

THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND GENDER IN TEXTBOOKS IN THE BALTIC STATES¹

OLGA SCHIHALEJEV, *University of Tartu, Estonia* | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4727-0329>

LAIMA GEIKINA, *University of Latvia, Latvia* | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7901-6731>

RIMGAILĖ DIKŠAITĖ, *Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania* | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2059-3467>

KÄTLIN LIIMETS, *University of Tartu, Estonia*

ABSTRACT: Several countries have implemented policies to safeguard gender equality. While education serves as a tool for societal transformation, the expectation that general education would inherently promote gender equality encounters challenges, particularly in the teaching of religion—a traditionally male-dominated field. This article delves into the examination of how textbooks in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania address gender representation within the realm of teaching religion. Although gender bias in textbooks has been scrutinized across various subjects, religious contents have received comparatively less attention. In Estonia, where religious education is limited, study focused on civics and citizenship education materials, while Lithuania examined religious and moral education textbooks. Latvia's analysis centered on Christian education materials. Employing abductive content analysis in all three countries, predetermined categories provided a framework, allowing some flexibility in the selection of textbooks. The results of the analysis revealed consistent patterns across all three countries — male characters outnumbered females, portraying a predominantly masculine narrative concerning religious tradition. The textbooks reflected the historical male dominance in religion(s). The conclusion offers a discussion of potential solutions to address the identified issues, aiming to contribute to a more inclusive and gender-equitable educational landscape.

KEYWORDS: Textbooks, Gender, Baltic States, Religious Education

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DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND GENDER EQUALITY IN THE BALTIC STATES

Our article examines how school textbooks in the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reflect the intersection of gender and religion. The three countries have a partially shared history. All regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and became full members of the European Union in 2004. Since then, all three countries have worked to implement gender equality as one of their core democratic values. Gender equality has become a litmus test for democratisation (Inglehart, Norris & Welzel 2003). According to Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker (2000), increasingly liberal views on marriage and family, changing gender roles, recognition of minority rights and a focus on individuality and independence are social constructs that are inseparable from a modern and increasingly secularising society.

The constitutions of the Baltic countries enshrine the principle of equal opportunities: equal treatment of men and women under the law so that no one may be discriminated against on the basis of sex. Numerous programmes, measures and projects have promoted gender mainstreaming (European Institute for Gender Equality 2019a, b, c). However, there is a discrepancy between everyday life in the Baltics and their legal frameworks of gender parity (Khomá & Kozma 2021; Tomala & Słowak 2020; Wike *et al* 2019). Gender inequality is found both in schools and in the workplace (European Commission 2022a, b, c; Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs 2016; Central Statistical Bureau s.d.; Rastrigina 2015). All three Baltic States lag behind the EU average in the Gender Equality Index and are significantly behind Sweden, Denmark and Finland (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021, Figure 1). Labour segregation and women's lower earnings are particularly problematic.

Women tend to outnumber men in the fields of education, health and welfare, the humanities and art – the fields that pay less than those that tend to be dominated by men, such as engineering and computing. At the same time, boys are more likely than girls to drop out of secondary education. This has led to a higher proportion of women in tertiary education and to segregation in educational choices.

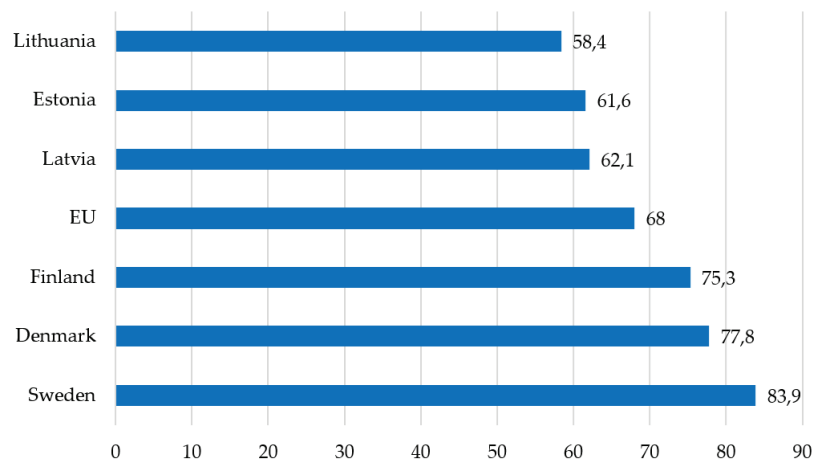


Figure 1: Gender Equality Index in Baltic and Nordic countries in 2021. Source: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/compare-countries/index/table>.

In the process of democratisation, the Baltic States are struggling with inequality, the elimination of which requires a collective cultural transformation. Eradicating gender inequality requires raising awareness of its existence, offering alternatives and then changing

society. Compulsory education can play the role of an intermediary between government and civil society, promoting and strengthening its core values, such as gender equality.

Textbook publishers in the Baltic countries draw on several international guidelines to promote gender equality (Brugeilles & Cromer 2009). In Estonia, teachers, rather than state officials, choose their textbooks and teaching resources. Manuals that help to understand the legislation on gender equality in educational settings support teachers' agency in making good choices (Papp 2012). In Latvia, educators can consult the "Guidelines for the Evaluation of Textbooks from the Perspective of Gender Equality." As stated in the introduction to the guidelines, textbooks not only impart subject knowledge but also explicitly and implicitly reflect social and cultural patterns of behaviour (Bogdzeviča, Celmiņa & Grigule 2005, 5). In Lithuania, teachers can choose from textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Each textbook is vetted for gender equality and other values: "The content must be consistent with the fundamental values of a democratic society, not contradict the legislation of the Republic of Lithuania, and be impartial with regard to gender, age, disability, ability, social status, race, nationality, ethnicity, origin, language, religion, belief, faith, sexual orientation, convictions, or opinions" (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania 2019, 5.3).

