

**Introduction:
Women's Agency. Multiplying stories and subjects**

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The idea behind this special issue is the relative invisibility of women's contributions to Latvian society and culture through the ages. One of the reasons why so little is known about women writers, translators, publishers, artists, scientists, politicians, social workers and others is that historiography relies on existing biographical and documentary research, most of which contains little information on women. It is also a result of historical circumstances as, out of all the socially created divides, the gender divide is one of the most resistant to change. Bringing into focus diverse ways in which women of a multi-national society, various social classes and education have asserted agency and contributed to the development of culture and society in Latvia lay at the core of this fundamental research project of the Latvian Council of Science: *Female Agency in Latvian Culture and Society (1870–1940)* (No. Izp-2020/1-0215) which is being carried out by the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of University of Latvia. The project's time frame was established by marking 1870 as the starting point when the position of women in the Latvian social and cultural sphere gained attention with two critical events: the self-educated woman activist Karolīne Kroņvalde opened a debate in Latvian periodicals, defending women's right to education and freedom, and the first Latvian female playwright Marija Pēkšēna's play *Ģertrūde* won a playwriting competition; while at the other end of the timeframe the occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Army in 1940 is seen as the turning point that transformed not only the political environment, but also affected the position of women in society.

The special issue comprises nine articles by scholars from the disciplines of history, art history and literary studies examining a wide range of questions about how women exercised their agency: through education, travel, writing, art criticism, translation, publishing, political, clerical and social work, as well as analysing the obstacles that these women faced. The volume is divided into two parts. The articles in the section *Education, Social Work and Politics* examine female academics as a new phenomenon in the interwar Latvian academic environment, certain aspects of social care work and female managers of social care institutions in Riga, women as active participants in Latvian foreign affairs from the first decades of its formation and also

the voting tactics deployed by female candidates to win popularity and succeed in being elected to parliament. The second section *Writing, Art and Publishing* contains articles that explore the biographies and contributions of German women who were active in the study and promotion of art and art criticism in the territory of modern Latvia, and women who promoted the integration of Latvian literature in the German-speaking world. They also examine a controversial figure in the history of women's emancipation, Laura Marholm, whose publications stimulated a discussion of women's emancipation in the German-language press of Latvia; analyse how women constructed narratives about themselves as embodied travelling subjects in travel writing, and research different publishing strategies used by women publishers in the interwar period.

Thus this special issue resonates with and continues the study of women in Latvia's political and social history, literature and art which started soon after the restoration of Latvian independence in 1990, as shown in *Women of Latvia-75: researches, statistics, reminiscences* (1994), *Feminisms un literatūra* (Feminism and Literature, 1997), *Nezināmā. Latvijas sievietes 19. gadsimta otrajā pusē* (Unknown. Latvian Women in the Second Half of the 19th Century, 2002), *Sieviete Latvijas vēsturē* (Woman in Latvia's History, 2007), *100 Latvijas sievietes kultūrā un politikā* (100 Latvian Women in Culture and Politics, 2008), *Sievietes Latvijas ārpolitikā un drošības politikā* (Women in Latvia's Foreign and Security Policy, 2020), *Viena. Grozāmo sarakstu slazdā: sieviešu politiskā vēsture Latvijā 1922–1934* (Closed off by the Flexible Lists: Women's Political History in Latvia (1922–1934), 2022).

The special issue aims to provide a forum to rethink women's agency through the lens of biographical research. In recent years, biographical criticism has made a comeback as people have increasingly realised that to reach a deeper and more nuanced understanding of a history or a work of art and so on, it is essential to know about a person's life, familial and educational background and preoccupations (Lässig 2008, Renders, et al. 2014, 2017). This was one of the motivations for creating a digital resource *womage.lv* dedicated to the contribution of women to Latvian culture and society. The site already contains biographical information, photos and visual material regarding almost half a thousand public and cultural figures, politicians, writers, artists, actors, teachers, doctors and other professional women whose active career dates back to the period from 1870 to 1940. The resource includes extensive metadata on persons, organisations and data for biographical maps.

Besides multiplying stories and subjects, in the words of Joan W. Scott (1991), who writes that documenting the lives of people omitted or forgotten from the accounts of the past multiplies not only the stories but also the subjects, providing evidence of a world of alternative values and practices and making it possible to

write histories from different, even irreconcilable perspectives, assuming that none of them is complete, the research represented in the articles also stresses the use of various sources by taking into account travel writing, ego-documents and their different forms as diaries, correspondence and autobiographical notes, detailed investigations of personal documents such as passports and student files, family history and studies of periodicals.

