

GENDER
AND
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
IN LATVIA

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Author and Report Coordinator:

Astrida Neimanis

UNDP Project Manager:

Charlotta Relander

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Cover: Nele Zirnīte, *The Bunch* (etching, 1998)

Nele Zirnīte was born in Lithuania in 1959, and in 1984 graduated from the Graphic Art Department of the Latvian Academy of Art. She has been a prolific graphic artist in Latvia for almost 15 years.

Design and layout: Olafs Zaķis
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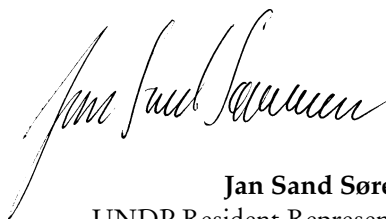
Foreword

When Latvia's Constitution was renewed following the restoration of independence in 1991, one of the basic principles enshrined therein was the right of every individual to be protected from discrimination on the basis of his or her sex. Latvia has signed the relevant international conventions which guarantee equal rights for men and women, and this principle is also embodied in Latvian legislation.

It therefore seems that Latvia has come a long way towards ensuring gender equality for its inhabitants in the relatively short time that has elapsed since the restoration of independence. However, this formal equality guaranteed by signatures and promises is only the foundation — the base — upon which true equality in everyday relations and interactions must be built. It is one thing to put pen to paper and adopt a law; it is quite another whether this law is applied throughout society and in all aspects of life — in the labour market, in schools and education, and in the home. While many people think gender equality is only a question of “women's equality”, it is in fact as much about men's, or rather of equal opportunities for all and of increasing the well-being of each individual in society, regardless of sex.

While formal equality strives to guarantee justice and fairness, gender equality is just as much about guaranteeing the welfare, stability and sustainability of a nation. By looking at the concepts of “gender” and “human development” as closely linked, the report therefore hopes to promote an understanding of the added value of gender equality for all of society, and of the links between gender inequalities and other problems. These problems include opportunities within the labour market, division of labour within the home, deteriorating health indicators, and rising incidence of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation.

Sustainable solutions demand the development of appropriate mechanisms that will enable the Government, in cooperation with civil society, to recognize, monitor and react to gender inequalities and related problems. The establishment of a Gender Focal Point in the Ministry of Welfare at the beginning of this year is a commendable first step in this direction. However, longer term change will demand a strengthened dialogue about gender issues at all levels of society, and a shift in the way these issues are approached and understood. I hope that the report **Gender and Human Development in Latvia** will provide as strong contribution to this important dialogue.



Jan Sand Sørensen
UNDP Resident Representative
Riga, July 1999

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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:

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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

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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.

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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.

tainable development in Latvia.

While a traditional approach to economics has often focused on financial resources, it is important to recognize “economics” as consisting of other resources and aspects that are not usually associated with monetary value. In this sense, “work” consists not only of remunerated work, but of unpaid work as well (such as domestic work and

child-rearing). Similarly, availability of resources, or the lack thereof, can pertain not only to money, but to other goods and services, time, and unquantifiable resources such as health, social interaction or education. Thus, while the following three sections will look at various aspects of economics from a traditional perspective, they also address these other aspects as equally important.

2.1.1 Poverty

Poverty has been recognized as one of the greatest barriers to sustainable human development, particularly when defined in a comprehensive manner to mean not only a lack of material resources, but also a lack of opportunities and a lack of access (to education, to information, to health care, to social contact). Gender is also a critical dimension of poverty: because poverty impacts men and women differently, one gender or the other can be put at an increased risk for poverty or may bear the consequences of poverty as an increased burden. In other words, both causes and effects of poverty are gendered, and need to be analyzed as such. Strategies for addressing poverty must therefore also anticipate and address the ways they will impact both genders differently.

Until very recently in Latvia, poverty had not been a focal subject of policy debate. While the issue was being sidestepped by the Government, however, poverty-related problems in Latvia grew increasingly acute. Realizing the growing imperative for action, the Government requested UNDP assistance in carrying out an in-depth needs assessment and analysis of poverty in Latvia which would provide the basis of a strategy for alleviating poverty to be developed in 1999 by a working group appointed by the Cabinet of Ministers and led by the Ministry of Welfare. In the context of this project, various analyses of poverty are planned, and as of spring 1999, three poverty reports (each focussing on specific issues) have already been pro-

duced. These have incidentally highlighted various important gendered aspects of the problem.

For example, in the Report, **Who is Poor in Latvia and Where?**⁵, the “poverty risk” was calculated for various socio-economic categories of the population. When looking at differences in gender, the report notes that an initial glance at poverty indicators suggests no significant differences in poverty risk between women and men. However, a more in-depth analysis reveals that single women living by themselves in Latvia have the lowest risk for poverty, while men who live on their own are subject to a significantly higher risk: 15.4% of single women are poor, in comparison to 23.6% of single men. However, this situation inverts itself as the household grows larger: the more children per household, the more the risk for poverty increases for female-headed households. While the risk for poverty for male-headed households with additional children also grows larger, this increase is neither as steep nor does it reach the same level (see Figure 1). These are very significant observations that need to be analysed in more detail by policy analysts. At the moment, though, several points can nonetheless be extracted from these data: First, given that women can either be at the greatest risk or at the smallest risk for poverty, depending on their family situation, it is evident that there is nothing *inherent* in one’s gender (such as ability, fiscal management skills, will to work, etc) that creates poverty risk. Rather, social roles and social functions and the context within

Figure 1

Percentage of the Population Living in Poverty (Household income >38 Lats per month per household member.)		
Of those who:	Men	Women
Live Alone	23.6%	15.4%
Head a household with:		
no children	28.37%	28.8%
1 child	42.89%	46.3%
2 children	47.62%	61.09%
3 children	68.75%	75.21%
4+ children	79.97%	91.45%

⁵F. Gassmann, UNDP, 1998.

which both genders live out their daily existences seem to be far more significant in determining one's risk for poverty. The fact that women without children are less poor than women with children, while the opposite holds true for men, suggests that because of unequal distribution of childcare responsibilities in the home, women are unable to contribute equally to productive work if they have many children. It follows then, that if men were more active in the domestic sphere, families would be at less of a risk for poverty (see 2.1.3 for more analysis on this point). Furthermore, the fact that female-headed households with children are poorer than male-headed households with children reminds us that many female-headed households with children are those with absent fathers who often fail to contribute resources required for childrearing (money and time). Male-headed households with children, on the other hand, are more likely to be those with two parents that share productive labour and domestic work responsibilities (whether equally or not). Again, the need for stronger participation of fathers in family life is highlighted.

Quantitative measures of poverty (i.e. household or individual income levels), although often revealing when disaggregated according to gender, do not tell the whole story: poverty also pertains to other aspects of an individual's existence, such as opportunities and access, as mentioned above, as well as issues such as self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness, dependence, cultural or spiritual deprivation and social isolation — all of which often elude quantitative measures. That is why, as some experts have noted, documenting the experience of poverty and how it is gendered, particularly from the perspective of those who suffer most from it, is one important step towards the development of adequate policies to address these problems. Latvia has already taken a very significant step in this respect: In 1998, the Philosophy and Sociology Institute of the Academy of Sciences in Latvia was commissioned under the above-mentioned UNDP technical assistance project to undertake a qualitative analysis of poverty in Latvia. While substantiating the quantitative gender disparities mentioned above, this analysis goes further to underline some of the gender dimensions that a household budget survey can miss. For example, the qualitative analysis highlights how women and men employ different survival strategies to contend with their poverty: many respondents noted that men had more of a tendency to slip into deep depression, alcoholism and other self-destructive behaviour, sometimes culminating in suicide, while women (most often noting their responsibilities towards their children) were more active in seeking out any way at all to make ends meet, in spite of their own feelings of depression and social isolation. Again, it is evident how more involvement by men in the domestic sphere would not only provide support and assistance to women and other family members in such

crises, but would also increase men's feelings of self-worth and responsibility at a time when they are isolated from the formal employment sphere which has traditionally served as the source of their self-esteem.

The qualitative survey also highlighted how the existence of gender discrimination in society impeded women in their attempts to climb out of poverty. Many women noted how they had received discriminatory treatment from both private employers and the State Employment Service when looking for work: For example, women often reported being discriminated against because they were older than 35 or even 30. While it should be noted that men above 50 also experienced difficulties in finding work, women often encountered additional discrimination in regards to their gender, appearance and role as a mother. As one woman noted, she had recently been dismayed by a job advertisement looking for "a young, pretty female worker with a nice figure and long legs." Similarly, one woman reports she was turned down for a factory job only after the employer noted that she had five children at home. Similar tendencies were noted all across the country, in both urban and rural areas. This type of discrimination has various effects: first, it devalues women's potential as employees, implying that their looks or age are more important than their abilities and skills. Not only does this put them at an unfair disadvantage in advancing their own professional lives, but it also has a serious impact on the material conditions of their families — as quantitative data on poverty levels of women with children has indisputably substantiated. Discrimination against women as mothers also reinforces social roles concerning a woman's place within the home, again locking her into stereotypes, while at the same time not in any way encouraging men to participate more meaningfully in the domestic sphere. Not least, such blatant discrimination against one's gender or age is also prohibited by the Constitution of Latvia and needs to be challenged on that basis alone.