Although the promotion of gender equality is an educational goal in democratic societies, it is not self-evident and worthy of study. Teachers, textbook authors and learning resource creators reflect the attitudes of the population, which may not share this aim. For example, Christian teachers in Latvia appealed to the Saeima, the parliament of the Republic of Latvia, to not ratify the Istanbul Convention, claiming that it threatens traditional Christian family values (Latvian Public Media 2018). It is therefore important to research whether and how gender equality is promoted in education, and here, we start by examining textbooks.

GENDER AND RELIGION IN TEXTBOOKS

Analysing how gender and religion are represented in textbooks is of great scientific importance, as it sheds light on the representation and portrayal of these two crucial aspects in educational materials. Although textbooks are just one of many learning resources, they deserve research attention. Textbooks play a critical role in shaping students' perceptions and understandings of gender roles and norms. A study in Israel has shown that gender biases in basal reading materials influenced young people's attitudes towards gender, depending on what they read (Karniol & Gal-Disegni 2009). Textbooks are also the most widely used materials in religious education (Broberg 2020; Andreassen & Lewis 2014). They are considered authoritative because they present established truths and the state of knowledge about the subject.

Textbooks convey not only explicit information, but they also communicate implicit messages and values. By analysing how textbooks represent gender, researchers can identify potential biases, stereotypes or the under-representation of certain genders. This information can inform efforts to promote gender equality in education and contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. Many studies have been conducted to identify gender bias in textbooks from different countries and subject areas (Islam & Asadullah 2018; Curaming & Curaming 2020; Blumberg 2008; etc.), including the Baltic countries (Mikk 2002; Aavik 2010; Papp 2019; Pičukāne *et al* 2002; Reingardė, Vasiliauskaitė & Erentaitė 2010; Martinkutė-Vorobej, Narkevičiūtė & Skučaitė-Budrienė 2019). For the most part, they have used content analysis to examine the balance of gender representation and the stereotypical portrayals of female and male characters.

Researchers mainly study gender bias by analysing "equality of representation, visibility of women, and the gender division of labor" (Chisholm 2018, 231). Blumberg's meta-research

found that gender bias in textbooks is universal, found in almost all countries and subjects. This becomes a “virtually invisible obstacle on the road to gender equality” (Blumberg 2008, 345). Women and girls tend to be underrepresented in all dimensions (e.g. lines of text, quotations, name lists, named characters); characters’ professions and activities are stereotyped by gender, with women as followers and caregivers and men as leaders and decision-makers. Gender bias is also reflected in the use of adjectives (Janatti 2015; Julianti 2019). Some studies have noted minor improvements in finding ways to make textbooks more gender balanced, such as in Sweden (Blumberg 2008) or Germany (Ott 2014), but these improvements tend to be exceptional and slow (Blumberg 2015, 1). Analysing how gender is addressed in textbooks helps to identify subtle biases or assumptions that may influence students' attitudes and beliefs about gender roles and relations.

Several studies have analysed the depiction of religion in textbooks (e.g. Tobin & Ybarra 2008), including reviews of the portrayal of religion in Estonian and Lithuanian textbooks (Nieuwenhuysse, Maasing & Galian 2022; Pöder 2007; Reingardė, Vasiliauskaitė & Erentaitė 2010). Although gender and religion in textbooks have been studied separately, they have not yet been studied together. There is a significant tension in religious education (both the specific subject and, more generally, the education provided about religion that may happen in other subjects) between the ideal of gender equality and the traditional understanding of religion as predominantly male or male dominated. This contrast creates a controversial aspect in the teaching of religion. Understanding how religion and gender are represented in textbooks can provide insight into hidden biases. It also enables us to identify areas for improvement, update content to reflect contemporary societal values and create educational materials that align with the goals of diversity, inclusivity and gender equality.

By analysing the representation of gender and religion in textbooks, researchers can explore the potential impact on students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. This information can help educators make informed decisions about teaching strategies and content choices to enhance students' critical thinking skills and promote a broader understanding of these topics. Overall, the scientific rationale for analysing how gender and religion appear in textbooks lies in the potential to create more informed, inclusive and equitable educational environments that equip students with accurate and diverse perspectives on the complex ways in which religion can shape our understanding of gender and vice versa.

RELIGIOUS AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Religious Composition of the Population

At the beginning of the 1990s, the number of believers and churchgoers increased in the three Baltic countries (Žiliukaitė *et al* 2016). The region has also witnessed increased religious freedom and the restoration of church buildings and other properties. All three countries have faced the challenges of building a relationship between church and state. At the same time, they have had to grapple with the national regulation of theological education in universities and religious education in schools. Although there are many similarities between the three Baltic states, they are different when it comes to religious composition and religious education. Demographically, Lithuania is Roman Catholic (Pew Research Center 2017); Estonia is religiously mixed or even secular (Pollack & Rosta 2017); Latvia is multi-denominational with three dominant Christian traditions (Geikina 2014, 152).

