



Exchange of good practices on gender equality

The role of men in
gender equality
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Comments Paper - Latvia

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Men and Gender Equality. Comments. Latvia.

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1. Background

Post-Soviet transitions in Latvia as well as the accession to the European Union have been producing a specific context in which men live and work. In the early 1990s, after the retreat of the state from a surrogate father's role in the family, women were called upon to return to their natural roles, identities and belongings of caretaker and mother whereas breadwinning was re-asserted in its centrality to the normative paternal role of the man. This appeal to the masculinization of the familial power hierarchy in the figure of a "returning father" was addressed by Pascall and Lewis address this process as "retraditionalisation", or reversion to the male breadwinner model of the family.

In 2001, 84% of respondents believed that "*women do regular housework*", and 85% stated that "*men should take the main responsibility to provide the wealth of the family*". The 2006 survey demonstrated that 68% of respondents believed that the "*responsibility of the household*" should be a woman's duty, while 86% believed that a man should be a breadwinner. The 2013 survey confirms the prevalence of the gender-role stereotypes, in particular, in the labour market and "female" or "male" professions. (National Beijing Declaration Report 2014, further NBDR, available at www.lm.gov.lv, Gender Equality Unit page).

At the same time, the national labour market has been integrating into the migration patterns and economic spaces of post-industrial globality, in which the "male full-time labour supply is falling and part-time supply is rising moderately" (CESifo Report: Do Fathers Still Have A Peripheral Role in Daily Family Life? 2009). These gendered shifts to migration and part-time labour supply have been challenging the re-traditionalized stereotype of a man as a strong breadwinner, a professional with a stable long-term job and an emotionally distanced father. The socio-economic focus shifted "*to the needs of employed parents, of both mothers and fathers, who increasingly work flexible jobs, by giving them more options*" (Ostner 2002).

At the political level, the very recent parliamentary elections to the 12th Saeima demonstrated that the agenda of gender equality and the related issues of welfare and employment disappeared from the party and individual campaign agendas. Before, in winter 2013, a number of Latvian parliamentaries called for a change in gender equality policies towards a more conservative and traditional agenda.

2. Policies, legislation and institutions

The Gender Equality index is lower than average in the European Union (44,4).¹ After the 8th Parliamentary elections (2002-2006) the sub-committee on gender equality of the Committee on human rights and Public Affairs was launched to promote gender equality agenda in politics. A parliamentary women's group was organised after the 9th parliamentary elections. Latvia started to harmonise national legislation with the EU *acquis communautaire*, and the institutional mechanism was provided. Since 2003 gender equality issues have been the responsibility of the Gender Equality Unit at the Department of European and Legal Affairs of the Ministry of Welfare. Line ministries are responsible for the coordinating integration of the gender equality principle into policies, normative acts and programmes and information campaigns. The Ministry of Welfare is responsible for gender equality policy coordination.²

The first strategic document for gender equality policy in Latvia, the Concept Paper on Gender Equality Implementation (2001), became the basis for the action plans and policy documents. Gender mainstreaming is the main method in national gender equality policy in Latvia (institutional mechanism; functions of stakeholders; training of specialists and public awareness). Major policy documents are the Programmes for the Implementation of Gender Equality, and the latest is the Gender Equality Action Plan 2012-2014, elaborated in compliance with the Concept on the Implementation of Gender Equality.

At present, there is a tendency to explain a recess in gender equality policy with a negative impact of the economic crisis (NBDR 2014). In fact, gender equality policy is seen as an 'additional load' on the budget that should be suspended until 'better times'. The National Beijing Declaration Report-2014 addresses the situation with organisations in gender equality as major stakeholders of the process very clearly: *"There are quite few NGOs working with gender equality issues in Latvia when compared with other countries. According to survey data, there were 17 550 NGOs, from which only 3-4 are working with gender equality issues in 2013."*

3. Employment, crisis, migration

The economic crisis in Latvia has had a negative impact upon female and male employment. As the National Beijing Declaration Report of The Gender Policy Unit indicates: *"The level of men's employment has dropped from 72, 0% in 2008 to 61.3% in 2009, whereas the level of employment of women has dropped from 65.5% in 2008 to 60.9% in 2009. In 2010 these indicators equalised to approximately 59% (59, 2% to men and 59, 4% to women). Resulting from the end of the recession in 2010, the level of employment among men increased more rapidly by reaching 66,8% in 2013 while the level of employment among women in 2013 increased to only 63, 4%."*

In Latvia the gender pay gap has been between 15 and 19%, and the most striking example of the gender pay gap is in the finance sector (approx.35-37%). It is lower in administrative and service sector (1.8%), professional, scientific and technical sectors (0,7%), and state administration (0.2%).(NBDR 2014). At the same time,

1 <http://eige.europa.eu/content/activities/gender-equality-index>

2 Webpage of the Gender Policy Unit at The Ministry of Welfare www.lm.gov.lv

„The highest risk of poverty in the EU has been considered to be in Latvia, with at least 26 % of the Latvian population being poverty-stricken. Compared to 2004, these numbers have increased dramatically, when only 16 % of the Latvian population in 2004 were considered to be below the poverty line” (Eurostat, 2007, 2010).