A set of questions underlines the exploration of female agency in Latvia's culture and society: How was female activism represented in Latvia's social and political discourses and realities from 1918 to 1940? (Lipša 2023, this issue; Smirnova 2023, this issue; Eglāja-Kristšone 2023, this issue) How do civic responsibility and participation enter into women's narratives, through the media of travel accounts, diaries, letters and autobiographical notes? (Kārkla 2023, this issue; Eglāja-Kristšone 2023, this issue) Which women's organisations were active, and what role did they play in Latvian women's participation in international organisations? (Rozīte 2023, this issue; Lipša, 2023, this issue) What was the importance of the involvement of women in the leadership of local political, educational, social welfare and cultural organisations and institutions? (Lipša 2023, this issue; Smirnova 2023, this issue; Rozīte 2023, this issue; Raudive 2023, this issue) How did the choice of studies reflect women's identity in society? (Rozīte 2023, this issue; Vanaga 2023, this issue) Who were the women publishers, journalists and translators, and what was their role, importance and influence in publishing literature and developing the modern press? (Kārkla 2023, this issue; Pārpuce-Blauma 2023, this issue; Raudive 2023, this issue; Grudule 2023, this issue) Responding to these questions also provides an opportunity to examine how women understood and employed agency in different circumstances.

'Agency', one of the key concepts in the study of women and gender, in its most basic definition is the capacity to act, make choices, initiate change or commit oneself to a transformative or challenging course of action. In this special issue, the emphasis on agency assumes that women are active, rational subjects who desire autonomy and self-realisation by struggling against the dominant norms and institutions that oppress them. However, we also consider that women actively adopt prevailing norms that systematically constrain their options. Thus, women's agency cannot be imagined outside established gender hierarchies and institutional and structural contexts, but is configured in relation to such structures as economy and politics, as well as family and interpersonal relations. When thinking of agency as a capacity for action enabled by historically specific relations, multifaceted, complex, and contradictory features of women's agency appear. Hence we use the concept of agency as a starting point, following researchers in women's and gender studies

who have called for an openness to the diverse, historically possible configurations of agency (Scott 2011, Thomas 2016).

The four articles in the first section *Education, Social Work and Politics* highlight the importance of agency, activism and organisation in women's and gender history. They provide valuable lenses for the study women's interaction with the social world by foregrounding and articulating historical challenges to patriarchy, social structure and the status quo. Almost all articles underline that after the proclamation of the independent Latvian state on 18 November, 1918, women obtained full gender equality and equal rights, possibilities and responsibilities under legislation to advance the economic and cultural development of the new state and to promote democracy and a nationally minded Latvian society. However, women's careers could be significantly affected by practical issues such as financial matters, family circumstances, and the attitude of certain officials towards the presence of women in academia, politics, foreign affairs and the social sphere.

Zane Rozīte opens the section with the article *Female Academics at the University of Latvia (1919–1940): A Brief Insight into the Key Issues*, analysing aspects of the recruitment of female academics, the attitude of male colleagues and the struggle for equality. Rozīte discusses observations applied to women in academia and science, and women's education in general. There was a widespread belief that women chose those professions that were connected with the human being, a belief that had not changed since the 19th century, and the profession of doctor, similar to the job of teacher and in other areas of humanities, was viewed as a suitable occupation for women because of the similarity of the perceived natural qualities of a mother such as care-giving and nursing. Although there were no formal restrictions on women applying for academic positions, the recruitment policy generally showed a masculine bias and a preference for men in all academic posts. Until 1940, there were no women professors in Latvia, and senior lecturer was the highest position a woman could achieve. Only five women earned their doctor's degrees at the University of Latvia, as opposed to 137 male doctoral degree recipients. Ten women were elected to the position of privatdocent (versus 161 male privatdocents). Even though the problem was identified, on the whole, no practical measures were taken institutionally; even the Latvian Association of Academically Educated Women, founded in 1928, among whose main tasks was to defend the professional rights of educated women, also failed to address the problem.