Like Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia experienced a post-independence religious revival. Today, its population is more secular: only about a third of the population claimed to adhere to any religion in the 2021 census, with Orthodox and Lutheran Christians as the largest groups (Table 1) (Statistics Estonia 2022). Ethnic Estonians tend to be much less religious than others in the country. Religious disaffiliation (especially from Christianity) is reflected in declining

beliefs and practices: 19% of the population consider themselves religious, 37% believe in God and 5% attend weekly Sunday services. Most Estonians expect religious institutions to help people in need but not to be present in public discussions and politics (Eesti Uuringukeskus 2021).

Latvia's three most influential religious denominations are Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Russian Orthodox (Table 1). According to the SKDS survey, 43% of Latvians describe themselves as Christians who believe in God, 30% believe in God but do not claim to be Christians and 17% do not believe in God; also note that 10% of respondents declined to answer these questions (LETA 2018).

The most visible and influential religious community in Lithuania is the Roman Catholic Church (Schröder 2012; Streikus 2012). Approximately 70% of Lithuanians identify as Catholic (Lithuanian Department of Statistics 2021; Table 1), and 76% of the Lithuanian population believes in God (Pew Research Centre 2017).

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Roman Catholics	0,8%	19,5%	74,2%
Lutherans	7,7%	36,2%	0,6%
Orthodox	16,3%	19,1%	3,7%
Other Christians	2,0%	1,6%	0,8%
Other religions	1,9%	0,1%	0,9%
Unspecified/none	71,3%	23,5%	19,8%

Table 1: Religious affiliation (% of total population). Sources: Statistics Estonia 2022; The World Factbook 2021.

Religion and Gender Equality in General Education Curricula

Education is one of the most influential social institutions in determining and implementing the direction of social development. Basic education (mainly for children aged 7-16) is the most salient agent in this, as it is compulsory for all children in the Baltic countries, and some students may not continue their education afterwards. However, most students choose to enrol in upper secondary education after completing their basic education (Eurostat 2020).

In Estonia, national education policy is described in the National Curriculum for Basic School (NCBS 2011). The NCBS identifies gender equality as a core social value that education is based on and should promote (NCBS 2011, 2.§2(3)). Although all the subject areas must support this core value, the area of social studies is primarily responsible for instilling civic competencies related to gender equality and religious tolerance.

The compulsory subjects of history, civics and citizenship education, as well as the optional religious education, are part of the social studies subject area. In Estonia, religious education is an optional non-confessional subject (Schihalejev 2014) that is only taught in a few basic schools (Sooniste and Schihalejev 2022). Consequently, most students get their knowledge of and attitudes towards religion from other subjects, especially social studies. The NCBS states that an important objective of this subject area is to develop the “skill to stand against violations of central norms and to follow the principles of social justice and equal treatment of different genders” (NCBS 2011, App. 5, 1.4). Gender equality (and its promotion) is also central to civics and citizenship education (NCBS 2011, App. 5, 2.3). Regarding religion, the subject area of social sciences aims to “understand the distinctiveness of people, knowing that they differ according to nationality, sex, mental and physical capacity, views and religion, are

tolerant of differences, willing to cooperate" (NCBS 2011, App. 5, 2.3). Religion is mentioned only in passing in the curricula (Sooniste & Schihalejev 2022), but it may still be presented in other frameworks, including cultural differences and human rights.

Latvia's educational system also stipulates gender equality. The Order of Cabinet Ministers' "Plan for the Promotion of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men for 2018-2020" (2018) prescribes equal educational opportunities for boys and girls, men and women, and education that promotes gender equality. The current legislation on gender and religion provides for equal rights to education regardless of gender and religious affiliation, but in educational institutions established by religious organisations, it requires loyalty to religious content and moral norms (Education Law 1998, 3¹(1), 3¹(3)).

In Latvia, the Education Law, the Law of Religious Organisations, the Rules on Demands for Pedagogues and the Rules of the National Curriculum for the state's primary education set the framework for religious education until 2020. Article 10 of the Education Law defines the relationship between education and religion: "The education system shall ensure freedom of conscience. Educatees shall have the option to learn the Christian religious instruction or ethics, or Christian religious instruction and ethics concurrently" (Education Law 1998, 10). Since 2004, students in grades 1-3 must choose between ethics and ecumenical Christian religious education.

The 2019 National Curriculum places the fields of religion and ethics in the subject area of social and civic competence. In this frame, religion and ethics are related to the uniqueness and value of human beings, mutuality, community building and the multiplicity of cultures. Religious education provides global competence and a deep understanding of "the manifold expressions of culture and intercultural relations, such as languages, arts, knowledge, traditions and norms" (OECD 2016, 13). The new approach, which is competence-based rather than subject-based, is meant to integrate religion across the curriculum, primarily in the area of social and civic competence. Nevertheless, Christian instruction continues to be an elective subject in the first three elementary school grades, parallel to the ideas of cross-curricular competence embedded in the new standard. Less than 20% of pupils study Christian instruction (Geikina 2019).

After 1991, Lithuania introduced a confessional model of religious education (Ališauskienė 2012). Today, moral education can be found in Lithuanian general education curriculum. Under the umbrella of moral education, students must choose between religious education or ethics (Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania 2011). Up to the age of 14, parents choose which course their child will follow.