Gender budget. There is no annual budget line in the state budget for gender equality issues. The work with gender equality has benefitted from external resources. The Programme for the Implementation of Gender Equality 2007-2010 was implemented during the economic crisis, thus, with a negative impact to all action vectors in the Programme.

Labour migration in 2005 was around 1.3 thousand women and 1 thousand men, whereas in 2008 the gender ratio among the labour migrants abroad was already 3.4 thousand women to 2.6 thousand men (CSB, 2011). Among post-enlargement push-factors of labour migration, particularly during the crisis, an earnings differential and already created social networks are usually mentioned, as well as a gendered factor of high employability of men in capitalist economies: *“men are choosing to enter the workforce rather than enrol in higher education. In fact, evidence that men are leaving to find work outside of the region is supported by high rates of remittances for some countries, especially the poorest”* (Magno&Silova 2004). In contrast to the trends in return/stay dynamics before the financial crisis, currently migration flows tend to „one-end” decisions, *„because people are unable to find employment in Latvia and stay with their friends and relatives who are already living abroad”* (Hazans 2010).

“One-end” emigration of young men and women has turned into a very serious gender impact of labour migration upon the development of the national economy and sustainability of the national welfare system. In total, loss of investments in education and in the development of a skilled labour force, reduction of labour force and loss of child-rearing generations (depopulation), unfavourable dependency ratio between working and dependent populations have been effects and costs of both genders’ emigration for Latvia to face already in the nearest future.

4. Family, child care, maternity and paternity leave

Gender equality legislation, policies and gender mainstreaming provide the institutional regime for **equal parenting practices**, and they have brought more critical awareness of fathering as a care role in the family. **Both parents are eligible to a childcare leave**, but mostly the mothers make use of this leave, unofficially called as “mother’s wage”. The national employment legislation guarantees a leave related to child birth and immediate post-natal care. Pre- and postnatal (maternity) leave are granted to a mother. Childcare legislation actually infers mother, not father, to be a primary care-taker by law.

The childcare allowance for a child up to two years of age can be granted to either of the parents, irrespective of their employment (171 EUR up to two years of age, and 42,69 EUR up to 1,5 years of age).

Paternal leave: A father is entitled to a 10-day paternity leave granted not later than two months after the birth of a child. Fathers are entitled to parental benefit of 80 per cent of a person's taxed average salary.³ A paternity leave, rather short, has been used not quite actively by fathers. The data on paternity leave shows an increase since 2004, when it constituted 22%, but in the first half of 2013 42%. Since 1996, the situation in Latvia has changed, and men spend more time in household work and with children.

Gender equality legislation, policies and gender mainstreaming provided the institutional regime for equal parenting practices and brought more awareness of the "fatherhood triangle" and "fatherhood regime" (the specific rights and obligations placed on fathers by the state, family and employment policy) (Gregory and Milner 2004). For Latvia, the idea of the change from cash to care, central to social and media representations of fatherhood, is perhaps still an encounter in process, given traditions and many other local variables. Anyway, fatherhood (Lupton and Barclay 1997; Hobson and Morgan 2002) begins to be perceived on a popular level more as a new paternal identity that is different from traditional notions of fatherhood and fathering practices.

Long-run care and pre-schooling: In October 2014 new regulations on parents' benefit are more favourable to employed parents full- or part-time, including those who take care of a child from one to 1,5 years of age. Employed parents will be entitled either to apply for a parent benefit until the child reaches one or 1,5 years of age (30% of the parent benefit) and a childcare allowance (171 EUR) or continue employment and be on a payroll. Unemployed parents receive a parent benefit of 60% of a person's social insurance contribution.

Because of a lack of available places in municipal childcare facilities, starting with January 2014 state support of monthly 142 EUR is secured for children from 1,5 years of age in the case of childcare services in a private institution or by a private service provider. This support is provided on condition that the total of state and municipality child support does not exceed 228 EUR per month in Riga municipality and 185 EUR per month in other municipalities.

5. Violence

Latvia is the most tolerant country towards domestic violence among 27 countries-members of the European Union, according to the 2010 Eurobarometer Domestic Violence against Women, the most of the cases are not reported (66% see violence against women as unacceptable and liable to criminal code; 29% see domestic violence as unacceptable).

