

Teaching material/teachers

Ineta Upeniece (Latvia)

Some facts about Latvia and Latvians (also in the context of gender equality)

Latvia is a small country near the Baltic Sea and has been an independent and democratic state for the last 24 years. Our neighbours are Estonia, Lithuania, Belarus and Russia. At the beginning of the year 2013, the resident population was 2,023,825 (54.2% women and 45.8% men).

There is gender balance in the teaching staff or disproportion between male and female teachers in Latvia in educational institutions. There are only a few men in preschools. The situation in universities is much better. For example:

- at the beginning of the school year 2012/2013 the teaching staff in educational institutions was 31,578 in total (81% women and 19% men);
- in general education schools, 88% of the teachers were women and 12% were men; in preschools only 0.5% (half of %) were men!
- in vocational education institutions 69% of the teachers were women and 31% were men;
- in higher education institutions the academic staff was made up of 56% women and 44% men.

Latvians are not open. We do not like to express emotions, we are individualistic.

The stereotypes concerning gender roles are still alive. For example, the areas of women responsibility in the family is housework like cleaning, cooking and child care and education, but men are in charge of finances and safety.

Women in Latvia are more educated than men. The difference is particularly large in higher education. Females do not study in technical fields, and it resonates with the current situation in the labour market segregated by gender. In 2013, 92% of graduates in the field of education, health and social care were female, while 74% of the science, mathematics and information technology graduates were male.

There is no annual budget line in the state budget for gender equality issues. The work with gender equality has benefitted from external resources, e.g. different EU funds, the Nordic Council of Ministers and other donors.

Involvement of non-governmental organisations and social partners has played an important role in policy-making and the implementation of gender equality policy. Knowledge and expertise of non-governmental organisations is an important resource which is used not only for development of gender equality policy, but also for providing a range of services and support, and for promoting public understanding and awareness of equal opportunities in any area of life and opportunity to defend their rights.

The challenge in Latvia is to merge the traditional strict borders of the social roles of gender to open up a wider perspective for children. Unfortunately changes in attitude develop very slowly.

What we are doing or a little about Latvian experience

Gender equality perspective is included in the educational content at preschool, primary and secondary levels. Gender equality in educational content is understood in the context of human rights as equal rights and opportunities which are free from biases and discrimination.

For example, in the guidelines of preschool education some curriculum objectives are defined as promotion of positive children's attitude to themselves and other people; development of safe and healthy lifestyle skills.

One of the aims in gender area in the standards of primary education is to promote responsible attitude and awareness of the physical and mental safety, relationship, sexuality, family planning, social norms, etc.

In general, gender equality issues are included in the subject called "social studies", and in subjects such as geography, history, foreign languages, Latvian literature and home economics.

Gender equality aspects are included in the teachers' professional development programme content by linking them with health, safety, ethical and other issues.

From 2010 till 2013, the National Center for Education implemented the European Social Fund project "Lifelong learning of Teachers". During the courses, the teachers could learn about issues like health education, gender equality, etc. The courses were attended by 4,000 teachers.

To reduce educational segregation, the Gender Equality Committee at the Ministry of Welfare established a Working Group which in 2013 developed recommendations "On the integration of gender equality aspects into process and content of all educational levels until 2020."

Reviewing of textbooks. The National Center for Education is concerned about the quality of textbooks. One of the responsibilities of the Center is reviewing and approval of textbooks. The Center regularly organizes seminars for textbook authors, editors and reviewers about actual and typical problems in the textbooks. Some of the criteria for a good textbook are reality and practical application of knowledge and skills; human rights as equal rights and opportunities which are free from prejudices and discrimination in texts and pictures.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education and Science in collaboration with the University of Latvia and the National Center for Education developed methodological recommendations "Content development for teaching literature according to National educational standards", which also contain recommendations for the development of teaching literature in terms of gender equality. The recommendations show that "the content of the training material should pay attention to the texts and exercises that help build awareness about human rights, personal rights and freedoms, encourage students to express their views, experiences and discuss". Very important are the illustrations of women and men (their marital status, housework, decision taking, and the business environment)". These recommendations are available to everyone electronically (.pdf-file) in the Center's web page.