Schools in Lithuania have six syllabi options for Religious Education. The Roman Catholic program is the most prominent, but some schools offer Orthodox, Reformed and Lutheran religious education options, and there are also Karaite and Jewish syllabi. Each of these syllabi proposes an analysis of faith issues from the perspective of that denomination or religion. The selection of which syllabus depends on the school's religious orientation, the pupils' (and their family's) faith or the arrangement with the school's administration (General Syllabus of (Catholic) Religious Education 2006).

Based on the syllabus of moral education approved by the Minister of Education of the Republic of Lithuania (2016), both ethics and religious education have aims related to the topic of our paper. The aims of moral education try to find a balance between critical individual abilities to consider issues of human existence ("3.1 . . . to mature the consciousness of students so that they are able to consciously, honestly and responsibly choose their behaviour and lifestyle") and the cultivation of respect for traditional values ("3.5 . . . reveal the main values of Christianity and the Christian approach to the family"). In ethics, the emphasis is on

critical thinking skills based on equal opportunities. Socio-historical analyses of gender and family ethics are encouraged (sections 9.6.3 and 11). In religious education, there is a greater emphasis on traditional values. Pupils are encouraged to analyse their values in relation to God and Christianity (13.1.1, 13.2.1, 13.7.5). Topics include issues of gender, sexuality and the family in relation to issues of identity, relationships, responsibilities, worldviews, scripture and modern popular culture (General Syllabi of Secondary Education, Appendix 1 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The topic of interest in this study was how students are socialised regarding religion and gender and what possibilities and hidden messages are embedded in textbooks when they deal with the topic of religion. The main research question was: how is the relationship between different genders and religion presented in the study materials of compulsory education in the three Baltic countries? The following sub-questions were developed:

- Are men or women more often depicted and cited in texts and illustrations?
- Who are more often mentioned by name, women or men?
- What adjectives are used to describe women and men?
- In which occupations, roles and activities are women and men described or depicted in texts or illustrations.
- How do textbooks in the three Baltic countries differ in their representation of the genders?

SAMPLE

In studying the portrayal of genders in different religious traditions in general education textbooks, we were interested in subjects that would provide a majority of students with their knowledge of and attitudes towards religion. As the education systems in the three countries differ, we had to apply different sampling strategies.

In Estonia, very few children take religious education, thus most students are taught about religion in the context of the compulsory course in civics and citizenship education. If history courses teach the historical development of religion, then the primary source of information on contemporary religion is civics and citizenship education. In the first phase of the research, our sample included all social studies textbooks and workbooks in civics and citizenship education published after the 2010 national curricula took effect. They were reviewed to get an overview of the material on gender issues in religion. No references to religion and gender were found in seven textbooks and eight workbooks. Eight textbooks and three workbooks for grades 6–9 (ages 13–17) on the subject were selected for the study sample (Table 2a). The textbooks covered topics such as diversity in society (including religious diversity), human rights, democratic principles in school and society, state institutions, the national constitution, social relations, labour and consumption, the media, the social, civil and institutional structures of society and the economy.

Authors	Textbook/subject	Grade	Year of publication
Sarapuu, Jaak	Ühiskonnaõpetuse õpik [Textbook for Civics and Citizenship Education]	6.	2011
Hvostov, Andrei; Lahe, Jaan; Ugur, Kadri*; Arrak, Andres; Klementi, Kadri*; Sellenberg Urve*; Realo, Anu *; Uriko, Kristiina *	<i>Inimene ja ühiskond II. [Human and society II.]</i> Textbook	6.	2012
Rundu, Kaarel; Laan, Tiiu*; Klementi, Kadri*; Sellenberg, Urve*	<i>Inimene ja ühiskond II. [Human and society II.]</i> Workbook	6.	2012
Kippak, Riina*; Kloren, Anne*; Kulderknup, Ene*; Peetris, Kaja*	Mosaiik. Ühiskonnaõpetuse õpik [Textbook for Civics and Citizenship Education]	6.	2013
Somelar, Madis	Ühiskonnaõpetuse õpik [Textbook for Civics and Citizenship Education]	6.	2016
Marmor, Viktoria*; Kaarlõp-Nani, Hanna-Liis*; Rannast-Kask, Liisi*; Pärn, Margit*	<i>Inimene ja ühiskond III. [Human and society III]</i> Workbook	6.	2014
Aavik, Anu*; Aavik, Toivo; Allik, Jüri; Konstaabel, Kenn; Raudla, Heiki	<i>Inimene ja ühiskond [Human and society]</i> Textbook	7.	2012
Hvostov, Andrei; Mihkelson, Marko; Ruutsoo, Rein; Ljulko, Edvard; Klementi, Kadri*; Kõuts, Ragne*; Keller, Margit*; Järvelaid, Mari*; Teesalu, Rein; Võsa, Gristel*	<i>Inimene ja ühiskond II [Human and society II]</i> Textbook	8.	2013
Marmor, Viktoria*; Laan, Tiiu*; Rundu, Kaarel; Pukk, Triin*	<i>Inimene ja ühiskond I [Human and society I]</i> Workbook	8.	2013
Pullmann, Helle*; Kastepõld-Tõrs, Kaia*; Viik, Tõnu; Lahe, Jaan; Gräzin, Igor; Teesalu, Rein	<i>Inimene ja ühiskond I [Human and society I]</i> Textbook	8.	2018
Järv, Talvi*; Raudla, Heiki; Tereping, Avo-Rein	<i>Inimene ja ühiskond [Human and society]</i> Textbook	9.	2014

Table 2a. Textbooks and workbooks containing the topics of religion and gender in Estonia.
* – female authors

In Latvia, it was decided to analyse textbooks that explicitly refer to religious content. We analysed Christian education textbooks for the second and third grades (Table 2b). The textbooks were written by four authors: one male and three females. The textbooks contain original fictional stories portraying the life of the main character, Katrina, an elementary school student who grows up with the reader from the first to the third grade. Katrina tells the readers about her daily life and relates it to Bible stories and church practices. Each story is accompanied by pictures that illustrate the text. The textbook's pedagogical approach is catechesis implemented as learning in religion (Grimmitt 2000).