6. Education and research

Though the NBDR states that „since 2013 gender equality issues are included in the subjects world history, history of Latvia, social sciences, politics and law”, higher education is the area nearly completely ignored in the area of gender equality. A minute number of courses delivered by individual university lecturers in gender

³ http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems_1May2014.pdf

aspects cannot provide sustainable development of gender research and teaching for professional use in politics, media, social welfare, education, economics. The Centre for Gender Studies at The University of Latvia has been the only institution in the country since 1998 that provided an interdisciplinary cluster of courses in gender theory and research by pro-feminist lecturers with expertise in this area. The economic crisis actually stopped a launch of the programme on the basis of this course cluster.

There are no gender and women's studies programmes, and jobs related to gender equality do not exist in the national job classification code. The exchange between feminist theory, critical men's studies and policy is non-existent in Latvia, and intersectional methodologies of complex analysis on men and gender equality are replaced with limiting analysis on sex-differentiations. Men and women are dealt with as homogenous groups in national gender equality due to a lack of elaborated and evidence-based research and comparable data.

7. Media and dissemination

Over the last years, as the Beijing Report recognises, *“public awareness campaigns have not been implemented, which is one of the reasons why the public awareness on gender equality, particularly in the past two years has significantly deteriorated, and gender equality as one of the principles of human rights is being misunderstood.”* (NBDR 2014).

8. Men and gender equality

Immediately after joining the European Union (2004-2007) a few public awareness campaigns targeted gender equality and men, masculinity stereotypes and behaviour, men's involvement in child care and household duties. The projects *The role of mass media in (re) distribution of power (2004)* and *Men and Women in Governance (2004)* were the first analytical reports to address stereotypes of men and masculinity discourses in national mass media. Both projects manifested that men and "masculinity" and "men's practices" were viewed as "natural" and popular assumptions on men and politics were often used in journalism.

The research project *Men equal, men different (2006)* addressed a man's role in children's upbringing, and its authors concluded that national legislation supports man's role as a father and provides him equal opportunities with a woman in parenting. However, as the project authors argue, dominant gender stereotypes and traditional views upon men's work, his role as in family and parenting are the reasons for which only 25% of men used a paternity leave.⁴ The 2006 report also concludes that *“the barriers to the increased role of Latvian men as fathers are more operational than legal, as the legal system to the most part complies with the EU recommendations and international standards. The barriers to men's increased role in active fatherhood have to do to a great extent with the general stereotypes that exist among the employers and the general public about what family duties are specifically male or female.”*⁵

4 http://www.genreenaction.net/IMG/pdf/Finaljointreport_211106.pdf.

5 http://www.genreenaction.net/IMG/pdf/Finaljointreport_211106.pdf

Currently men are not a subject of gender equality policies. There is no working group on men's issues, and there are no governmental strategies and action plans on men's issues. Men carry out just representative functions for stakeholders in the Gender Equality Council and as responsible officials from the ministries.

At the same time, gender equality, quite a new term that emerged during the access period to the EU, is not known to the wider public, is not discussed in mainstream media, is not addressed by politicians. Recent elections to the national parliament explicitly demonstrated absence of gender equality issues and policies from the party programmes and public debates. Gender equality is seen as a women's issue, and men do not involve themselves in the organisations addressing gender equality. National media do not address men's issues in terms of gender equality working in their interests and for their benefit as men. Journalists are not gender-sensitive to address the problems that men experience as gender problems. Men in gender equality as public agenda does not exist in Latvia today, and if to think of it intersectionally and transnationally (migration, diaspora), the dimension of men's diversity, marginalisation, exclusion – ethnic, regional, social – is not addressed, either.

9. Policy-related recommendations

Although the projects about men have been important and had a positive effect, they have not created a broad awareness of men's participation in gender equality as a desirable national goal. There is a **need to provide a better knowledge of the role and positioning of men in gender equality issues**. Gender equality should be seen as a political commitment by the national governance particularly in the times of economic hardships. The experience of **Iceland – Gender Equality Watch** - could be a very good practice for Latvia to monitor from the gender equality perspective. The economic crisis endangered gender equality achievements both economically and politically in Latvia, and Iceland can also be a very good example of politicians' competence and commitment demonstrated de facto in the measures to confront the economic downturn, pursuing its commitment to gender equality.

Men should be integrated in the field of gender equality policy which should be cohered with family and labour market policies as well as addressing the needs of men in their diverse social, ethnic, racial identities. There should be a report that would demonstrate how political neglect of gender equality, negativisation of the concepts 'gender' and 'gender equality' impact upon economic and social progress of our society.

