




The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**The role of men and boys
in advancing gender
equality and breaking
gender stereotypes**
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Comments paper – Latvia



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Transforming the gender stereotypes in Latvia: old problems and current developments

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the existing gender equality legislation, policies and practices in Latvia in light of recent indications of *Gender Equality index* ([EIGE, 2022a](#)). It looks at equality status in such domains as employment, finances, education, political activity and representation, health and time balance between domestic and social spheres. It also addresses such issues as domestic violence and gender discrimination, which is still a problem in Latvia. On the positive side, it describes the emergence of healthy and modern understanding of gender roles, facilitated by the public events, such as “[Forum Stand Up!](#)” and [Barbershop conference](#), the father’s movement, and men’s groups movement as well as various public forums, that are breaking away from norms and traditions, characteristic for post-authoritarian societies. The paper concludes that despite the significant progress made in the last decade, there is still much to be done to raise awareness of contemporary concepts of masculinity and femininity, as well as the involvement of men and boys in promoting social transformation towards a more gender-equal Latvia.

1.1 Background and context: data on gender norms and stereotypes

1.1.1 Equal employment

In 2019 it reported that only “six economies – Belgium, Denmark, France, **Latvia** (emphasis mine – V.S.), Luxembourg, and Sweden – score 100 in the *WBL* index, meaning they give women and men equal legal rights in the measured areas. A decade ago, none of these economies scored 100, indicating they all reformed over the past ten years” ([WB: 2019](#)). While the share of women in managerial position was less than 50 % in all of the EU Member States in 2021, the closest numbers were observed in Latvia (46 %), Poland and Sweden (both 43 %) ([Eurostat, 2021](#)). However, such formal equality does not necessarily translate into an actual equality, which is a general problem with improvements in gender equality. Survey shows that “some people still have unreasonable prejudices against women in management positions, for example, women are less able to cope with stress, cannot be strong leaders”. Survey also indicated that such stereotypes are more common in older people, while the younger generation tends to be more gender-neutral – the younger the respondent group, the less prejudice they had ([LSM, 2022](#)).

1.1.2 Financial inequality

Equal pay is one of the key indicators of gender equality, yet women's work is still largely undervalued. In 2020, among the EU countries the highest gender pay gap 22.3% was found in Latvia, which is almost double of the EU average difference of 13% ([European Parliament, 2022a](#)). This information is quite alarming, because in 2019 this gap was only 15.7% (which was slightly better than 16% of EU average), ([European Commission, 2019a](#)). What could be the cause of such downturn during just one year? Most likely that is a consequence of governmental measures and restrictions applied in the period of Covid-19 pandemic: "Women were hit particularly hard by job losses early in the pandemic, over-represented as they were in the worst-affected sectors such as accommodation, food services and tourism" ([EIGE, 2021](#)). This segregation of labour market takes place in accordance with gender stereotypes about certain professional fields, for example, there are fewer women in such fields as mathematics, computing, and engineering. ([European Commission, 2019b](#)). Also, the gender pay gap means that women are at greater risk of poverty in old age. In 2019, EU women over 65 received pensions that were on average 30% lower than men's pensions. Again, the gap varies between Member States, from huge (44.2%) in Luxembourg to none (0%) in Iceland, putting Latvian number 14.8% in moderate zone ([Eurostat, 2019](#)). Same source indicates that 54% of Latvian pensioners aged over 65 are deemed to be at risk of poverty, which is one of the largest numbers in EU.

1.1.3 Educational inequality

As it is stated in the country specific factsheet of GEI Index, "since 2019, Latvia's score has decreased most severely in the domain of knowledge (- 3.2 points) in which Latvia's ranking consistently remains the lowest among all Member States, standing at **47.7 points**. The decrease can be attributed to severe losses in the sub-domains of attainment and participation (- 4.5 points) and segregation (- 2.2 points)" ([EIGE, 2022a](#)).