Thus it is crucial that any steps to address poverty in Latvia take these gender discrepancies into consideration. For example, the UNDP/Ministry of Welfare project that has as its goal the development of a poverty alleviation strategy must be concerned not only with unemployment and education, but also with gendered dimensions of poverty. This strategy should promote activities that address both causes and effects of poverty and the way in which these are gendered. Specific activities could include: the provision of more psychological support for men (such as fathers' support groups), promotion of activities and services that strengthen the family in times of crisis, organization of retraining activities at times when women will be able to balance them with childcare responsibilities, mentoring programmes for women, the establishment of more and better day-care services, and gender sensitivity training for the State Employment

Service and potential employers. Specifically addressing gender in such a strategy would also be an important show of political will on the part of the

Government. This alone could help change societal attitudes, while also having a ripple effect in other areas of policy-making.

2.1.2. Gender, Employment and The Labour Market

Rates of employment and the quality of employment are pivotal factors that impact a nation's human development. In Latvia, with the transition to a market economy, the employment sector has had to make the parallel transition from state-controlled employment to the growth of private enterprise and major restructuring of the labour market. New trends and new policies have affected different groups of the population in different ways. Men and women, too, have been impacted differently by these changes. In order to maximize the contributions that both can make, while also guaranteeing gender equality in access to resources and opportunities, it is necessary to analyze unemployment, access to employment and quality of employment from a gender perspective, so that policies and other interventions can be appropriately developed, implemented and evaluated.

Research has shown that women are placed at a disadvantage before they even enter the labour market. For example, in an analysis of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the **Latvia Human Development Report 1998** noted that entrepreneurs are predominantly male. Furthermore, the higher level of male activity in the SME sector was anticipated to grow even more, as employers reported that in the future, they planned to hire more men than women. These findings were also reflected in interviews with women, as noted in the previous section on poverty: many women report that they are refused jobs either because they are young women (employers assume childbearing and child-rearing will negatively impact their productivity), or because they are too old — and therefore “untrainable” or “unattractive.” Such blatant discrimination needs to be seriously addressed. While the largest Latvian-language newspaper has, thanks to the efforts of NGO lobbying, banned sex and age discrimination in job advertisements, discrimination nonetheless persists. The lack of a Labour Court or efficient ombudsperson institution that could address issues of discrimination in the labour force is one aspect of the problem, but the other is a lack of awareness of these issues in general. Many women who are discriminated against are not aware of their rights or of what action they can take to protect them. While the National Human Rights Office has an important role to play here, trade unions and employer's organizations should also be addressing this problem: employees' organizations should be working to protect the rights of those who are discriminated against, while employer organizations

should initiate activities to educate their members about discrimination.

If one were to look at rates of unemployment and economic activity, however, it might appear that women are not hindered from entering the labour market at all: rates of employment and unemployment are about equal for women and men (see Figure 2). Are women, then, not discriminated against in the labour market? The answer, quite simply, is no. As pointed out by an expert from the International Labour Organization in a recent report on the labour market in Latvia⁶, *quality* of employment is also vital to human development: simply because people *have* jobs, this does not mean that they are personally satisfied, subject to just and equal treatment in terms of career advancement and pay, or even earn a living wage (in Latvia, a significant number of people living in poverty are, in fact, formally employed). Trends and circumstances within the labour market — and not only rates of employment — therefore also need to be addressed from a gender perspective.

It is not surprising, then, that once women have entered the labour market, there is also evidence to suggest that they are again discriminated against. For example, various studies have highlighted the fact that serious discrepancies exist between the wages that women and men earn: on average, in the private sector men earn 10 Lats more than women per month. In the **Latvia Human Development Report 1998**, the authors highlight that this is because men tend to work in sectors with higher average wages, such as construction, while women are more often employed in low-paid jobs in education and service. The **Human Development Report** thus concludes that women who work in the same jobs as men actually only earn an average of 4 Lats less (which, it should be noted, is evidence of discrimination nonetheless). While this is one reason, it is not the only one: it must be noted that men are far more likely than women to be employers — three times more likely, in fact (see Figure 3). This, and not only the sectors in which men and women work, will affect average wages.

Furthermore, the underlying causes for the 10 Lat wage discrepancy need to be examined, rather than dismissed as a simple feature of labour market demographics. For example, we need to ask, first, *why* women are employed in lower paying sectors than men, and then, *why* they are less likely to experience career advancement on a par with their male counterparts. An answer to the first question un-

⁶Maarten Keune, Poverty and the Labour Market in Latvia, UNDP 1998.

doubtedly concerns attitudes and gender roles. In regard to sectors of the labour market, pervasive cultural stereotypes keep women out of jobs such as construction, while also deterring men from jobs in education, medicine, and the like. This is not to say that women want to be construction workers, but are not permitted to be: it is rather pointing out that due to culture and traditions, many women would not even consider themselves suitable for such a profession. This is further reinforced by a rejection of Soviet era gender equality and the reaffirmation of traditional gender roles discussed in Part I. For similar reasons of cultural stereotyping, men rarely become nurses, or teachers. The objective here, again, should be to break down these stereotypes so that both men and women have true choices in their professional lives, and are accepted in their chosen profession, regardless of their sex. Not only would this enhance professional satisfaction for individuals, but would also increase the gender balance in all professions. Perhaps most importantly, this would also remove one of the barriers that deters women from finding work, particularly in the better paid sectors of the labour market. Similarly, unemployed men would have better chances of finding stable work if it were more socially accepted for them to work in traditionally “female” professions.

A specific example of this type of discrimination is noted in the SME sector — an area where wages and job security are often more favourable. As noted above, women are not as active as men in this area of the formal labour market. In the **Latvia Human Development Report 1998**, the authors remark that this is probably because employers are looking for “skilled, full-time workers”, and that women are at a disadvantage here. However, given the fact that women are both better educated (see Part 2.2) and more active in the labour market than men, it is difficult to understand how exactly their skills are lacking — particularly for work typically associated with SMEs (service, accounting, etc). When employers in general were surveyed about their work forces, they stated that they are looking for employees with foreign languages, computer skills, communication skills and practical abilities backed up with theoretical knowledge. Again the question, how are women lacking, exactly? It is a mistake to simply accept at face-value the fact that

women are “unskilled”, and the underlying assumptions of this statement need to be addressed. Furthermore, if it is discovered that women truly are unskilled in comparison to men, then necessary policies and initiatives must be put into place to equalize the situation. As far as the need for “full-time” employees goes, this goes back to the reluctance of employers to hire women because of assumptions made regarding childcare responsibilities. Again, more participation of men in the domestic sphere, as well as more sensitivity on the part of employers, would help to rectify this situation.

An answer to the second question (why are women less likely to experience career advancement?) is also connected to gender roles and stereotypes. Simply put, society values the work of men more. Reasons for this are less likely to do with the objective abilities and skills of men and women, and more likely to do with presumptions about gender roles. Just as men are more readily hired for the reasons highlighted above, they are also more readily promoted. Similarly, women are far more likely to be engaged in unpaid labour as family members or relatives (see Figure 3). This underlines the value that is attached in Latvian society to the work that men and women do, regardless of what the nature of that work is: if men perform a job, it is valued more, thus higher remuneration and other rewards, such as promotion, are forthcoming. If Latvia is to maximize its opportunities for sustained economic growth, these attitudes must be addressed, challenged and changed.

Several steps have been taken to help redress some of these inequalities. The Ministry of Economy, for example, has recently developed a micro-credit programme for women entrepreneurs. Other such programmes are being implemented around the country at the regional and local levels, supported by various non-governmental organizations and local organizations. The UNDP has also organized a training programme for women in small- and medium-sized enterprise. Unfortunately it is difficult at this stage to evaluate the impact of these programmes, as they are all relatively new.

Some attempts have also been made in the past to accommodate women who are mothers but also have remunerated employment outside the home. For example, Article 172 of the Labour Code of Latvia stipulates that women with children un-

Men and Women in and out of the Labour Force

November, 1997 (total inhabitants, thsds)

	Total	Men	Women
Economically Active	1186.1	615.2	571.0
Employed	1014.9	527.1 (85.7%)	487.1 (85.3%)
Unemployed	171.2	88.0 (14.3%)	83.2 (14.6%)

Figure 2

Figure 3**Women and Men in the Labour Force According to Status and Their Primary Job** (thsd)

	Men			Women		
	1995	1996	1997	1995	1996	1997
Employees	429,0	418,7	420,8	399,9	400,1	401,2
Employers	26,5	20,1	25,7	11,2	7,8	8,3
Self-employed	37,2	45,6	53,2	20,3	30,2	43,9
Unpaid labour (family, relatives)	21,1	19,1	25,7	25,5	22,4	33,9

der the age of three should be awarded full wages while working only 30 hours per week, instead of 40. While attention to this issue within legislation is commendable, several comments are nonetheless called for: in the first place, many working mothers are unaware that such a provision even exists in Latvian legislation, which speaks to the need for more information dissemination on the part of the State. Secondly, however, it should be noted that without a corresponding culture within the labour market that supports the demands of parenthood, women will be blocked from exercising their rights in the first place: if women place such demands on their employers, they run the substantiated risk of losing their jobs, just as women of child bearing age are often not given jobs in the first place. Furthermore, because of the current lack of an efficient complaints mechanism for addressing such conflicts within the workplace, if women are unjustifiably dismissed, or if employers refuse to comply with these legislative requirements, women have little course of redress. This is a good example of how legal rights are meaningless in a practical context fraught with obstacles to the enjoyment of this equality.

