysis is also important for mapping public attitudes and opinions. Both can provide the basis for policy-making and legislation by highlighting priority areas for action. In regards to gender, specifically disaggregated data on how men and women differ in terms of circumstances, attitudes and behaviour are absolutely necessary for developing policy and legislation in all areas. Furthermore, because of the general existence of legal equality in Latvia, many people unfortunately can not be persuaded that gender equality is a serious issue. In this sense, an arsenal of statistics, case-studies, reports and analysis can truly be an indispensable tool in creating dialogue.

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, a certain amount of gender scholarship has emerged in Latvia since the restoration of independence. At the national level, the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) has participated in various workshops on gender disaggregation of statistics, including a seminar organized in 1995 for collectors and users of statistics on gender. One of the recommendations of this seminar — to produce a booklet specifically devoted to gender statistics — was fulfilled by the CSB in 1997. Other non-governmental groups, such as the Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies and the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Academy of Sciences have also implemented surveys and produced reports over the past five years on issues such as gender and poverty, women in politics, violence against women in the home, women in prison, and other numerous topics. Since 1993, the Women's Studies and Information Centre of the Academy of Sciences has been conducting research for specially initiated projects, collecting statistical and survey data, as well as other types of information on gender issues, and disseminating these materials to interested groups and the general public. Several private research groups also exist that have been commissioned to implement larger scale surveys and projects. For example, Baltic Data House was commissioned by UNFPA and the Ministry of Welfare in 1997 to implement a national survey on reproductive health and behaviour.

While there is a continually developing capacity in Latvia to undertake such research, unfortunately the State does not always utilize this in commissioning research for various purposes. For example, regulations on prostitution were accepted by the Government in November 1998, despite the fact

that comprehensive and reliable data on the extent of prostitution, its causes and effects in Latvia has yet to be collected. Similarly, no comprehensive studies have been commissioned on such important pressing policy issues like domestic violence, gender discrimination within the labour force, or the role that gender plays in social integration and the move towards a civic society. While it may be assumed that gender-specific trends can be extracted from more general data collection on issues such as crime, unemployment or health, international and national practice has proven time and again that not only do specifically tailored studies provide more comprehensive information, but they also point to much more dramatic indicators in regard to issues such as violence and discrimination — issues about which people are reluctant to provide information unless specifically asked by trained and sensitive interviewers. For example, the UNFPA/Ministry of Welfare Survey on Reproductive Health asked respondents, amongst many other questions, whether they had ever been the victim of sexual violence, to which only 6% of women answered yes — a definite case of underreporting.

Similarly, much data that is collected is not adequately gender disaggregated in reports and summaries of this data. While the gender of respondents or research subjects may have been noted during collection, this information is not always disseminated in a disaggregated fashion, thus making it difficult for users of the data to gain a clear and holistic impression of the given situation. This was evident, for example, in the compilation of this report. While research specifically about gender (for example, the 1997 CSB Statistical Portrait on Men and Women in Latvia) of course provides this information, other research in all areas often lacks attention to gender. It is strongly recommended that more attention be paid to gender disaggregation in both the collection and presentation of data in the future.

Despite the evolving capacity for research on gender in Latvia, certain practical constraints must also be addressed before this capacity can fully be taken advantage of. First, comprehensive research is undoubtedly very expensive. International partners and donors could provide needed and valuable resources in this respect. Furthermore, due to the high costs associated with such research, better coordination and comprehensive planning of research projects is encouraged. For example, if one group is to commission a comprehensive national survey on violence against women, it would be worth the additional effort to canvas various stakeholders in Latvia for input regarding the research questions and setting a questionnaire. Such steps could help ensure that all large scale projects yield a maximum amount of information. Various models of pooling resources (finances, people, time or ideas) should be further explored in both small and large projects.

### 3.3.3. The Role of Media

As many experts on the role of the media in society have pointed out, media can work both passively as a reflection of dominant attitudes and opinions in society, as well as actively in promoting or reinforcing certain viewpoints and perspectives. Particularly as regards gender, the media can reinforce gender stereotypes — not only concerning how men and women perceive each other, but also how they perceive themselves. On the flipside, media can also be a powerful tool for challenging gender assumptions — particularly in Latvia, where literacy rates are high (99% in 1997), many people read newspapers (16 copies of daily papers per 100 people were published in 1997), and the population watches a lot of television (102 televisions per 100 households in 1997).