1.1.4 Power inequality

In domain of power, Latvia holds the 15th place: "Gender inequalities are strongly pronounced in the domain of power (50.9 points). Although Latvia's score has increased quite significantly (+ 16.1 points) since 2010, it still falls below the EU average of 57.2 points. This is mostly caused by a weak performance (43.7 points) in the sub-domain of political power and a general stagnation in the overall domain in recent years (+ 0.5 since 2019)" ([EIGE, 2022a](#)). In 2022 for the first time GEI presents data in the sub-domain of social power. Here the women make 76.5% of board members of the research-funding organisations and 75% of publicly owned broadcasting organisations ([EIGE, 2022b](#)).

1.1.5 Inequalities in health

Latvian score in health domain is 79.3, which puts it at the tail end (25th among 27 EU Member States). Despite progress in recent decades, gender inequalities persist in the health domain and are reflected by major disparities in life expectancy and self-

assessed health status. In Latvia women outlive men by 9 years: current life expectancy for men is 71 years, while for women it is 80 ([EIGE, 2022a](#)). Men tend to engage more in risky behaviour such as smoking (50% of male population and only 21% of female) and excessive drinking, while women are more engaged in healthy pursuits, including a more balanced diet, physical activity and frequent visits to health specialists, all of which conforms to the gender stereotypes.

1.1.6 Time management inequalities: work-life balance

According to *Baltic Gender Equality Barometer 2022*, 41% of respondents thought women needed to spend more time raising children than men, and 33% believed a woman's primary role is to take care of home and family. 30% expressed the view that a man's main role should be to make money ([LSM, 2022](#)). Women's career choices are greatly influenced by family responsibilities: women are much more likely to be the ones who have career breaks ([European Parliament, 2022b](#)). This leaves less time for paid work. More than one-third of Latvian women (37.5%) work part-time, while only 10.2% of men do so (European Parliament, 2022a). Care responsibilities are holding back women's job prospects and influencing the choices they make in their professional lives, which is not the case for most men. ([EIGE, 2020](#)). Far more women than men choose to take parental leave. This, together with a lack of childcare facilities, means that women are often **forced to leave the labour market** – only 65.8% of women with young children in the EU are working, compared with 89.1% of men. Across Europe around 32% of women work part-time, compared with only around 8% of men. ([European Parliament, 2019b](#)). Traditional gender roles of “male provider” and “female caretaker” are reinforced also by organisational culture, that puts on expectations of constant availability and working long hours, which assumes that the ideal employee has almost no constraints or responsibilities outside the workplace ([Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016](#)).

1.1.7 Domestic violence

In 2020 the highest rate of femicide in EU was in Latvia: 16 women were killed by their family members, while 6 women were killed by their partners ([EIGE, 2020](#)). Latvia has one of the highest rates in EU of women victims of physical violence (31%) and of psychological violence – 60% of women have suffered psychological violence in their lifetime ([The Ministry of Welfare, 2022](#)). There are two fundamental problems in Latvia about the perception of domestic violence. Firstly, domestic violence is accepted by a significant part of society – an opinion poll shows that 15.8% of the respondents acknowledge violence against women in the family to be justifiable ([Marta Resource Centre for Women](#)). Secondly, widespread are the myths on domestic violence: almost one third of Latvian society (31% of the respondents) still believes that domestic violence is a family matter, and say they would not interfere in a case of noticing it ([European Commission, 2016](#)). Thirdly, victims of violence are often unaware of their rights and reluctant to report to the police. It is very likely that because of these attitudes violence against women is under-reported and the scale of it is even larger. Gender inequalities are rooted in the “patriarchal model” of relationships which is using biological differences between the genders to justify the discriminatory social norms, limited opportunities for education and professional fulfilment, freedom of self-

expression and personality development. Adherence to this model is related to such factors as strong religious views and traditional conservatism, which views the woman primarily as a mother and homemaker, assigning her a more obedient, passive, caring, and nurturing role. This is also one of the reasons why women tolerate domestic violence.