Finally, however, the most elementary

problem with this article of the Labour Code is its focus on mothers at the exclusion of fathers. While law-makers should be commended for their attention to the importance of parenthood, this article again fixes the woman as the prime care-giver while simultaneously alienating men from their potential role as fathers. This not only directly impacts children in the family (in terms of the gender roles and stereotypes that they will inherit and most likely continue to espouse) but also has widespread consequences for women and men, and society as a whole: women, due to their family responsibilities, are impeded from participating more actively in the public sphere, are relegated to lower-paid jobs and have more narrow networks of information and contact, while men, pushed outside of the family, often experience depression and other health problems, particularly if they lose their jobs. As a result, neither the public nor the private sphere can reap the benefits of gender-balanced decision-making and participation. Thus, continued policy and legislative review is necessary with the view to enhancing the quality of women's employment, while simultaneously allowing for strengthened families with more equal division of responsibilities.

2.1.3. Home Economics:

The Gendered Division of Household Work and Family Responsibilities.

Many experts on both gender and human development have noted that the gendered division of labour plays a key role in the perpetuation of gender inequality. This applies not only to the way the formal labour sector is structured according to gender, but also to the gendered division of labour within the private sphere — the home and the family. If the average employed inhabitant of Latvia spends around 8 hours at his or her workplace, it is logical that another 16 hours will be spent away from it — either engaging in social or civic activities, or, more commonly, within the home. As we all know, households are not run on their own — indeed, many people devote their entire day to domestic work, with still plenty left to do at the end of the day. While cleaning, cooking, shopping and household manage-

ment are a handful on their own, childrearing and child care multiply the amount of work to be done by several times. In short, it cannot be said that housework is not, indeed, "work."

Furthermore, unpaid labour within the home is a vital aspect of a nation's economics. In 1995, the UNDP global **Human Development Report** estimated that the non-monetized, invisible contributions of women to the economy, if added up, would total around \$11 trillion. It is in fact this invisible contribution that makes the formal sector of the economy possible, as we all need a home in which to live, clean clothes to go to work in, meals to eat. Children, who make up the future labour force, need to be fed, bathed, clothed, and prepared for school as well. Quite simply, without this con-

Time Usage Among Employed Men and Women

(Total Time Fund: 168 hrs.)

Activity	Men	Women
Physiological needs	72:06	69:50
Salaried job	51:20	46:45
Studies	1:02	1:05
Domestic work	15:44	28:03
Free time	27:05	21:48
Undistributed time	0:43	0:35

Figure 4

tribution, the nation would collapse.

Recent research⁷ showed that 73% of women in Latvia are primarily responsible for all of the domestic work in the household. However, given the pressures of the current economic situation, most women — or at least the same amount of women as men — are also employed outside of the home. This means that many women are in fact employed in two full-time jobs. It is no surprise then, that when a similar study asked respondents to keep a diary of the way they spend their time, it was revealed that employed women spend almost twice as many hours on domestic work as do employed men, while these same women spend only slightly fewer hours at their remunerated job. As a result, employed men have more time for both physiological needs (eating, sleeping, bathroom time) and leisure time — over an hour extra a day, in fact.⁸ In households with children, differences in contributions are even starker: whereas single women spend about 10 hours more per week on domestic work than do single men, women spend an average of 20 hours more than men on domestic chores if these respondents are part of a couple with children. The emerging picture is very clear: women are making a much larger, yet unrecognized, contribution to the economy than that of their male counterparts.

This situation has a variety of consequences. From the woman's perspective, her opportunities within the formal labour market are restricted while she is forced to juggle all of her responsibilities. As a result, her health — both physical and mental — may suffer, and her opportunities for both personal and professional development are narrowed. As far as the family goes, however, all members suffer — not least of all, children, who in effect are left with only one full-time care-giver. In order to rectify this situation, it is absolutely crucial that fathers and male partners become more active in the domestic sphere.

The most effective and sustainable way to affect this change is through dialogue and shifts in attitudes — within the family and within society as a whole. Legislation and policy, however, do have a

role to play here as well. As gender activists in Latvia have been pointing out since 1995, current social benefits policies that grant child care allowances solely to mothers legitimate current gender roles concerning parenthood: On the one hand this approach to policy reduces opportunities for women outside of the home (she and only she must look after young children) while on the other hand, men are further isolated from active fatherhood. Changes to these policies must be made so that parents are able to choose appropriate arrangements based on their individual circumstances. Similarly, laws pertaining to employment and the formal labour market (see, for example, Part 2.1.2 on Article 172 of the Labour Code) should not be solely focused on finding ways to allow women to juggle their career and their household — they should also be encouraging fathers to share this burden.

On a positive note, social dialogue about these issues has noticeably increased over the past few years. Leading this effort are both NGOs and academics — while a considerable amount of research on these issues has been published over the last two years (see Bibliography), this has been supported by a number of conferences and seminars that attempt to bring this research to a wider audience. For example, in November 1998 the Women Studies and Information Centre, in cooperation with the Council of Europe, held a seminar on "The Role of Fathers in the Family." The activities of several NGOs are also worth mentioning, most notably the efforts of the Union of Latvian Associations of Large Families, which has been working for several years to strengthen the role of the family in society, including increased participation of fathers. This organization has also actively lobbied the Government to implement more family-friendly policies, unfortunately, however, with limited success. Partnerships between state and local government institutions and community-based and non-governmental organizations need to be strengthened in the future in order to combine social dialogue and public policy for change.

⁷ B. Zepa et. al. "Latvian Women in the Labour Market: Attitudes and Behaviours". 1998.

⁸ Ieva Marga Markausa, "The Distribution of Domestic Work in Latvian Families," 1998.

2.2 Gender and Education

The level and quality of a nation's education is a meaningful indicator of human development: the more literate and educated a nation is, the more its population can contribute to its ongoing development, while also enjoying their rights and responsibilities as residents of that nation. In terms of gender, education should be examined from the perspective of access and structural equality — that

is, whether or not men and women have equal opportunities within the education system — but should also be looked at in terms of substance: Do schools and the materials they teach promote or hinder gender equality? Do educational programmes reinforce or challenge stereotypes and out-of-date gender roles? In this context, education can also be seen as an *opportunity* for addressing inequality.

2.2.1 Structural Equality in the Education System

In comparison to many other countries, the population of Latvia is very well-educated with a literacy rate of 99% in 1996. Furthermore, the percentage of inhabitants aged 7-23 years old that are enrolled in some type of educational facility has increased from 68.2% in 1993 to 74% in 1997. It also can be said that women and men in Latvia have relatively equal opportunities when it comes to formal education: In 1997, 50.5% of students enrolled in comprehensive schools were female — a percentage that has remained relatively unchanged since 1990. Additionally, there are currently no formal or societal barriers in Latvia that would place girls at a disadvantage to boys in terms of access to basic education, as it is a culturally accepted norm in Latvia that girls should receive the same amount of education as boys.

In terms of professional education, it is worth noting that in the 1996/97 school year, only 41.7% of students enrolled at vocational schools were women. However, since a secondary professional education can also be completed at specialized secondary schools, where 52.1% of those enrolled were women, one could conclude that professional education opportunities, and the enjoyment thereof, are equal for both men and women.

Moving on to higher education, however,

discrepancies between the sexes grow. The ratio of female to male university graduates in 1997 was 1.4 to 1. In other words, if anything, men seem to be worse off than women when it comes to earning a university degree. But this discrepancy needs to further analyzed. For example, how does this difference impact opportunities for men and women? In terms of higher education as a means of preparing for a career, we see that men do not seem to be discriminated against at all: Given that women are disadvantaged both in the labour market (see above) and in terms of political representation at the national level (see below), their better education does not seem to put them at any advantage. It is absolutely crucial that this major inconsistency be examined more closely: If women are more educated than men, why do they make less money and hold less prestigious jobs? The answer undoubtedly brings us back to issues of hidden discrimination, stereotypes and gender roles in the sphere of employment, both in the public and private sector, that were discussed above.

Another issue to consider, however, is the type of education men and women are receiving. Just because more women are active in higher education, this does not necessarily mean that they are better equipped for a higher *quality* of employment.⁹ For

Figure 5

Percentage of Women Enrolled in Various Fields of Vocational and Specialized Secondary Education

(as of September 1997)¹⁰

Field of Study	% of Women, Specialized Secondary Education	% of Women, Vocational Schools
Institutions		
General Education	38	38
Humanities	79	75
Social Science	88	74
Engineering and Technology	25	15
Agriculture	35	46
Health and Health Sciences	—	95
Services	74	82

⁹ The quality of employment refers to such aspects as working conditions, working hours and remuneration.