A strong recommendation is to develop and implement gender equality strategies which include a set of measures to support and encourage men to devote more time and **priority to the reconciliation of care, home and paid work**. At the same time, the balance of work and family needs a rethinking of working conditions and salaries in traditionally female dominated occupations. In Latvia education and health care are feminized sectors of public economy, thus, underpayment has been traditional in these sectors because they are feminised. Whatever gender equality campaign is organized, these sectors remain feminized as soon as they underpaid.

It is important to think about involving so called 'absent' fathers in the situation when today, in fact, 1/3 of children in Latvia grow in single-mother families. The recent decision to publish the names of those who don't pay alimonies is very controversial from this perspective.

There should be an intensive policy-thinking vector in 1) fathering and caring masculinity in unregistered partnerships that are widely accepted (45% of children born in unregistered partnerships), 2) men working in the grey sector, 3) men in migration, 4) men in retirement.

Changing attitudes towards gender and gender models for promoting non-violent masculinities should be interconnected with public awareness campaigns on violent behaviour, act, language.

There is an absence of **institutionalised involvement of men in gender equality policy** in Latvia. Explicitly naming men as driving forces and target groups in gender equality policies is therefore a first important step. From this perspective, the **Austrian experience** of the institutional mechanism (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Family Affairs, Department of Men's Politics at the Ministry of Labour) could be a good practice to be transferred and adapted to Latvia for supporting the development and implementation of policy structures on men and gender equality or other forms of institutionalised practices. The transfer of this good practice would be theoretically possible in the context of wide public debates, media/NGO involvement, political commitment to gender equality and qualified academic expertise. In fact, it is not an achievable tool of gender mainstreaming in the current anti-gender backlash.

In terms of paternity leave, the **Austrian project of proposing different paternity-leave** options can be considered for a transfer.

Experience of Finland could be valuable in linking academic training in gender/women's/men's studies, pro-feminist, progressive and critical men's policies and evidence-based research to gender equality policy. Only when low public and policy makers' awareness about gender equality issues is radically challenged at the grassroots' level, then a number of good practices, most probably, would emerge from within the national context.

In my view, the national and regional quota system is not helpful for the electoral system to support a more equal representation of women and men. It is very much the question of men's and women's awareness of what gender equality means for them in the sphere of politics and whether it is one of priority agendas for acting politicians whether men or women.

10. Transferability issues – constraints

How to scale up a good practice and its transferability? In 2012, the Ministry of Welfare, with the financial support from the Northern Council of Ministers, published a translated version of the Danish methodology brochure "*Børnehaver med Plads til PippiPrinser og PiratPrinsesser*". Its goal was to educate the personnel and parents of preschools on promoting of equal opportunities for boys and girls. As the Beijing Report indicated: „*The methodological material and books serve as the source of inspiration for teachers and others working with preschool children where they can learn how to refuse obsolete concepts about the abilities of boys and girls, their skills, “decent” gender compliant behaviour and to let them be as they are without restricting their possibilities just because they are either boys or girls.*” (NBDR 2014). However, in fact, the publication of the translated book was accepted rather negatively by a wider public, and the concept of gender all of a sudden became as

something hostile, threatening and destructive to the traditional family ideas and values. The public response to the published translation included an open letter of 54 NGOs against this book as destructive to Christian values, an invitation to the Minister of Welfare to resign from her post. The overwhelming public and media response to the translation manifested a dramatic gap between gender equality policymaking (de jure) and how gender is viewed in the society (de facto). Secondly, the trap is the language of gender-equality policy-making in Latvia because the concept „gender equality” itself is translated as ‘sex equality’ (dzimumlidztiesiba) though the term ‘gender’ has a translation in Latvian – ‘dzimte’.

In other words, while recognising an importance of good-practice transfer, there should be a critical awareness of the challenging variables (and their complexity) flexing a transfer to post-enlargement, post-crisis cultures and contexts struck by migration. A serious challenge in the Latvian context is an uninvolved and even a rather negative public attitude to the concept of gender and ideas of gender equality. A bottom-up approach has to be re-addressed in advancing gender equality in the country. To enable a transfer of good practice, there should be **structures of transfer** and **people for transfer** - men and women of different classes and ethnicities should be aware that they are beneficiaries as well as they are actors in shaping gender equality policy.

Actually, there should be a multi-disciplinary study and report by the research team, qualified in gender/women’s/men’s studies at the national level on the factors constraining the transfer of good practices. Not only the standpoint of a **receiver** is important here, but a move towards the potential of **originating ideas** of good practice in gender equality for the diversity of target groups and agendas at the national level. In other words, in terms of a good-practice transfer, policy makers should think of its 1) local anchoring, 2) competence-building, 3) transferability analysis, 4) institutionalized facilitating mechanism providing the conditions for long term transfer process, 5) and involving public discussions for telling men and women about its potential.