2. Policy debate

A regulation on protection from domestic violence was adopted in 2014, aimed at reducing domestic violence and protecting (potential) victims ([Cabinet of Ministers, 2014](#)). In May 2016 Latvia signed the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence ([the Istanbul Convention](#)) but has not ratified it yet. To reduce public tolerance towards violence against women and domestic violence, measures aimed at raising public awareness, as well as enhancing prevention, are being implemented. During the period from 2017 to 2018, The Ministry of Welfare successfully implemented two projects: (1) "[One Step closer: Unified Community Response to Cases of Violence Against Women](#)". Its implementation ensured development of professional competencies of specialists (officers of the State police and local government employees, social workers, children's rights protection specialists, health care and NGO experts). (2) "[Awareness Campaign on Zero Tolerance for Violence Against Women: "Violence Thrives in Silence"](#)". Special attention was therefore given to young people in the project to promote respectful and equal relationships between boys and girls.

As a result of joint efforts of NGOs and government, in 2021 the [Plan for the Promotion of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men 2021-2023](#) was adopted by Latvian Cabinet of Ministers. The objective of the plan is to ensure an integrated, carefully targeted, and effective policy that promotes the equal rights and opportunities of women and men and there are three lines of action: equal rights and opportunities for women and men in the labour market and education; prevention of domestic and gender-based violence; and strengthening gender equality in policies in different sectors of the economy.

3. Good practice examples

3.1 Father's movement

Spearheaded by the "Fathers [Tēvi] Association", NGO for promoting and popularising the image and role of a father involved in family life, as well as reduction of the disturbing stereotypes associated with the role of a father. They work in close cooperation with the foundation "Dardedze Centre" (NGO for a safe childhood) and the *Marta* Resource Centre for Women. "Father's Association" believe that involvement of fathers in child-rearing and family life is linked to the persistence of stereotypes in society. They explain the role of fathers in families through campaigns and events, as well as [on-site courses and support groups](#) for young fathers.

3.2 Men's groups movement

Started approximately in 2016 by "Riga First Men's group" and based on members who translated and adopted the "[Men's Group Field Guide](#)" for men's support groups written and distributed by Australian men's movement. Latvian approach to the issues of gender stereotypes has been inspired by the [mythopoetic Men's movement](#), which is based on the work of Robert Bly, but more recently, on Jungian analytical psychology and the work of Jungian therapist Robert Moore "King. Warrior. Magician. Lover. Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine" ([Moore & Gillette, 1990](#)), which has been [translated into Latvian](#). It has a website [telpaviriem.lv](#), where the important information, such as the translated Field Guide and information about the four archetypes of masculinity, interviews, and participation in public [debate about the male gender identity in 21st century Latvia](#).

3.3 "Forum Stand Up!"

Marta Resource Centre for Women "[Forum Stand Up!](#)" [Forums Celies!], was established in 2016 with the aim of promoting gender equality – reduce gender-based violence and discrimination, promote healthy relationships among peers and raise awareness, responsibility and participation of men and boys in reducing violence against women and children. Both men and women are invited to participate in Forum's activities and discuss various questions regarding gender equality and its implementation.

3.4 A Barbershop conference

The [Barbershop conference](#) is an initiative that was inspired by UN global solidarity movement *HeForShe*. It is an international conference on men's role in promoting gender equality in modern society, which took place in 2020. Organised by the Ministry of Welfare and the Nordic Council of Ministers, the conference debated the challenges of everyday masculinities and femininities and the practices that have already been implemented, but also stimulate discussions on aspects that help to reduce gender stereotypes in society while promoting a more active involvement of boys and men in building an equal society. It was a successful event, and it would be great to have another one (the [conference proceedings](#) are available online).

3.5 "Balance for everyone"

The [Balance for everyone](#) project by The Ministry of Welfare which was carried out from 1 March 2020 to 28 February 2022. The project provided various information and explanatory activities for employers, employees and the general public to support the implementation of the requirements of the [Directive on on work-life balance for parents and carers](#).

3.6 "He can – she can" campaign

"He can – she can" [Spēj viņš – spēj viņa] is an annual campaign within the long-term project "Openness is a value" [[Atvērtība ir vērtība](#)] which started in 2018. The project

is implemented by the Society Integration Foundation in cooperation with the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs and the Provision State Agency.