¹⁰ Educational Institutions in Latvia. CSB. Riga, 1998.

Figure 6**Enrolment in Selected Institutions of Higher Education by Sex**(as of September 1996)¹¹

School	Enrolment		% of women of total enrolment
	Women	Men	
University of Latvia	10882	5539	66.3
Riga Technical University	3054	5014	37.9
Latvian University of Agriculture	2938	2994	49.5
Riga Aviation University	1363	1892	41.9
Latvian Academy of Medicine	1531	615	71.3
Riga College of Pedagogics and Education	2462	143	94.5
Police Academy of Latvia	667	1364	32.8
Pedagogical Sports Academy of Latvia	526	593	47
National Academy of Defence	74	635	10.4
Latvian Academy of Arts	422	216	66.1
Latvian Academy of Culture	446	105	80.9
Jazeps Vitols Academy of Music	253	156	61.9
Riga College of Economics	72	126	36.4

example, at the beginning of the 1996/97 school year, women made up 80.9% of the students enrolled at the Latvian Academy of Culture, 71.3% of the students at the Latvian Academy of Medicine and 94.5% of the students at the Riga Higher Education Institution for Pedagogy and Education — all sectors in which professionals traditionally receive low wages and are afforded low social status in Latvia. Conversely, women made up only 36.4% of the students enrolled at the Riga College of Economics. A similar picture is reflected in enrolment at vocational and specialized secondary schools, where gender balance does not exist in any subject area: all areas of study (with the exception of agriculture) are either predominantly male or predominantly female — and some overwhelmingly so (see Figure 5).

Unfortunately, there are no statistics that could provide information on whether these percentages reflect the fact that pre-existing cultural stereotypes are keeping women and men out of certain fields of study, or whether these are free and informed choices on the part of the students. In ei-

ther case, all professions and educational disciplines would benefit from a more equal gender balance: if both men and women were equally represented in the medical profession, then gendered aspects of medicine would be more likely to be addressed. Conversely, if more women studied economics, more females would be more likely to be employers and in management positions in the private sector.

Despite the need for more comprehensive analyses of the links between education and opportunities and how this impacts both genders differently, several recommendations can already be made. For example, teachers, education counsellors and career counsellors should be encouraged to promote the participation of young men and women in “non-traditional” fields of study for their gender. Furthermore, the education system — and particularly vocational education and higher education — needs to be reformed so that it better meets the demands of the changing labour market. In the context of such a reform, mechanisms should be established that would guarantee both young men and young women equal opportunities to access to the labour market.

2.2.2 Promoting Gender Equality Within Education Programmes

The education system has a potentially important role to play in finding ways to address and eliminate gender inequality in society. As one educator has noted, “The world is created by our interpretations of it. We create our views not on the basis of what is true, but on the basis of what we see and hear around us”¹². For children especially, then, what they are exposed to in the school environment can significantly impact their views and behaviour.

If gender equality were to be reflected and promoted in teaching materials and classroom interactions, then a significant step would be taken towards addressing gender roles and stereotypes outside of the classroom.

Guidelines issued by the Content and Examinations Centre of the Ministry of Education in 1997 regarding teaching in the social sciences state that elementary school students should gain an un-

¹¹ Latvian Women and Men: A Statistical Portrait. CSB, Riga, 1997.

¹² Aija Tuna, “Gender Equality in Latvian Schools”. Much of the information in Section 2.3.2 is based on Ms. Tuna’s reflections in the cited article.

Thinking Gender: The Gender Studies Centre of the University of Latvia

When asked recently by a Finnish colleague whether it was not maybe “too early” to discuss gender and feminist theory in Latvia, the director of the Gender Studies Centre at the University of Latvia answered that the academic discussion of these issues in Latvia was long overdue. For this reason, through the enthusiasm and hard work of three women, the Gender Studies Centre was established in 1998. Primarily financed by grants from the Central European University, the Centre offers courses to students (and non-students in the community) in various disciplines of gender studies and organizes events to promote the debate. Most recently, these have included a conference on Gender and Multiculturalism in Jurmala in June 1998 and an International Nordic-Baltic Conference on Gender Studies in Riga, in October 1998. The Centre has also published several books in cooperation with international partners.

While the University provides office space and classrooms, all activities of the Centre are financed from individual project funds (from organizations such as the Nordic Women’s Information Centre, the Soros Foundation and the Nordic Council of Ministers). Although on the one hand the lack of university funding carries with it a welcome freedom in terms of hiring lecturers and setting a curriculum, it also leaves the centre in a precarious balance: what happens when project funds run out?

As with any new initiative, the Centre will have to prove that its existence makes a vital contribution both to the University and to society more generally. One way it is trying to do this is by attracting a diverse audience to classes and activities. Male students have attended every class to date, and the emerging flip side of “women’s studies” — masculinities — is also being taken seriously. In the spring of 1999, a guest lecturer and international expert on male studies gave a series of lectures on this topic.

Another main objective is involving gender activists from NGOs and the wider community in both courses and conferences hosted by the Centre. As the Centre’s director points out, these activists can often teach academia a lot more than academia can teach them. In this way, a necessary intersection of theory and practice emerges: the study of gender relations informs the way activities are implemented, and reality of gender relations in society continues to remind academics that theories require practical application. The director of the Centre also feels that more information about gender issues needs to be published, more straightforward texts need to be translated into Latvian, and, most importantly, this information needs to be made accessible to everyone in society — not just to academics in dusty library reading rooms. Through this intersection, the Gender Studies Centre can make an important contribution to the way in which gender relations are understood.

Understanding of the following: “what men and women, as well as boys and girls, have in common and what is different between them; stereotypes and reality, distribution of jobs and obligations; links between gender and profession; historical traditions and the present day.” The guidelines also state that classroom activities should reflect “cooperation, mutual assistance; ensuring and demanding equal opportunities.” Similar guidelines are also currently being developed at the secondary school level.

These guidelines are a very significant and important step forward — not only will they (hopefully) influence what is being taught in classrooms, but they also illustrate political will on the part of the Government to take gender equality seriously. However, the guidelines will be meaningless without a concerted effort to implement them, including the monitoring and evaluation of this process. At the moment, there is still plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that the reality in classrooms still reflects gender bias and stereotype: for example, one researcher has noted that when housework

is discussed in classrooms, children are still encouraged by teachers to assist “mommy” at home. Similarly, many teaching materials are based on Latvian folklore traditions which depict traditional gender roles as discussed in Part I. Teachers enforce these roles not only with the children they teach, but with parents as well: on parents’ days and at other events, teachers often speak only to mothers, sometimes grandmothers, and rarely fathers, about a child’s development. This not only sends the message that women (exclusively) should be responsible for child rearing, but may also contribute to fathers’ sense of alienation and dislocation in modern society.

Comments from teachers themselves substantiate these attitudes. Recent research showed that many teachers believed gender issues were either an artificially created problem, or one that did not apply to the classroom. Only through training teachers to be more sensitive to these issues — and to genuinely espouse their underlying principles — will real change come about. This will undoubtedly take time, as well as more significant investments

from schools and the Government.

While the way in which subjects are presented and classrooms are conducted can help to break down traditional gender roles and stereotypes, the types of subjects that schools offer can also contribute to a greater understanding of gender issues. As alluded to in the new Ministry of Education guidelines discussed above, schoolchildren and students should also be learning about the substance of gender relations and inequality: in the home, in the workplace and elsewhere. However, there is little evidence that this is being done. While during the old Soviet regime, family issues were a mandatory part of the education curriculum, this is no longer the case (whether or not this former subject espoused gender equality is not exactly the point: if it still existed it could at least be used as a framework and forum for the discussion of gender issues today). Despite concerted on-going efforts by educators, non-governmental activists and some state institutions (notably, the State Health Promotion Centre), health education (including sex education) is still not a mandatory part of the school curriculum at all levels. Were this so, another important forum for discussing gender relations in terms of sexual relationships would be opened up. While the current primary school curriculum contains a section on civic society, gender is not discussed as an aspect of this — although this presents one potential avenue for integrating gender

issues. As it stands, there exist very few opportunities and even fewer examples of where and how to discuss gender from within the curricula of primary and secondary schools.

University-level education, however, offers more promise. Not only do university curricula offer more room for the discussion of diverse issues and topics, but instructors at this level are also more specialized. There are two ways to potentially bring gender into university classes — either by integrating issues of gender into existing subjects such as political science, sociology, philosophy, law, and others; or, by offering specific classes on gender studies (see Box 1). Studying gender in university can have a variety of effects: first, students themselves become more exposed to these issues; second, gender issues begin to be more reflected in academic publications; and third, the “trickle-down” effects of academic publications and discussions, as well as direct involvement with the communities in which academic institutions find themselves, increases an understanding about gender in society more generally. Together, these effects can contribute to the formation of a society that is more aware of how gender disparities negatively impact its development, and can thus take measures to address this. In summary then, more efforts to increase the way in which gender issues are reflected in school curricula would be beneficial.