Authors	Textbook/subject	Grade	Year of publication
Iveta Gaile*, Ina Kovaļeva*, Linards Rozentāls, Ingrīda Trups-Kalne*	<i>Kristīgā mācība [Christian instruction]</i>	3.	2008
Iveta Gaile*, Ina Kovaļeva*, Linards Rozentāls, Ingrīda Trups-Kalne*	<i>Kristīgā mācība [Christian instruction]</i>	2.	2006

Table 2b. Textbooks and workbooks containing the topics of religion and gender in Latvia.
* – female authors

In Lithuania, most students study either Catholic religious education or ethics. The sample consisted of four textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania that are used in schools: two for Catholic religious education and two for ethics (see Table 2c). In the religious education textbook *I Choose Life*, general topics are presented for discussion, such as “Who am I?”, “What is my calling?”, “Why am I?” and “What am I in the world?” The Beresnevičius’ textbook presents Eastern and monotheistic religions, as well as the characteristics of the new religiosity. Baranova’s textbooks for 10th, 11th and 12th grades use works by several authors to explore topics like the meaning of life, suffering, suicide, responsibility, freedom, love, loneliness, children and parents, woman and man, jealousy and hatred, wisdom, forgiveness and duty.

Authors	Textbook/subject	Grade	Year of publication
Agnė Lastauskienė* and Giedrė Rugevičiūtė*	<i>Renkuosi gyvenimą: katalikų tikybos vadovėlis [I Choose Life: a guide to Catholic Faith]</i> (Catholic Religious Education textbook)	11.–12.	2018
Gintaras Beresnevičius	<i>Religijotyra [Study of Religion]</i> (Catholic Religious Education textbook)	12.	2003
Jūratė Baranova*	Filosofinė etika: aš ir tu [Philosophical Ethics: Me and You]	10.–11.	2005
Jūratė Baranova*	Filosofinė etika: prasmė ir laisvė [Philosophical Ethics: Meaning and Freedom]	12.	2005

Table 2c. Textbooks and workbooks containing the topics of religion and gender in Lithuania.
* – female authors.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

After selecting the textbooks, content analysis was applied. The American sociologist Rae Lesser Blumberg, in her review essay on gender bias in educational work, noted that content analysis has been used worldwide since the 1970s for the gender analysis of educational materials (Blumberg 2007). A coding guide for content analysis was developed and used in all three countries. Categories related to the research questions were deductively assigned to the selected texts: anonymous or named representation of a person, adjectives used, occupation or role of a particular subject and domain of activity. Codes were assigned abductively as they appeared in the text (Timmermanns & Tavory 2012).

The Estonian textbooks were analysed first. Coding of the text was carried out twice to increase the reliability, and when there were questions, co-coding was used (Liimets 2021).

Based on the deductive categories and preliminary results, the initial coding tree was developed (see Figure 2) and the textbooks in all three countries were coded abductively.

Type of Unit	Religion	Gender	Person	Features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Text Illustration Quote 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General (Religions are ...) Animism Buddhism Christianity Hinduism Islam Judaism Others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female Male Mixed group Both, female in focus Both, male in focus Other/not identifiable / the third gender 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Named Anonymous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adjective Profession Domain of activity

Figure 2. Central codes and categories.

In Estonia, the sections on religion and gender were brief. The unit of analysis applied was the thematic mentioning of religion in which gender was present. The mention consisted of a sentence, which was analysed in conjunction with the relevant context. In other words, if adjacent sentences provided additional information about the sentence under analysis, they were taken into account. The main text, additional texts and illustrations were analysed. If the illustration was mentioned in the text, it was one unit of analysis. If the illustration provided separate information that the text lacked, or vice versa, they were treated as separate units of analysis. (For example, in Somelar's sixth-grade textbook, there is a photo of a smiling Muslim family with the adjacent text: "In many countries where Islam is the dominant religion, women's rights are understood differently from those in Christian Europe" (Somelar 2016, 35). A total of 140 units of analysis were found: 66 texts, 73 illustrations and one table. The number of units varied greatly between sources, from 43 units in Pullmann *et al* (2018) to one unit in Järv *et al* (2014). The average number of units was 13.

In Latvia and Lithuania, one textbook chapter constituted one unit of analysis, including its main text, additional texts or questions and illustrations. Each unit consisted of several characters, which were listed as many times as they were mentioned. A person mentioned several times was counted as one character. In Latvia, the number of units in both sources was 66. In Lithuania, in total, there were 222 units of analysis (Baranova 2005a with 91 units, Baranova 2005b with 87, Lastauskienė & Rugevičiūtė 2018 with 28, Beresnevičius 2003 with 16).