The effective role of the media depends on two main factors: first, how skilled the journalists are, and second, how critical their audience is. The development of a plural media, which offers different viewpoints and perspectives, can also help to sustain this balance. The media's efficacy in terms of promoting and reinforcing gender equality in Latvia would then require journalists to be knowledgeable about and sensitive to gender issues and then able to accurately reflect these in their work. The audience, on the other hand, would need to be adequately aware of gender issues to be able to read or view the media critically. Finally, the greater the amount and variety of reporting on gender issues, the better the general public will be able to develop these critical skills.

The actual situation in Latvia is far from this ideal, although it should be noted that there have been marked improvements over the last few years. As described in Part I, the general public is still largely unaware of the significance that gender disparities can have, and of the way in which stereotypes and myths can work to foster these disparities. Unsurprisingly, then, media in Latvia is hardly more capable than the general public of challenging these stereotypes or analyzing the significance of gender inequalities. Recent research on the Latvian print media and gender-based violence<sup>24</sup> showed, for example, that out of forty news items about rape from March 1995 through July 1996, only one serious article appeared which addressed issues of power and control from a gender perspective. In general, articles on rape and domestic violence were found to perpetuate myths about these crimes, and often blamed the victim while exonerating the perpetrator.

Several positive steps have been taken, however, towards improving the quality of reporting on gender issues. For example, in March 1997, a media seminar on gender equality issues was organized for

approximately thirty print and visual media journalists in the context of preparatory activities for a Baltic-Nordic conference on gender equality. This two-day seminar consisted of both theoretical and practical approaches to gender in the media, providing journalists with background on gender concepts, illustrations of how gender has been reflected in the media, and skills for how to enhance their own reporting. Similar media training events in rural areas are planned for 1999 specifically in relation to gender issues vis a vis sexuality and family life in the context of a project to be implemented by Latvia's Association for Family Planning and Sexual Health.

The important question here, however, is whether such training has been seen to have an impact. In specific instances, this seems to be the case. Some quality reporting that takes gender issues quite seriously has appeared over the past two years in both television and print media. For example, in 1997 an article was published in *Neatkarīga Rita Avize* about the disproportionate way that poverty affects women as opposed to men, and during 1997 at least two serious articles on domestic violence were published in one paper. Feature articles on some aspect of gender (the male health crisis, NGO support to disabled women, small-and-medium sized businesses run by women) are now also more common in the largest Latvian-language daily, *Diena*. Generally, the quality of reporting in these articles, in terms of reliance on stereotypes or other unsubstantiated assumptions of gender roles, seems to be improving.

While it may seem obvious that women's magazines would offer better quality reporting on gender issues, this is not the case. In fact, these publications are perhaps the most guilty of reinforcing unhelpful gender stereotypes. Some even explicitly espouse out-dated stereotypes: For example, the (male) editor of the magazine *Zeltene* wrote in one issue that "A housewife is good at handicrafts and has a broad knowledge of life. And visually she is also a beautiful women."<sup>25</sup> Another women's magazine, *Sieviete*, advocates female passivity: "the role of the woman and the duties of the man overlap so much that there is no foundation for women to struggle to assert their moral superiority"<sup>26</sup>. The research done on media portrayals of violence against women revealed the same trend: in the April 1996 issue of *Sieviete*, the "10 Commandments for Women Who Want a Happy Family" were published, and featured the following "advice": "If an argument erupts or differences of opinion or even the slightest complications emerge, first search for blame within yourself and only then with your husband... husbands tire quickly of tearful wives."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ieva Zake, "The Latvian Press and Violence Against Women in the Context of Gender Equality", 1997.

<sup>25</sup> *Zeltene*, no. 6, 1995, 12, as quoted in Novikova, "Fashioning our Minds", 1998.

<sup>26</sup> *Sieviete*, no. 5, 1993, as quoted in Novikova, "Fashioning our Minds," 1998.

<sup>27</sup> *Sieviete*, no.4, 1996, as quoted in Zake, "The Latvian Press and Violence against Women," 1997.

Women's magazines evidently seem to do a better job of upholding stereotypes than challenging them.

The point here, however, is not that such journals should be censored in the name of gender equality, as the development of a free and just society is based on many principles, including freedom of the press. Unfortunately, this type of women's publication is the only type available to readers in Latvia — alternative views do not exist in the popular media, thus hindering audiences from being able to evaluate this material more critically. It is therefore important to encourage the development of more plural media for women.

It is also worth noting that there are differences between the gender roles that are promoted in Latvian-language and Russian-language press. The goal of social integration — a crucial aspect of human development in Latvia — could be better promoted if a more qualitative dialogue were fostered between Latvian speakers and Russian-speaking minorities on a variety of important issues — including breaking down old gender stereotypes and working together to articulate new roles for men and women that could accommodate all ethnicities in the process of nation building.