2.3 Gender and Health

Health is obviously a crucial aspect of human development — the healthier a nation’s inhabitants are, the more they are able to contribute to human development processes. Indications of a nation’s health can be found in the average life span of its citizens, as well as in the incidence of other diseases and illnesses. While these indicators mark long-term progress (or deterioration), more short or medium term indications can be uncovered by looking at issues of access and information (Are there enough doctors and hospitals to treat patients? Can people afford to visit a doctor? Are people informed about preventive measures and risks?), and by ex-

amining proxy indicators such as attitudes and behaviour (Do people value their health? Do people use the information available to them, taking precautions in risk situations, or by using preventive methods in general? Are people generally positive and happy?).

In terms of a gender approach then, it is important not only to analyze differences between men and women in terms of mortality and prevalence of illness and disease, but also in terms of access to quality medical and counselling services and up-to-date, reliable information. Any discrepancies noted should then provide the basis for tailoring strategies and policies so that the benefit to both genders is maximized.

Unfortunately, as in many other areas, there is a lack of comprehensive and reliable information about all aspects of health and health care in Latvia, and particularly of data that is gender-disaggregated. However, available research and statistics point to some areas needing further attention.

In the first place, it is no secret that the average male **life span** in Latvia has reached a critical low, and lags more than ten years behind the female average. It is not surprising, then, that indicators for the second and third highest causes of **mortality** in Latvia — cancer and unnatural causes — are more prevalent in men than in women (see Figure

Life Expectancy at Birth, Male and Female

Year	Male	Female
1990	64.21	74.58
1992	63.25	74.83
1994	60.72	72.87
1996	63.94	75.62
1998	64.10	75.50

Figure 7

Box 2

Unemployment, Depression and Suicide: A Man's World?

Antonina, aged 52, has a secondary education and works as a cleaner in a soap factory in Riga. Her husband, Grigorijs is a mechanic, but unemployed. They have a 23 year old daughter, a 14 year old son and a 4 year old granddaughter. Antonina is the only breadwinner in the family. During the interview, she spoke of how for an entire year Grigorijs had been unsuccessfully looking for work and of how he has been deeply traumatised by the negative outcome. Over the last little while he has come home drunk after looking for work, which has caused arguments in the family.

Not long after this conversation, the interviewer went to visit Antonina again to find that a week after the initial interview, Antonina had discovered Grigorijs in the kitchen after he had hung himself.

(excerpt from A Qualitative Analysis of Poverty, UNDP/Philosophy and Sociology Institute of Latvia, 1998.)

8). It should also be noted that while the biggest killer in Latvia — cardiovascular disease — is fatal to more women in total than men, the vast majority of these deaths occur in women over the age of 75 — when, unfortunately, the average man has already died from other causes. Furthermore, mortality indicators from cardio-vascular disease for men from the ages of 45-70 outweigh mortality rates of women in the same age categories by 3 to 4 times. Thus while cardiovascular disease may not kill as many men in actual numbers, the intensity of death from cardiovascular disease for men is 1.8 times higher than for women.

From a human development perspective then, it would be important to bring down mortality rates for everyone, but for men in particular. Various necessary interventions include not only more accessible services, but more public information and efforts to encourage people to live healthily and take preventative health measures. For example, a 1997 WHO survey on **nutrition and diet** found that while both women and men consume insufficient amounts of fruits and vegetables, women consume much less (men consumed a daily average of 200.8 g of vegetables, while women consumed only 167.4 g). This gender discrepancy could be connected to poverty, which as noted in Part 2.1, affects women differently than it does men. When surveyed, many poor women reported that in hard financial times, they had sacrificed their own nutritional intake for the sake of their family's. Because

poor health compounds the effects of poverty (less energy and frequent illness make it more difficult to work or be socially active), it is necessary to find ways of promoting health for underprivileged portions of the population as well, and particularly for women. Again, this points to the need for holistic gender policies that acknowledge links between areas such as poverty and health. It is also possible, however, that poor nutrition in women in Latvia may be connected to eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, which are also "gendered" illnesses. There has been virtually no sociological research on these illnesses in Latvia, despite the fact that they are undoubtedly prevalent.

Another aspect of healthy lifestyles that is gendered is **physical activity** and weight problems. Women tend to be more often overweight than men and are more often clinically obese as well (9.6% of men versus 18.5% of women). Furthermore, while physical activity is not sufficient within any age or sex group of the population, women engage in physical activity less often than men. Given high mortality rates in women from cardio-vascular disease, programmes should be developed to encourage women (especially older women) to live more healthily in this respect.

Alcoholism rates, however, are higher amongst the male population, and particularly amongst those living in impoverished conditions. Not only does this take a severe physical toll on the body (as substantiated in male mortality rates), but

Figure 8

Death Rates by Main Causes of Death in 1997, Male and Female

Cause of Death	Deaths per 100,000 inhabitants	
	Males	Females
Cardiovascular disease	660.3	763.2
Cancers	268.2	227.3
Unnatural Causes	230.0	80.6

Percentage of First-time Patients Treated in Hospitals For Alcoholism that are Female¹³

Year	Percentage of Patients that are Female
1993	12.6
1994	16.7
1995	16.6
1996	22.0
1997	22.7

Figure 9

it can also have profound effects on another critical area of health care: **mental and psychological health**. One illustration of this can be found in male suicide rates, which are very high (28.5 per 100 000 inhabitants, in comparison to 7.4 for women). It is interesting to note, though, that when asked to rate their emotional well-being, women are far more critical than men. For example, in 1997 twice as many women as men reported to being “often” or “very often” depressed¹⁴. Gender roles and stereotypes

help explain this paradox. Men in Latvia often succumb to the stereotype that men must be strong, invincible and capable of solving their own problems, and those of the people closest to them. For example, in a survey commissioned by UNFPA and Ministry of Welfare in 1997, 51% of men who had been the victims of violence had sought no help at all — not even from friends, relatives or a doctor. When asked in what instances they would seek help from a psychologist or psychotherapist, only 0.1% said they would if they were contemplating suicide. It is also interesting to note that in all situations, women were more ready to seek professional help, except for the purpose of consultation (acquiring new information), where more men stated they would use professional services. This again highlights men’s resistance to admitting that they have any problems for which they might need help in resolving. Unfortunately, this situation therefore finds its logical resolution in high rates of male alcoholism and suicide. It is therefore crucial that means are explored for encouraging men to take responsibility for their mental health and to seek help when necessary. Both national health strategies as well as community-based and NGO activities could play an important role here.

2.3.2 Reproductive and Sexual Health

The area of reproductive and sexual health has often been considered by some policy makers to be a rather narrow issue, mainly of concern to women of reproductive age (usually 15-45). For this reason, parliamentarians and policy makers may assume it is not important, or certainly not a policy priority. This assumption needs to be challenged for two reasons: First, if policy makers do not pay sufficient attention to this issue because it only affects “women of reproductive age”, it should be quickly recalled that in Latvia, for example, this “narrow interest group” in fact represents around 30% of the population. To ignore reproductive health concerns for this reason thus ignores demographic logic as well. The second reason to challenge this assumption is simply because reproductive and sexual health are not only about women of reproductive age, or even women. They are equally, although in several different ways, about men. In Latvia, reproductive and sexual health are particularly significant, given the demographic and health crises that persist.

For both of these reasons, reproductive and sexual health are indisputably gendered, and need to be approached from a gender perspective. One issue to examine is the high rate of **abortion** in Latvia. As with many other countries that were part of the former Soviet Union, abortion was often used

by women in Latvia as a form of birth control. Under these circumstances, incidence of abortion reached astounding numbers — in 1993 alone, 57.3 abortions were performed for every 1000 women aged 15 to 44 years of age. Furthermore, the total fertility rate (the average number of children born to a woman of reproductive age) in 1996 was 1.16 — which highlights a characteristic trend of the nineties where the number of abortions outnumber live births. Such high figures are significant for several reasons: first, abortion has a serious impact on the health of women. Many health professionals have pointed to a correlation between high abortion rates and high rates of infertility, which also then points to the connection between reproductive health and demographic indicators, i.e. low birth rates. For this reason high rates of abortion should be of concern to society more generally. Furthermore, not only do abortions take their toll on women’s bodies, but the psychological impacts are also significant: in a 1997 survey on reproductive behaviour and attitudes in Latvia, many women reported feeling depressed and anxious after having an abortion¹⁵. This stress is also augmented by the fact that most women bear this burden alone: this same survey revealed that only 36% of women consulted their partner in the case of their first (in some cases, only) abortion. These

¹³ Alcohol Consumption, Alcoholism, Alcohol-induced Psychosis, Drug Addiction and Smoking: Incidence and Consequences, Latvia 1997. Centre for Addictions. Riga, 1998.

¹⁴ Social Processes in Latvia, p. 78. CSB, 1998.

¹⁵ “On the Reproductive Health of the Population”, Baltic Data House, 1997.

mental and physical health risks for women logically impact other areas as well: a woman's relationship to her husband and family, her performance at work, her psychological comfort and self-esteem.