RESULTS

*Estonia*²

If the civics and citizenship education course is the main source of knowledge about contemporary religions for most Estonian students, the number of mentions of the topic in textbooks and workbooks on the subject is rather low. Of all the study materials analysed, 140 units were found; 49 mentioned Christianity, 29 Islam, 26 Buddhism, 14 Judaism, 8 Hinduism and other religions were mentioned a couple of times. With so few entries, the information provided in the textbooks is sparse and often limited to the founders and tenets of the religion.

When analysing the data in light of the research questions, it was found that male characters were mentioned significantly more often (over 5 times) than women were. As many of the

² In Estonia, a complete analysis has been presented in a graduate paper by Liimets (2021).

religions are rooted in patriarchal traditions, there was evidence of a gender bias in favour of men in the texts and illustrations.

The same pattern was repeated when analysing the non-anonymous characters. Since many religious leaders, important religious figures and founders of religions have been male, the authors of the social studies textbooks have named more male figures. In fact, of the 90 people mentioned by name, 61 were male. Even when excluding presumably male deities and the founders, there was still a bias towards the masculine: 21 males and seven females.

Gender stereotypes are historically and culturally formed; hence, according to the monitoring of gender equality in Estonia (Ministry of Social Affairs 2016), there is reason to hypothesise that textbooks use adjectives that support traditional gender roles when describing women and men. In the textbooks and workbooks analysed, the use of adjectives for characters was so rare that no significant conclusions can be drawn. Adjectives were only used in ten instances. The lack of adjectives may reflect the authors' desire to remain neutral.

Our analysis of professions and roles revealed that women were never found in leadership positions, high religious offices or education, which testifies to the strong patriarchal influence. Thus, the institutional leadership of religious communities, their representation, teaching, jurisprudence and all things concerning power and position in religion – the most popular topics in the content on religion – fall within the masculine domain.

As there are both male and female religious adherents, we hypothesised that there would be less gender bias in how religious followers were described or depicted in the texts and illustrations. The analysis of the 'ordinary people' category of roles and occupations was the only one in which a reduction in gender bias could be observed. Overall, there were equal numbers of males and females in the textbooks and workbooks, but among the followers, there were even more single females. The large number of mixed-gender couples and groups stands out, indicating that gender bias was limited. Since most of the representatives of this group are contemporary laypeople, it can be said that there is no significant gender bias in the description of their religious life.

Latvia

In the Latvian language, nouns are either masculine or feminine. In the plural, the masculine form is used for all-male groups, groups of both males and females or groups whose gender composition is unknown. The female plural form is used only for all-female groups (Veisbergs 2002). Likewise, in the Christian instruction textbooks, the generic masculine form is always used when referring to groups, e.g. people in general, guests, schoolmates, parents whose children are ill and others.

The main character in both textbooks analysed is Katrina, who tells stories about her life and reflections on faith, church and ethics. This perspective leads to a balanced gender representation. In our 66 units, different people were mentioned 300 times: 170 times in the second-grade textbook and 130 times in the third-grade textbook. In the second-grade textbook, females were mentioned 74 times (43%); males were mentioned 96 times (57%). If we look at the named persons, the gender perspective changes: females among other females were named 47 times (57%); males were named 43 times (45%). In the third-grade textbook, females were mentioned 70 times (54%) and named 37 times (53%); males were mentioned 60 times (46%) and named 21 times (35%). One interpretation of such results is that Katrina (a girl) is the main character. Katrina has a friend, Paul (a boy), who was mentioned more often in the second-grade textbook – 34 units, 7 times, 21% – than in the third-grade textbook – 32 units, 3 times, 9%. In both, the individual Bible characters that were named included Jesus/Christ,

Maria, Joseph, Moses, Adam, Eve, Paul, Silas, David and Daniel. Only two of these characters are female.

Katrina's family consists of her father, mother, younger brother Kristians and pets, a rabbit and a dog. None of the adults in the family have names, perhaps because the authors wanted the readers to imagine what these names were.

Adjectives were rarely used. When they were, most were used to describe Katrina as a curious, good-natured, caring and disciplined girl. At times, she can be impatient, sad or angry. Other adjectives were used to describe people behaving badly. In the second-grade textbook, neighbours who smoke or leave their dog on the balcony, or drunk men, were characterised as bad. A few illustrated stories in the textbook depicted boys as undisciplined and troublemakers.

Both textbooks stereotyped people based on their age. Old people were depicted as poor, awkward and critical of young people; for example, in one story, an old man was a beggar, and an old woman asked for food. Perhaps this was unintentional on the part of the writers. Another story portrayed Katrina's reaction to a Black man: "He looks so strange and a bit scary" (second-grade textbook). In the textbook, this story was used as an example that contradicts God's love for everybody.

In both textbooks, males were leaders and protectors; females were caregivers and supporters. Males were mentioned as fathers, grandfathers, drivers, tour guides, mail carriers, pastors, rescue workers, tram drivers, controllers, state presidents, police officers, security guards and doctors. Females were mothers, grandmothers, teachers, models, conductors, nannies, nurses and doctors. The jobs held by men tended to be more prestigious.

In conclusion, the textbooks analysed here have the following characteristics. They attempt a balanced representation of the genders. Because the main character is female, more female than male characters were named. All the characters from the Bible (most of whom were male) had names. The textbooks depicted the traditional nuclear family, with men in positions of authority and women as subservient. There was prejudice against the elderly and a stereotypical job distribution. There is no way of knowing if these stereotypes were intentional, but it is possible to assume that textbooks reveal hidden patterns of the authors' culture.