Thus, while the situation seems to be improving, there is still much to be addressed in terms of gender representations in the media. At the same time, there is also much untapped potential in using the media actively to promote the goal of gender equality. Not only can gender stereotypes be challenged in media, but media can also be used as the conveyor of practical information that would enhance gender equality in Latvia: media should be deployed to bring an understanding of the policies and legislation that affect people's everyday lives to the general public, in a way that they can understand, highlighting any gender implications. Media can also be used to foster greater transparency in society, and to uncover disparities that are not pronounced in the public eye. The media can thus be proactive both in integrating a gender perspective into reporting generally, and in providing special features or columns (or entire publications or broadcasts) that specifically tackle these issues. Through more activities such as these, not only will the way in which gender matters to human development be better understood, but some of the root causes of gender disparities — outdated attitudes and stereotypes — will also be challenged, and hopefully, eventually, overcome.

### 3.3.4 International Cooperation and Support

There are various ways in which international partners can also play an important role in promoting gender equality. This can include not only financial support to projects and other initia-

tives, but also support to raising the profile of gender issues and in using international pressure as a means of inciting states to action. A very basic example of this type of pressure is that of the interna-

#### **Box 7**

#### **Partnerships for Dialogue**

From the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 1997, around 2000 women and men from eleven Nordic and Baltic countries gathered in Valmiera to participate in the conference, "Women and Men in Dialogue". The goal of the conference was to examine gender equality not only cross-culturally — looking for similarities and differences between the experiences of various countries, but also cross-sectorally: topics ranging from media to violence, from health to politics, from business to religion, were all examined both in plenary sessions and working groups with the aim of better understanding how gender is an integral part of all of these spheres. Most importantly, however, the conference intended to discuss these issues across both genders, engaging men and women equally in this important discussion, and recognizing that the contributions from both genders would be necessary for any sustainable solutions.

International cooperation was a vital part of this event in various ways: not insignificantly, the event was funded by international donors. Equally as important in terms of the success of the event, however, was the profile that was raised due to such a high level of international interest, commitment and participation in the conference. The presence of government officials from all participant countries, including Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, ensured not only ample press coverage, but also attendance by the same level of officials from the Latvian side — something unprecedented in Latvia in terms of discussions on gender issues.

In the case of the Valmiera conference, not only did international participation stimulate national participation, but it also provided the opportunity for a unique exchange of opinions. For example, during a ministerial panel discussion, the Minister of Welfare of Latvia sat alongside Nordic and Baltic counterparts, fielding questions on gender and government policy. Equally as unique was the opportunity for activists, scholars and professionals involved in gender issues to network with their Baltic and Nordic colleagues, exchanging ideas and in many cases, laying the groundwork for joint projects in the future — many of which are being implemented today. Thus the Valmiera conference represents for many a true example of dialogue — not only between men and women, but also between Latvia and its international partners.

tional community on specific states to ratify the global conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Similarly, pressure from European Union member states can encourage prospective member countries to adapt legislation compatible with EU requirements. In the case of Latvia, such pressure has also been effective in encouraging the Government to establish a Gender Focal Point within the national machinery (despite the fact that this had been recommended by national activists for several years, it is debatable whether or not it would have happened without the parallel encouragement from international partners.)

International partnerships are also equally meaningful at the non-governmental level. Many NGOs in Latvia benefit from cooperation with international partners, either through grant-giving or other funding opportunities, or through links to international networks. For example, since 1997 several gender organizations in Latvia have been part of the Femina-Baltica network which seeks to enhance long-term and large-scale cooperation of women at all levels of society in communities around the Baltic Sea. Other organizations are part of the East-West Women's Network (NEWW), which disseminates information and promotes collaboration of women's groups in Eastern Europe and the West over the internet. Other NGOs are affiliated to or

are members of global organizations and thus benefit from networking and training opportunities, and some financial support.

While international partnerships have been in many ways instrumental in bringing attention to gender issues in Latvia, it is also important to remember that initiative and commitment must become truly indigenous before real change can occur. At the same time, international partners must be wary of pushing their own agendas before securing the necessary support from national partners, either at the national or the grass-roots level. Because "gender" is an issue that is unfortunately often met with scepticism, international partners can run the risk of strengthening the opinions of those who believe gender equality is a "western import" and a challenge to Latvia's cultural sovereignty. In this sense, strategic interventions must always be planned with participation of national voices. International organizations and partners, particularly those non-resident in Latvia, must also be sure to avoid homogenization of all non-western countries, or even of Eastern and Central European countries, without paying close attention to specifically articulated needs and varying circumstances. Finally, the most effective international partnerships are sure to be those with reciprocal channels of idea generation, awareness-raising and project development and implementation.