This is not to say that a woman's right to an abortion should be restricted — the right to choice in the case of unwanted pregnancy is a fundamental aspect of reproductive rights for women. However, the major negative impact that abortions, and particularly repeated abortions, can have highlights the need to address this problem, including looking at its causes and possible solutions. The high level of abortions in Latvia can be largely attributed to the legacy of the Soviet era which did not provide women with information or access to quality reproductive health services that would allow women to make informed decisions regarding contraception, pregnancy, and other reproductive health matters. It must also be highlighted that this situation was also largely symptomatic of a general policy that did not acknowledge any special needs or rights of women to contraceptive choice. Without any other options presented to them, women resorted to abortion as their only option.

It is particularly encouraging to see that through the hard work and conscientious efforts of non-governmental organizations in Latvia, the amount and quality of information on reproductive health issues has risen considerably, while the incidence of abortion (in absolute numbers) has been in decline over the past few years. This is an extremely positive trend, and a worthy testament to the impact that access to quality information and attention to the reproductive health needs of women can have. Similar positive trends are noted in the prevalence of **hormonal contraception** — alongside an increase in information and access to quality services, the number of women using safe and modern contraceptive methods has significantly increased.

As noted though, these changes have come about largely through the efforts of non-governmental organizations and dedicated professionals. Response from the government, on the other hand, remains inadequate. Despite a major project in

1996/97 funded by UNFPA to collect and analyze the necessary information for the development of a **national strategy** on reproductive health in Latvia, this strategy has yet to be developed (although the Ministry of Welfare has recently taken steps to initiate this process). Even more significant, however, is the Parliament's continued lack of attention to the development of a **law on reproductive health** that would regulate abortion and surgical methods of contraception (currently there are no official laws on these subjects). While many activists have spent considerable time developing and commenting on draft laws over the past three years, in the fall of 1998 the Parliament stated that it would no longer discuss any versions of such a law, deeming it unnecessary. However, abortion — and its potential effects — is *not* just a women's issue, but rather affects *all* of society in the ways described above. It is therefore highly recommended that this law be taken up again in the Saeima as soon as possible.

While positive trends regarding abortion and modern contraception have been noted over the past few years, the same can not be said about the incidence of **sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)** in Latvia. Rates of HIV infection have significantly increased over the past few years, particularly in parts of the population that have identified themselves as intravenous drug users and men who have sex with men, while incidence of syphilis in particular has reached alarming rates. One explanation for this is the poor reproductive health of men. While the majority of women reports visiting a doctor for regular check-ups, very few men report similar behaviour. This is a very significant fact in terms of gender: because reproductive health is marginalized as a woman's issue, men either do not have the same access to information and services, or are discouraged from making use of these due to prevailing societal stereotypes. While it is socially accepted and in fact expected that a woman would visit her gynaecologist regularly, there is no public encouragement for men to go for preventive check-ups. This is also related to stereotypes of "macho" and "powerful" men, who should have no reason to see a doc-

Figure 10

Year	Abortions		Contraceptive prevalence (hormonal)	
	total	per 1000 women aged 15-44	total	per 1000 women aged 15-44
1993	37 273	57.3	17 664	32.3
1994	32 535	49.8	28 150	52.3
1995	32 324	48.9	32 775	61.9
1996	29 653	46.1	45 573	86.6
1997	27 206	41.6	49 227	94.1

tor. **Condom use**, as the most effective way to protect against STDs, is another helpful indicator: The UNFPA/Ministry of Welfare survey revealed that less than one third of men had used condoms for the purpose of protecting against HIV or other STDs. Moreover, when those people who use condoms were asked why they do so, it was interesting to note that 17.5% of men stated that their female partners asked them to, while only 5% of women reported the same request from male partners. In other words, women are demanding condom use three times as often as men. This again highlights men's lack of attention to their own health, and to that of their partners. As a result, the health of both genders suffers.

Over the last few years, increasing information is being made available to men specifically in the form of pamphlets and brochures. However, it needs to be pointed out that this information is still not reaching the audiences of men for whom it is intended. More focus needs to be placed on how to disseminate such information so that men do in fact take notice of it. At the same time, other ways of encouraging men to take responsibility for their own sexual health need to be investigated. The lack of a national strategy on reproductive health which could specifically address this point does not help the situation. Furthermore, because health education has still not been made a part of the mandatory school curriculum, a vital opportunity for convincing young men of the need to pay attention to their reproductive health is lost. Policy makers need to address these issues, with special attention paid to male involvement, most urgently.

Attention also needs to be focused on challenging stereotypical gender roles and relations, and the above-mentioned UNFPA/Ministry of Welfare survey also provides valuable insight into the way in which attitudes about gender can have a negative impact on reproductive and sexual health. For example, while around half of the men surveyed either agreed or were unsure whether a woman should be a virgin upon entering marriage, more than 2/3 of women strongly disagreed with this statement. It was also interesting to note that when asked to rate their first experience of sexual intercourse, almost 3/4 of all male respondents claimed this was "fantastic and unforgettable" or "pleasant". Only 40% of women on the other hand felt this way — an additional 40% claimed it was "nothing special," while almost 15% found it unpleasant or very unpleasant (in contrast to less than 2% of men). While the first example highlights cultural **stereotypes regarding male and female sexuality**, the second example shows how these stereotypes impact people's actual experiences: it is culturally accepted for men to be libido-driven while women are meant to be chaste and passive. The way people behave in this most intimate sphere of life cannot be dissociated

from behaviour in society more generally. It is also important to remember that women are at increased vulnerability in the context of intimate relations, as law and protection institutions are hesitant to intrude upon this "private" domain in the case of partner assault, rape and other forms of violence in intimate relations. This makes ensuring gender equality within intimate relations even more crucial.

As stated in the ICPD¹⁶ Programme for Action, which Latvia also signed up to in Cairo in 1994, reproductive and sexual rights include the promotion of "responsible sexuality that permits relations of equity and mutual respect between the genders." The State therefore also has an obligation to encourage this through activities such as sexual education and services for young people, a variety of community-based activities and information campaigns, and the promotion of an open discussion about gender roles and sexual abuse. It is vital that issues of sexuality, negotiation of contraception and condom use and relationships are included as part of campaigns to improve reproductive and sexual health: while "health" can be protected through various objective measures, we can not forget that these measures — for example, condom use, — are embedded in social contexts bound by cultural stereotypes and traditions regarding gender. It is no use, therefore, to teach people how condoms can protect against STDs without helping young people (and adults) to negotiate the sensitive situations that arise when putting this knowledge into practice. Specifically designed programmes and activities that address not only sexual health, but its social and gendered context, can help young people to negotiate sexual situations already early in their relationships, so that healthy and satisfying sexual relations can become an intrinsic part of healthy and happy lives for both genders.

In this respect, NGOs are again leading the way in Latvia. Youth organizations in particular have done an outstanding job of promoting discussions about sexuality amongst peer groups in schools, summer camps, telephone hotlines and other venues. Increased understanding and tolerance of homosexuality is also being promoted by the Homosexuality Information Centre, an NGO active in addressing the rights of gay people in Latvia. Another NGO project worthy of note was a joint effort undertaken by the Women's Rights Institute and Latvia's Association for Family Planning and Sexual Health during 1998, which sponsored a series of seminars for women addressing issues of sexuality.

If gender roles and sexuality should be one important consideration for reproductive health policies, interventions and activities, another important consideration is **poverty**. A qualitative examination of poverty from the perspective of poor people has shown that access to prenatal care for poor

¹⁶ International Conference on Population and Development.

women is limited, particularly for women who live in rural regions. For example, in order to encourage healthy pregnancies, the state has doubled the birth allowance for those mothers who take advantage of prenatal care services. For women in rural regions, however, this often means travelling long distances by inadequate rural transport in order to reach the regional capital where they can receive such care. This journey is costly in terms of money, energy and time. Therefore those expectant mothers who could most benefit from increased birth allowances are not able to take advantage of them. Similarly, “baby-friendly” antenatal services, which have recently been

introduced in a number of hospitals offer families a wide range of options to guarantee a safe, family-oriented, pleasant birthing experience. While this is a very positive development that strengthens family ties and removes the sense of “female shame” that has surrounded childbirth in the past, a large majority of women unfortunately can not afford to take advantage of these services. This situation is another consequence of failing to address gendered dimensions of poverty in Latvia, which again points to the need to address gender issues cross-sectorally and in a holistic manner. Otherwise, important connections remain hidden from view.

2.4 Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is violence that is committed against one gender in disproportionate amounts or which is committed against a person specifically because of reasons to do with their gender. Gender-based violence takes many forms, which include: rape, incest, domestic assault, rape in marriage, acquaintance rape, forced prostitution and trafficking, threats of violence, intimidation, harassment, structural violence within the medical or legal system, and others. While males are also the survivors of gender-based violence, it is important to recognize that in all societies, survivors are disproportionately female, while perpetrators are disproportionately male. It is crucial that incidence of violence is therefore examined from a gender perspective.

All gender-based violence poses a serious threat to sustainable human development and the development of a stable and just democratic society. From a health perspective, violence can have debilitating effects on survivors, ranging from stress and fear, to serious injury, to death. In turn, this violence can have very practical consequences in terms of economic productivity and growth: survivors miss work and are hindered from realizing their potential as productive members of society. Similarly, the distress, psychological impact and physical injury endured by survivors of violence can impede them from participating in political, civic and social life. Violence, and particularly violence within the home, is also cyclical, passed from generation to generation, which means that children learn from behaviour they observe in their parents. For all of these reasons, gender-based violence needs to be urgently addressed and combated, not least to guarantee the safety and survival of survivors and potential victims, but also for the benefit of society as whole.