Anastasija Smirnova continues a discussion in her article *Female Managers of Social Care Institutions in Riga: the Case of Minority Asylums (1918–1940)*, and by using statistics shows that 81% of the staff in the Social Welfare Department of the Riga Municipality were women. However, most were employed in lower positions, and

very few women were managers of children's and disabled persons' shelters forming part of social care institutions. Based on the biographies of three female managers of the Riga municipality minority asylums for disabled people: Emilia Tiedemane, Emma Goerke and Eugenia Arente, and their career path to higher positions in the Social Welfare Department of the Riga Municipality, Smirnova traces inclusion of female participation in charity and social care work after World War I which shaped the understanding of female "abilities" in concrete professions, and social care was extremely important in this case.

The article *The Beginnings of Women's Agency in Latvian Foreign Affairs: an Autobiographical Approach* by Eva Eglāja-Kristšone broadens understanding of the feminist sense of international politics and uses the autobiographical approach as instrumentation. The representation of women in foreign affairs from the foundation of the Latvian state in 1918 up until the Soviet occupation in 1940 has not been a central subject of research until today. The statistics show that 278 men and 16 women held the highest diplomatic and consular service positions in the Latvian Foreign Service, and the highest positions open to women were the posts of secretaries, 1st and 2nd class. The article identifies and gives an overview of women's experience and agency in Latvian foreign affairs and diplomacy. Insight into the autobiographical material of the Grosvalds family allows observation of the foreign affairs scene through the gendered lenses of typist, secretary, translator, envoy's wife, and envoy's daughter. The most voluminous autobiographical document is the recently discovered diary of Margarēta Grosvalde, covering the period 1919–1926 when she worked at the Latvian Legation in London. These autobiographical testimonies reflect women's representation in the foreign service, and their specific activities.

In her article *Women Running for the Office of MP under the Flexible Lists System in Latvia: the Case Studies of Milda Salnā and Berta Pīpiņa (1922–1934)*, Ineta Lipša bases her study on Latvian parliamentary election result statistics, women's organisation and political party documents, and articles by female parliamentary candidates published in the press. Lipša adopts the close reading approach for the case studies of two female social activists and their biographies, investigating female electoral results under an electoral system that differed from the closed list system used in other European countries. The social activist and politician Milda Salnā was the only woman whose candidature was put forward for the position of Minister of Welfare, while another female politician, Berta Pīpiņa, is the only woman who became an MP under the flexible lists system. From 1925 until 1930, the two women collaborated, founding and leading the *Latvijas sievietu organizāciju padome* (Council of Women Organisations of Latvia). The flexible list in operation in Latvia complicated enormously the election of female candidates as MPs. The absolute minority of voters who

crossed out women from candidate lists dictated that a woman was elected as MP only once in Latvia during the interwar period.

The five articles in the second section *Writing, Art and Publishing* examine women's life stories and their work with texts, providing further examples of female agency by drawing attention both to individual actions and choices, and tracing different historical circumstances and situations that made agency possible. In *The First Female Art Historians in Latvia, 1880s–1915*, Baiba Vanaga offers information about the very first women from the local Baltic German community who worked in art criticism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Based on publications in the press, including women's own writings on art, as well as archival documents, the study uses a biographical method to introduce Rosalie Schoenflies, Bertha Noelting, Elly von Loudon and Susa Walter and their public activities in the field of art history that have so far been excluded from publications devoted to the development of art history in Latvia. All women discussed in the article, except for the painter Elly von Loudon, were teaching and giving public lectures on art history to earn their living, thus their agency was composed of a mixture of social structures, personal motivations and a keen interest in art.

In *The Contribution of Feature Writer Laura Marholm to the Discourse on Women's Emancipation in the German-language Press of Latvia at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Rasa Pārpuce-Blauma focuses on the biography and writings of Laura Marholm, who was born in Riga and later worked both in Denmark and Germany; her published works on the psychology of women were famous not only in Latvia but also in Germany and Scandinavia. Examining Marholm's influence on the discourse of women's emancipation in the German-language press in Latvia from the end of the 1870s to the end of the 1920s, Pārpuce-Blauma argues that Marholm's focus on women's physiological characteristics and psychological fragility, immaturity and morbidity – a woman is a free individual, but to fulfil herself she needs a man to whom she can dedicate herself – is incompatible with the feminist theory of difference that has been attributed to her. Marholm was not a typical representative of the women's activism movement and belonged to the anti-feminist community – she was called anti-feminist by her contemporaries – nevertheless, her publications stimulated the discussion of women's emancipation in the German-language press of Latvia. Around 1900, many press publications in Latvia when looking at the 'woman question' referred to Marholm's writings as an authority in the field of women's psychology. Delving into Marholm's biography, it is clear that her statements on women's psychology changed together with her own changing personal experiences and the circumstances in which she found herself, confirming that thinking about agency must take into account the multiple and changing forces that influence it.