Lithuania

The textbooks analysed used either gender-neutral language or the masculine gender. The generic masculine form was preferred for several translations of excerpts from prominent religious figures.

A Christian must be generous and high-minded. A Christian's heart is generous and always open. His heart does not close itself off egotistically. His heart does not calculate and does not say 'only this much; only up to this point' (Pope Francis, in Lastauskienė & Rugevičiūtė 2018, 110).

Most of the texts and images provided for analysis were written or produced by men. In the ethics textbook for 10th and 11th graders, all 84 texts provided for analysis were written by men. In the 12th-grade ethics textbook, all but one of the 79 texts provided for analysis were written by men.

In the religious education textbook, *I Choose Life*, a variety of sources were used; however, out of 60 sources, only three were solely written by women, one was co-authored by a woman and the remaining 55 were written by men.

In the *Study of Religion* textbook, out of 139 men mentioned, the most frequently discussed or quoted ones were Confucius (six times), Thomas Aquinas (four times) and Pope John Paul II (four times). A few women appeared, such as Mary or a goddess from another religion (e.g. Kannon).

In the ethics textbook for 10th and 11th grade, one of the first chapters is on parenthood: "You as a mother or a father." Parenting was related to the sexes. The authors included an excerpt of Aristophanes telling the myth of the origin of the two sexes in Plato's *Symposium*, where it was explained that, in ancient times, human nature was completely different:

In the first place, know that the human sexes were three and not two as they are now: man and woman; there was a third one, which was the union of the two. Only its name remains, while it itself has disappeared. In those times, androgyny was a separate sex: its image and name encompassed both the male and the female sex (Baranova 2005 a, 83–84).

The text also introduced Degas' painting, *Young Spartan Girls Challenging Boys*, which depicts girls as brave and equal to men.

The tasks or examples provided for the pupils were usually centred on a man. Men were also depicted as innovators in public life, spirituality and religiosity. Thus, there was no difference here with how the religious books discussed gender in relation to positions and roles: the man's portrait remains dominant.

All of the textbooks analysed, except *Study of Religions*, contain many photographs, illustrations, paintings or images of statues. However, they most often depicted God, prophets, philosophers, teachers, workers, inventors and scientists as male. The most frequent presentation of women was in the background of a photo or painting: a woman was presented as a nun (in the textbook *I Choose Life*), or as a mother (Picasso's *Mère et enfant*), a caregiver, wife or mother (Picasso's *La vie*), or in the arms of a man (Klimt's *Der Kuss*). Mary is arguably the basis of all these images. If photographed paintings of the works of famous artists were presented, they depicted women as elegant ladies on a man's arm (Gainsborough's *The Morning Walk*) or as girls wearing fancy dresses (Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas*).

The main difference between the ethics and religious education textbooks was that the former included more topics and raised more questions for class discussion than the latter. Some of those discussion questions were about gender.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The results reveal notable patterns in the representation of gender and religion in textbooks across Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In Estonia, where civics and citizenship education function as the primary source of knowledge about contemporary religions, the coverage of religious topics in textbooks was limited, and there was a particular focus on male figures. The prevalence of male characters and leaders in the texts indicates a gender bias that corresponds with the patriarchal traditions observed in various religions. Additionally, the use of adjectives in character descriptions was minimal, complicating our ability to draw significant conclusions regarding gender stereotypes in the texts.

In Latvia, Christian instruction textbooks reinforce traditional gender norms through the use of generic masculine word forms. However, because the main character is Katrina, there was a more balanced representation of genders, and more female characters were named due

to her prominent role. This contrasts with the Bible stories used in the textbooks, where males dominate, which helps explain why most of the Biblical characters who were named were male. While adjectives were also rarely used in Latvian textbooks, the stereotypical portrayals of family roles suggest a potential hidden pattern influenced by the authors' culture.

In Lithuania, the use of gender-neutral or masculine language was prevalent in the analysed textbooks. A significant proportion of the texts and sources were written or produced by men, thus contributing to a male-dominated portrayal of religion. The presence of women in the texts was limited, and when depicted, they were often placed in supporting roles or portrayed as mothers, caregivers or nuns. The representation of religious and philosophical leaders predominantly focused on men, and only a few instances of women were featured.

Overall, the textbooks in all three countries seem to have attempted a balanced representation of genders, albeit with varying degrees of success. Latvia's textbooks feature a main character that supports gender balance, yet their depiction of religion perpetuates traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Conversely, Estonia's textbooks display a biased representation of male figures in religious settings. The insufficient representation of women in significant religious positions in Lithuanian textbooks also perpetuates patriarchal influence.

Effie Fokas maintains that the place of religion in the field of education has always been one of the most socially and politically sensitive subjects. On the one hand, schools are tasked with upholding human rights regulations as stipulated in international agreements, conventions or obligations, while on the other hand, they aim to promote national identity and pass on inherited traditional values (Fokas 2019, 2). All the analysed textbooks had a strong gender bias with a disproportionate representation of men. This bias was noticeable in both secondary and upper secondary, confessional and non-confessional textbooks. It was less pronounced in the Latvian textbooks that contain everyday stories, yet still, most of the Biblical characters the authors included were male. The textbooks reflect the commonly held belief that men have had a greater historical influence in shaping religions and promoting traditional gender norms. There may be different reasons for perpetuating this in confessional religious education, which aims at enforcing Catholic religious doctrine, and in non-confessional civics textbooks, which have little space for a more nuanced discussion of religion.