From the outset it is crucial to point out that **there are no comprehensive statistics, research or data** on gender-based violence in Latvia. While some attempts have been made to collect this data, none have been comprehensive and none have yielded entirely reliable results. For example, even a brief glance at the UNFPA/MoW data in Table 2.4 suggests a substantial amount of underreporting: if

reliable data from countries around the world have highlighted that anywhere from one in four to one in two women has been the victim of some form of violence against women, then surely incidence in Latvia should emulate these findings. Small scale surveys and informal research undertaken by NGOs in Latvia have in fact yielded results more in line with global statistics, although given the lack of necessary funding, such research has been limited in terms of methodology. Not only does the absence of reliable data impede a discussion of trends and dynamics of this violence, but an approach to solutions based on comprehensive situational analyses is also impeded. For these reasons, one of the most pressing recommendations in this area is the implementation of a comprehensive and in-depth survey on these issues, to be commissioned by the Government.

Despite the lack of reliable data, several factors relating to gender-based violence in Latvia should nonetheless be commented on. First of all, as the underreporting in both official statistics and other surveys suggests, there is an **insufficient understanding** in society of what exactly violence is and thus a failure to always recognize it and name it. At the same time there is also an unwillingness to discuss violence by both victims and society as a whole. This shroud of silence impedes both more meaningful dialogue in society that could raise awareness of the causes and effects of violence, while also impeding concrete action against perpetrators and in support of victims. In Latvia, this silence is further complicated by practical matters: for example, due to a lack of shelters or alternative housing arrangements for victims of domestic violence, these individuals are often forced to remain living with their abuser. While counselling and crisis centres are helpful, it is vital that a network of shelters also be developed. The lack of understanding of gender-based violence in society also leads to victim-blaming and revictimization. For example, a recent study of women in prisons for charges of murder showed that many had murdered their partners after withstanding physical and sexual violence for many years.

Figure 11**Victims of Violence in Latvia¹⁷**

Percentage of Respondents Who Say They Have Been the Victim of:	Men	Women
Physical violence	24.1%	9.4%
Psychological violence	15.2%	18.7%
Sexual violence	0.4%	6.6%

The failure of the legal system and police force to protect women from violence can thus lead to an escalation of consequences for all parties involved. Currently, Latvian legislation does not recognize domestic violence as a special crime under the Criminal Code, and it is thus treated (in the rare cases where charges are laid at all) as common assault. The on-going psychological abuse suffered by many women is not recognized within the legal system.

Despite this troubling scenario, there have been several positive developments over the last few years to address the problem of gender-based violence. These include efforts by non-governmental organizations to provide sensitivity training to law enforcement officers on issues of domestic violence, and the establishment of some counselling services for survivors. For example, the Crisis Centre “Skalbes” has recently received funding from the Riga City Council (amongst other donors) to provide services to women survivors of violence in the Riga area (Skalbes provides crisis intervention for survivors of other types of trauma as well). In the district of Liepaja, the municipal government has do-

nated the premises of an old school house, that has been transformed by a local women’s NGO into a half-way house for women who have left their homes because of conflict and violence. Gender-based violence is also a topic that is integrated into peer education schemes of youth health groups around the country.

Despite these efforts, there are still many activities that need to be undertaken in order to comprehensively address issues of gender-based violence. These include both additional research and legislative reform, as suggested above, as well as the provision of more accessible and quality services for survivors. In order to coordinate these efforts and avoid ad-hoc approaches to such a complex problem, it is strongly recommended that the results of a comprehensive survey be used by the Government to develop a comprehensive strategy for addressing gender-based violence in Latvia in the context a National Plan of Action of Gender Equality. Furthermore, as an expression of its political will to combat violence, the Government should adopt a statement of commitment to non-violence.

2.5 Prostitution and Trafficking in Women

Prostitution and trafficking in women are issues that are increasingly attracting attention in Latvian society. It is difficult, however, to say if these activities themselves are increasing, and to what extent, as there are no reliable data on the extent of these phenomena. However, while prostitution has always existed, it can certainly be said that commercial sex work activities have become far more visible — and thus more readily available — over the last eight years.

Due to the massive economic changes brought about by the transition to a market-oriented economy, it is also a reasonable assumption that many women have turned to prostitution since the regaining of Latvia’s independence (a) out of economic desperation to make ends meet; and (b) because of the growing client demand from expanding tourist and foreign business industries. The growth in organized crime is also undoubtedly a factor in the growth of prostitution and trafficking.

It is important to bear in mind that attitudes towards prostitutes are often connected to gender stereotypes that need to be addressed before effective interventions can be developed or implemented. These stereotypes include notions of “sexually loose women” with overactive libidos that in effect “lure” men away from their wives and families. Not only does this stereotype ignore the fact that *clients* of prostitutes are those who perpetuate commercial sex work, but it also ignores the socio-economic desperation that provides the motivation for many prostitutes. Furthermore, this simple stereotype also ignores the fact that men are also engaged willingly and unwillingly in commercial sex work (although in Latvia, at least, clients are virtually always men).

When discussing prostitution and other forms of commercial sex work, however, it is also important to recognize that not all women or men involved have been forced into their current situa-

¹⁷ Reproductive Health of the Population of Latvia. UNFPA/Ministry of Welfare, 1997.

Male Prostitution: An Invisible Problem

In November 1998, the Cabinet of Ministers accepted new regulations on prostitution. Although these regulations stipulate simply that a “prostitute” is an “individual who engages in prostitution”, the grammar throughout the text in every instance refers to prostitutes as female¹⁸. While this is merely the language of the text — not its substance — language is powerful. Although these regulations are meant to be applied to male prostitutes as well, they are a prime illustration of the way the sexual exploitation of men in Latvia is made invisible.

Latvia’s Association for Safe Sex recently carried out two different surveys in Latvia: one on the attitudes, knowledge and behaviour of men who have sex with men, and another on commercial sex workers. The intersection of these two surveys revealed that men are indeed involved in commercial sex work, providing sexual services to other men for either money or in-kind payments. Of those surveyed, 77% of men who have sex with men under the age of 18 stated that they had either paid for sex or received payment for sex at least once. Of all the men surveyed, 15% stated that such incidents had occurred more than once. While there is a serious lack of research on this subject, many men who have received payment for sex have admitted to coercion and other forms of violence connected to these transactions. Young men are especially vulnerable — many come from rural areas to the city, and, without a place to stay, spend the night at hang-outs where sex is demanded in lieu of rent.

Because of the invisibility of male prostitution, those involved are especially at risk for violence and abuse. Attitudes towards prostitution that stereotype prostitutes as “sexually loose”, coupled with prevailing homophobic attitudes in society, often doubly deny these men from protection under the law in the case of abuse. It is important that current debates on prostitution in Latvia do not ignore the way in which these phenomena turn some men into invisible victims.

tion against their will: some commercial sex workers have made a choice, based on their circumstances and other considerations, to earn a living in this manner. It is important therefore not to judge or condemn the choices these individuals make, but rather to ensure that they are granted the same basic rights as others in society: access to health care, information and a safe environment. To this end, there are several organizations currently working with prostitutes in Latvia. One of these is Latvia’s Association for Safe Sex, which has opened a 24-hour consultation service for prostitutes, and offers both psychological and medical services. This organization has conducted surveys amongst the sex worker population and is also involved in providing information and medical advice to men who have sex with men. Another organization is Latvia’s Centre for Gender Problems, which has also conducted various surveys of prostitutes and implemented street work projects to disseminate information on health and other matters. The State Health Promotion Centre is also actively addressing the issue.

Perhaps the most significant step the State has taken in addressing this problem was the adoption of the Cabinet of Ministers’ Regulations on Prostitution in November, 1998. While this is a positive move in terms of addressing the problem rather than simply criminalizing it and then brushing it under the carpet, various grass-roots experts who work

with prostitutes have expressed concern over the content of these new regulations, the main criticisms being that these do not at all address the issue of client responsibility. For example, if more attention were paid to clients who use the services of underage prostitutes by making an effort to apprehend them and charge them with statutory rape, perhaps clients would be more discriminate of the types of services they purchase. Again, it is important to recognize prostitution as a client-provider relationship.

Another rising problem across Eastern Europe, including Latvia, is **trafficking in women**, whereby women are lured, often under false pretences, into the sex industry. Young girls are tricked by false advertisements regarding work or study abroad, and are often left with no means of escape if their passports, for example, are confiscated by those running the trafficking rings. Unfortunately, the largest problem in addressing this issue in Latvia is a total lack of information. It is therefore necessary that the Government develop some sort of action plan, starting with data collection and including concrete preventive interventions, with an aim to halting this form of sexual exploitation. At the NGO level, however, some steps are already being taken. In May 1999, for example, the Latvian Council of Youth Health Centres hosted a seminar for peer counsellors on how to equip young women with the tools to be able to spot potential trouble situations.