Zita Kārkla's *From Claiming Authority to Sensuous Excursions: Mapping the Female Body in Latvian Women's Travel Writing (1878–1920)* investigates a relatively little-known field in the history of Latvian literature: the early phase of women's writing, travel literature and the place of women writers' within it. The article provides a summary of the first works of women writers in the genre of travel literature and the trends marked by them, highlighting the importance of the gender category in the direction of cultural and literary developments. Kārkla offers a close reading of travelogues by Minna Freimane (*Par piemiņu*, 1884) and Angelika Gailīte (*Vērojumi un sapņojumi*, 1920) through the lens of feminist criticism, especially highlighting the ideas of the French *écriture féminine* about the bodily connection with subjectivity and the text, arguing that already in the 19th century, women's travel writing whose main purpose was to inform compatriots home about the experiences of travellers in foreign lands, show the value attached to subjective experience. In the early 20th century, as travel writing became more literary, alongside the narrative's informative function, the presence of subjective experience became increasingly important, drawing more attention to the sensual and sensuous aspects of the journey and inscribing emotions as an expression of agency.

In *Baltic German Women between Two Cultures: Translators of Latvian Literature at the End of the 19th Century and in the 20th Century*, Māra Grudule, expanding the ideas about Baltic German cultural space in an empirically rich study examines the biographies, literary activity and translations of Latvian literature of Hanny Brentano, Elisabeth Goercke, Elfriede Skalberg and Martha Grubbe. So far, almost no attention has been paid to Baltic German women translators. This publication is the first comprehensive insight into the life and creative activity of the four. Grudule investigates the reasons that motivated each of the four translators to focus on the transfer of Latvian texts into the German-speaking environment, she also analyses the translations and pays attention to the reception of the translated texts. Her skilful analysis of the translated texts allows us to see the translators' different approaches to the source material, while the focus on specific examples of collaboration between translators and authors increases understanding of the personal motivation and interests behind their work.

With the final article, Signe Raudive's *Women in the Book Publishing Industry of Latvia During the Interwar Period*, we turn from writing and translation to publishing. Raudive's empirical study is based on the evidence of women's activities in book publishing: reviews and booksellers' advertisements published in periodicals, various documents, historical publications and bibliographic indexes, as she analyses the activities of women publishers Ilga Zvanītāja, Anna Grobiņa and Emīlija Benjamiņa. Raudive maintains that there are two courses of action that publishing houses

founded by women in the first half of the 20th century took: in the first, the subject matter of the titles published was closely linked to the publisher's personal political or religious beliefs or interests, resulting in editions that were of interest to a narrow niche of readers. The second trend, discussed in the article, was the commercial publishing of books for general consumption, choosing titles tailored to the interests and needs of potential readers and following the current trends in popular literature in Western Europe. Looking separately at the women publishers, each of them pursuing a different publishing strategy and offering a differing range of publications, and examining the editions they published and how they were received, Raudive expands our knowledge about women working in publishing during the 1920s and 1930s, at the time a viable and profitable economic sector and primarily a patriarchal industry in Latvia.

The articles in this special issue are linked both by the notion of women's agency and by biographical research, studying closely women who have actively contributed to Latvian culture and society, and exemplifying and interpreting the patterns in order to understand individuals' changing experiences and outlooks. They cover cultural background, outstanding accomplishments, and historical significance. The diversity of articles on female agency through Latvian history moves women from the periphery to the centre of analysis, helping to draw attention to the assumptions through which women's positions and records are rendered minor, and joining the discussion at an international level. As editors, we hope that readers will find the articles in this special issue as stimulating and engaging as we did. Our sincere thanks to all the authors who have made their contributions. We would also like to thank the reviewers of the articles, translator and editor Terēze Svilane, as well as *Letonica* editor Jānis Oga. We hope that the perspectives in this volume will contribute to the study of women's agency and serve as a stimulus for further research and scholarship.

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