The authors of the textbooks might have taken these cultural attitudes for granted. In this way, they unwittingly perpetuated and reproduced the social dominance of males. Another possible underlying factor in these textbooks' perpetuation of gender norms could be the tension between educational core values and the topic under study. Jaan Mikk has argued that textbooks should balance educational core values (such as gender equality) and texts' "conformity with life" (Mikk 1999, 86). Finding a good balance becomes especially ambiguous in topics that pertain to gender and religion. In writing about religion, the perceived "conformity with life" may reinforce gender stereotypes. At the same time, in a religion where women are marginalized, any attempt to emphasise their role would inevitably fail at representing that religion. Feminist studies have been critical of religion for promoting gender inequality (Butler 2004; Goldenberg 2007). They claim that despite attempts at reform to reduce toxicity towards women in some segments of the world's patriarchal traditions, they predominantly remain male-centred. These traditions continue to uphold a male god and hierarchy, as Goldenberg noted (2007, 279). Consequently, the analysed textbooks seem to reflect this male-dominated nature of religion and its historical context, aligning with observations made by Western feminists (Epstein 2007).

Our research reveals a significant tension between the male-dominated nature of religion and the gender equality objectives of education. Even when textbook authors aim for gender

neutrality (e.g. by avoiding the use of adjectives or consciously selecting gender-balanced illustrations), the core issue appears to be rooted in the structural aspects of the representations.

LIMITS OF THE STUDY

Our study had several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, we only analysed a limited number of textbooks, so it is possible that textbooks from other subjects could contribute to a more diverse and comprehensive understanding. Second, our analyses were robust, but employing more nuanced analyses based on feminist theories could yield additional insights into the subject matter. Additionally, including textbooks from countries with more established practices in promoting gender balance, such as Sweden or Norway, would enhance the comparative aspect of our research.

Despite these limitations, the structural flaws we identified in the textbooks remain evident. Our findings highlight the need for further examination and improvement in addressing gender representation in educational materials. Moreover, we acknowledge that the extent to which textbooks influence students' perceptions and attitudes is unclear. However, there is a compelling reason to believe that textbook authors have more opportunities to reflect on and address gender balance in their materials than teachers, who often face numerous decisions and time constraints during the teaching process.

As we move forward, we must consider these limitations and recognise that they present opportunities for future research and improvement. By expanding the scope of analysis and incorporating diverse perspectives, we can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable educational resources that empower all students, regardless of their gender, to thrive in their learning journeys.

THE WAY AHEAD

In conclusion, the representation of gender and religion in textbooks mirrors historical patterns, with men dominating the discourse and women remaining largely invisible in religious narratives. The findings emphasise the need for more inclusive and diverse portrayals of gender and religion in educational materials. Simply addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and avoiding gender stereotypes will not suffice.

Is Male-Dominated Religion the Only Option?

Our findings can also be rephrased as follows: textbooks in all three countries exhibit a masculine coding of religion, prioritising rationalism and dogma while downplaying the feminine dimensions of lived religion (Bergdahl 2018). As with feminist studies, in religious studies until the 1980s, religion was presented in a way that showed men dominating and women largely being invisible (Woodhead 2016). Later works (e.g. Dubisch 1995 or Gemzöe *et al* 2016) feature some understanding of women's religious agency, challenging the traditional portrayals. There is also a rich but neglected body of scholarship exploring the complex intersections of religion and gender, detailing how these dynamics are constituted, negotiated, produced and reproduced in the lives of religious adherents in a dialogical relation to dominant cultural narratives and their institutional contexts (Avishai *et al* 2015). Many women have played prominent roles in various religions (Francesconi & Winer 2021; Mark 2019; VanDoodewaard 2017), but their presence is conspicuously absent from the textbooks. Including these women and discussing the feminine dimensions of religion would contribute to a more comprehensive and gender-balanced portrayal in teaching resources without breaking the "conformity with life."

The Role of a Teacher

The teacher, probably more than the textbook, is vital in shaping social and cultural behavioural patterns and modelling students' understandings of religion and gender. Teachers and textbook authors should actively challenge biases related to both gender and religion and ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives in educational materials. The educational documents of the Baltic states encourage students to discuss, reflect, problematise and interpret with the help of the teacher. This leads to the development of critical thinking skills, which enable students to see the relationship between religiosity and gender from a broader perspective. After all, the teacher keeps the discussion from being reduced to a simple conversation about life, which includes giving instructions, constructing the model of a "proper" life and ensuring there is "an indisputable truth." Thus, even if there is gender bias in a textbook, with sufficient guidance, this can be problematised and challenged by students.

However, some research has indicated a lack of understanding among educators regarding the significance of gender issues and the prevalence of gender stereotypes in educational settings.

...a lack of understanding among educators that gender issues are minimally discussed in schools and that gender roles are often perceived as constant. This reaffirms the need to critically assess direct and indirect information on gender roles in the learning process, which, according to research, is often based on gender stereotypes (Bogdzeviča, Celmiņa & Grigule 2005, 14).

Addressing this issue requires further investigation into how teachers encourage students to question textbook content and incorporate critical analysis into their lessons.

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