¹⁸ According to Latvian grammar, every noun must have a gender. With most professions or occupations, a noun can take either a masculine or feminine ending, depending on the concrete person referred to. In ambiguous cases, most often the ending is left in the masculine.

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.¹⁹

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-

¹⁹ Latvia Human Development Report 1998, UNDP 1999 p. 49.

Figure 11

	Number of Parliamentary Deputies	
	Men	Women
5 th Saeima (1993)	84	16
6 th Saeima (1995)	92	8
7 th 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.²⁰ 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	38.73
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

²⁰ 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 issues²¹. 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-

²¹ 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.²² 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)²³. 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

²² Latvia Human Development Report 1998, UNDP, 1999. p. 50.

²³ 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 violence²⁴ 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."²⁵ 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"²⁶. 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."²⁷

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

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

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

²⁷ *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 7th to the 10th 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.

PART IV: Conclusions and Forward-Looking Strategies

Throughout the pages of this report various steps have been suggested for improving the way that gender issues are addressed in Latvia, and thus for the ultimate improvement of gender equality and relations as a necessary precursor for sustainable human development. These suggestions have been both general and concrete, and they have pertained to both Government actions, civil society activities and the efforts of individual men and women in society more generally. In the articulation of these suggestions, various key themes have come up time and again, in virtually all areas of this report. For the purpose of summarizing then, these six key themes are listed below, highlighting again why they matter for gender and human development in Latvia. Some concrete recommendations as well as more general strategies are also summarized below.

I Strengthening the National Machinery for Addressing Gender Issues: It is evident that there is a current lack of capacity within the national Government to effectively address concerns that relate to gender. While several positive steps have been taken, there is still much to accomplish in terms of both political commitment and action.

Immediate recommendations include:

- the drafting and approval of a National Strategy for Gender Equality in Latvia. This should be coordinated by the Focal Point within the Ministry of Welfare, but all government partners must be involved in this process. (All other recommendations listed in Part IV should be incorporated into this comprehensive strategy in the form of a workplan with specifically designated responsibilities).
- capacity building for the Gender Focal Point in the Ministry of Welfare, as well as for Focal Points in other ministries. Medium-term goals should include gender training at all levels of decision-making, including the Saeima, the Cabinet of Ministers and civil servants. Capacity building at the local government level is also necessary.
- the establishment of an Interministerial Commission on Gender Issues. This should be comprised of high-level government officials. Its function would be to discuss proposals put forth by the advisory board (see below) or by focal points and to make necessary policy decisions.
- the establishment of a National Advisory Board on Gender Issues. The Board should be comprised of non-governmental activists, academics

and other individuals with substantive gender expertise. The role of the Board would be to serve in an advisory capacity to both focal points within the ministries and to the Interministerial Commission. Furthermore, the creation of such a board would encourage participatory practices of decision-making and governance, while helping to build capacity within the government.

II Improving Attention to Gender in Public Policy — moving towards gender mainstreaming and holistic policy making: One of the definite focuses of this report was the lack of attention paid to gender in most public policy to date. While some specific policies on gender may be necessary, it is equally important that gender concerns are mainstreamed into all areas of policy making — be it labour policy, health care, or school curricula. At the same time, approaching gender issues in policy making requires a holistic view of human development processes — in other words, many issues cannot be tackled in one area alone, but require reinforcing policies in various sectors. For example, policy on domestic violence requires attention from the health sector, the justice sector, the law enforcement sector, and so on.

Specific recommendations for immediate action include:

- strengthening national machinery, including capacity building, establishment of an Interministerial Board on Gender Equality and the establishment of a National Advisory Board on Gender Equality (see above);
- enacting a comprehensive review of all public policy in Latvia from a gender perspective, thereafter submitting concrete proposals for necessary amendments, additions and follow-up actions (i.e. the development of workplans or concrete implementation plans);
- enacting a comprehensive review of all Latvian legislation from a gender perspective, thereafter submitting concrete proposals for necessary amendments or additions. Legislation should be enacted that not only *prohibits* gender discrimination, but that *actively promotes* gender equality and the advancement of women.
- initiating and sustaining a dialogue amongst all partners that examines root causes of gender disparities and uncovers the way in which many examples of inequalities are interconnected and reinforce one another. Such an understanding is necessary for holistic policy-making that is to have a sustainable impact.

III Challenging Stereotypes and the Unhelpful

Maintenance of Gender Roles: One of the main obstacles to real gender equality in Latvia is the maintenance and even propagation of stereotypes about men and women, that serve to lock individuals into gender roles. This was noted as a hindrance in virtually every issue examined in this report. Unfortunately, this is also one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome, as it involves long-term change in societal attitudes that are historically and culturally imbedded. Nonetheless, a sustained effort must be made by all stakeholders — legislators, policy-makers, activists, academics, media, and the general public — to challenge gender stereotypes both in one’s everyday work and in one’s everyday relationships.

Specific recommendations include:

- increased training and sensitization to gender issues for the media. This should not only be directed at journalists, but at all people responsible for shaping the way in which the media reflect gender issues, including editors, producers, and corporate and public spokespeople;
- increased attention to the way teachers and other educators reflect gender in classrooms. While the new Ministry of Education and Science guidelines are a positive step (see 2.2), these need to be complemented by concrete plans for implementation;
- the creation of mentoring programmes for women entering certain professions (such as business, government, etc.) This will help to raise the confidence of women and to teach them skills and strategies from other women who have been in similar circumstances. At the same time, this will help break down stereotypes of what women can and can not do, and will provide a viable alternative to the “old boys network” that limits the opportunities of women.
- encouragement of male public figures and popular personalities to speak about their role as a father.

IV Strengthening the Family — but not at any cost: Another common theme is the connection of gender equality in Latvia to the need to strengthen families — enhancing mutual support amongst family members and in most cases, increasing the participation of fathers in the private sphere.

However, in articulating this goal, two important points should be borne in mind. The first is that families come in a variety of forms. Non-traditional types of families should not be discouraged or judged if they are providing a loving, stable and equitable environment for their members. Second, it is crucial to remember that “the family” has traditionally been a site that often conflicts with a wom-

an’s interests, freedom and safety. Socio-economic conditions of family life have been evidenced to work against the interests of women (i.e. poverty rates in female-headed households), while often robbing them of access to resources equal to those of their male counterparts. Furthermore, as part of the “private sphere”, the family tends to be isolated from the legal restrictions and protection mechanisms that pertain to the public sphere, be it in the workplace or on the streets. For this reason, women — in Latvia and around the world — are at far greater risk for physical, sexual and psychological abuse within the home, usually at the hands of their partners. Because of these limits placed upon women within the home, they are unable to equally participate in public life.

It is therefore absolutely crucial that attempts to “strengthen families” in Latvia, while necessary and welcome, must be approached from a perspective that demands gender equality within the home. Without such a perspective, “strengthened families” — families that are pressured to prevail at any cost — threaten to weaken society as a whole.

Specific recommendations for achieving this goal include:

- the issuance by the Government of a Statement of Commitment to Non-Violence, thus exhibiting political will on behalf of the Government to combat violence in society in all of its forms;
- the preparation of a National Strategy and Action Plan for combating gender-based violence in Latvia (or as a sub-strategy to the National Strategy on Gender Equality) and amendments to legislation so that gender-based violence is specifically recognized and addressed;
- amendments to policy and legislation regarding family and childcare benefits, so that either parent may be able to claim these;
- increased attention to the special needs of men and fathers in the provision of social services.

V Strengthening Partnerships: Another common theme that has emerged is the need for more cooperation between stakeholders and improving the quality and sustainability of partnerships. Most obviously this pertains to relations between government institutions and NGOs, although it is equally applicable to ties between research institutions and civil society, media and activists, international organizations and national organizations.

Specific recommendations include:

- the establishment of a National Advisory Board on Gender Issues (see above);

- implementation of new guidelines for the delegation of competencies by the government to NGOs, including plans for monitoring, evaluation and the dissemination of best practices and lessons learned;
- the articulation of priorities for international assistance within the National Strategy for Gender Equality, and the development of a framework in which such assistance can be implemented.
- commissioning an expert on gender issues to review and advise on major research publications (e.g. the **Latvia Human Development Report**; social policy reports; etc.) It is crucial that “gender” is not isolated as a “separate” issue, but also integrated into research and analysis of all important questions for human development. Particular areas where this needs more attention include: poverty, the labour market, minority issues and social integration. One way of achieving this could be through the establishment of an independent think tank and/or public policy institute in Latvia. A resident expert(s) on gender could work not only on integrating gender concerns into the institute’s work, but could also work in an advisory capacity for the government, private institutions or others.

VI Improving the Quality, Quantity and Accessibility of Information on Gender:

One of the major trends to appear in this report is the lack of available and comprehensive information in many of the discussed areas. In order for reliable situational analyses to be completed and for effective policy and legislation to be developed, it is vital that the amount, quality and accessibility of information on gender issues be improved. This refers not only to specific research on gender, but also to the integration of gender perspectives into all research projects.

Specific recommendations could include:

- the articulation (most likely within the context of the National Strategy on Gender Equality) of research priorities for the Government. This should be followed up by a workplan for the implementation of this research, bearing in mind the need for regular follow-up research for comparative purposes.

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