The campaign on gender equality took place in 2020 and was aimed at raising awareness on the topic of gender equality and identified current risks of discrimination and scenarios to reduce them in the labor market, education, career choices and family life. A person's abilities should be the only limit when it comes to choosing a career and a profession and sharing the care of family and housework.

3.7 Workshops on building respectful relationships

In October, the Ministry of Welfare, in cooperation with the association *Marta* Resource Centre for Women, organised a series of workshops for young people on building respectful relationships "[How to teach relationships?](#)" The aim was to provide young people with early education on gender equality, as well as to raise awareness about non-violent and mutually respectful and equal relationships. Four conversation workshops for young people aged 15-19 were held in different cities of Latvia, during which non-formal education methods will be used to raise awareness about gender equality and improve young people's skills on building respectful and equal relationships and reducing violence in society.

4. Transferability aspects

Irish paper by Pauline Cullen analyses the policy context and points out that gender norms (perception of women as caretakers) have direct impact on women's economic inequality due to imbalance between the domestic life and career. It also talks about political inequalities in leadership and decision making. Examples of good practices include revised curriculum on social and personal relationships and sexuality education; consultative practices with stakeholders, academics, government officials, and NGO's; national strategy emphasising a "zero tolerance principle" towards violence; data collection non gender norms and stereotypes. All of them could be transferable to Latvian context, provided that there will be enough political will and financing, as well as good cooperation between government, NGO's, academics and the stakeholders.

Austrian paper by Nadja Bergmann lists main elements of selected measures to prevent male violence against women: statistics on the frequency of gender-based violence against women; acts and policies, such as the [Istanbul Convention](#) and the Third Protection against Violence Act (2019) which tightened several other laws for greater efficiency; involvement of men into shifting the gender stereotypes and hierarchies and promotion of "Caring Masculinities"; establishment of the umbrella organisation for men's work (*DMÖ*); supporting more counselling hours for men with the specific target of violence prevention; establishing and financing the nation-wide helplines for men and boys. Although the article did not specifically mention "authoritarian personality", there was a sense of understanding the psychological mechanism of hierarchical prejudice against women that is one of the motives for

gender-based violence. The counselling possibilities and helpline practices seem to be particularly relevant for Latvia.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Our post-authoritarian heritage proves to be one of the main challenges for tackling the gender stereotypes. During the last hundred years Latvia has experienced decades of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes until it finally came to democracy. This history has ultimately affected both the society and the individuals, raising the level of social conservatism; and where there was authoritarian society, there was also the “authoritarian personality” ([Adorno et. al. 1950](#); [Baars & Scheepers, 1993](#)). In the field of social theory, the notion of authoritarian personality is defined as “a system of individual attitudes and behaviours that have a certain stability and resistance to change and that creates an intensely strict and hierarchical vision of the world. Subjects with an authoritarian personality demonstrate an automatic and mechanical adherence to traditional norms and values of their own community of reference. Along with an inflexible adherence to their cultural conventions, there is an unconditional deference, if not an actual submission, to the authoritarian figure – or figures – taken as a model” ([Campo, 2017](#)). John Robertson has theorised that there is a distinct type of male personality, the “authoritarian man” ([Robertson, 2012: xiii](#)). Hence the examples of tackling gender stereotypes should be at the same time seen in the larger context of struggle between the conservative-authoritarian masculinity versus democratic-pluralistic values of modern gender identity. They are attempts at re-building individual freedom and civil society through social solidarity, respect, and cooperation. There is still much to be done for involvement of both men and boys in promoting social transformation towards a more gender-equal Latvia. The government’s *Plan for the Promotion of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men 2021-2023* is an important policy move in right direction. However, at this point it is difficult to recommend anything outside the usual – data gathering, research on gender stereotypes, public education, counselling and raising awareness by public debate and social campaigns, and continuous development of the positive trends already mentioned in Irish and Austrian papers, as well as this one.