Unfortunately, gender stereotypes of social roles are deeply rooted, and over and over again gender stereotypes appear in dummy textbooks, which publishers bring to the Center for reviewing before the textbooks are printed.

A step by step to textbook approval: in almost final textbook or dummy textbook – they are reviewed – improved – approved and a better book is printed.

In dummy textbooks there are sometimes pictures with gender stereotypes in family and at work. Sometimes textbooks show the authors' biased opinions about children's behaviour, interests and habits. For example, girls do not break the rules, they like make-up, but boys usually fight and they like playing computer games.

After the dummy review, the Center gives publishers recommendations for improving the textbook. Sometime at the beginning the Center comments and recommendations are not accepted by author or editor. The Center comments are perceived as exaggerated, editors do not understand that the educational objective and essence are unchanged if, for example, the task of conflict resolution is illustrated with a picture of girls. But after discussions the authors or editors usually change their mind and pictures are redrawn. As soon as changes are made, the Center gives approval of the textbook. The textbook has become better and with gender equality perspective.

It is the free will of the publishers to submit a book for review and approval. In this case the approval of the Center is a guarantee of quality. Traditionally, when teachers need to choose a textbook, they check if the book is approved by the Centre.

The project "Translation and publishing of the Danish children's books *Den Dag da Rikke var Rasmus* and *Den Dag Da Frederik var Frida* and the teaching material"

In 2012, the Ministry of Welfare, with the financial support from the Northern Council of Ministers, realized the project "Translation and publishing of the Danish children's books "*Den Dag da Rikke var Rasmus*" and "*Den Dag Da Frederik var Frida*" and the teaching material and the education for the personnel and parents to promote equal opportunities for boys and girls". The objective of the children's book is to produce discussions among children – for example – about what girls do and what boys do; is it okay for girls to play football and for boys to play "family game" if they want to, etc.

A working group was established with the aim to adapt the methodological tool for the Latvian situation. There were experts and specialists of education, invited specialists (psychologists, methodologists, teachers) working in the preschool institutions of local municipalities and the private sector, experts from the state institutions responsible for the preschool curricula, as well as gender equality experts from the state and non-governmental level. The dictionary of the main terms used in gender equality policy documents such as: gender, diversity, gender roles, gender stereotypes, gender equality was added to the methodological material. There are also footnotes added all over the text, where explanations of situations, terms, and specific Danish traditions are given, to make the text more recognisable for the Latvian context. For example, the footnotes have a more detailed description about the Danish preschool system, what are traditions of St Lucia Day celebration in Denmark, etc. In such a way the working group has made the material more understandable for the preschool teachers in Latvia and they can use it like an inspiration speaking about equal opportunities between girls and boys in their everyday work.

The teaching material and children's book provide inspiration for teachers and others who work with small children about the abilities of boys and girls, their skills and individual possibilities. At the same time, the methodology material and the book can serve the teachers' self-reflection. Don't we treat boys and girls differently even without being aware of it?

The final goal of the project is to merge the traditional strict borders of the social roles of genders to open up a wider perspective for children for learning about themselves and the world by opening their true talents and encouraging more comprehensive development.

The translated children's book "*Diena, kad Kārlis bija Karlīna*" and "*Diena, kad Rūta bija Rihards*" and material for teachers were printed in 500 hard copies. Both materials are available electronically (.pdf-file) on the Ministry of Welfare web page, which is linked also with the National Centre for Education web page.

280 pre-school teachers participated in the project and were introduced with the topic of equality for women and men.

The book caused sharp public discussions both in the Parliament and in the public space, indicating that the book and the teaching material is in conflict with so called traditional values accepted by large part of our society, and gender equality as a threat to the public.

In the discussions a view was expressed that such a book should be written by a Latvian author who knows the local cultural traditions. However, it might not be funded from the state budget. The same applies to specific national programs for writers to promote children's literacy development and interest in literature (it is particularly important, because the boys' literacy is relatively low, OECD).

Nevertheless, it is positive that the discussion of importance of talking gender topics with children was started in society. And Latvia is ready to continue the ways for combating gender stereotypes in and through Education.