

**Where do the Religious and the Secular Meet in the Implementation of Gender Equality? Religion and Gender Equality in Post-Soviet Societies and Beyond. Introduction to the Special Issue of the RASCEE Journal.**

This special issue of RASCEE focuses on the findings of the international research project “Religion and Gender Equality: Baltic and Nordic Developments” (ReliGen), funded by EEA Grants/Norway Grants under the project contract No. S-BMT-21-4 (LT08-2LMT-K-01-036) with the Research Council of Lithuania. The project, conducted between 2021-2023, aimed to investigate the role of religion in the implementation of gender equality and to identify intra- and interreligious developments in the negotiation between sustaining and resisting gender equality in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Norway. The interdisciplinary project includes perspectives from sociology, anthropology, history, political science and theology on how religion and gender interact and where the secular and the religious meet in implementing gender equality at the individual, institutional and societal levels in the contexts studied. The project’s data, including media articles, school textbooks and semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse sample of religious women from the Baltic countries, has enabled a cross-disciplinary comparison of issues related to the interaction of religion and gender and a comparison between the societies investigated. In this issue, several project researchers share some of their salient findings.

This special issue contains six papers that present results from the ReliGen project and interpret them through interdisciplinary approaches. In their article, “Intersectional Grassroots Reception: The Use of the Bible in Discourses of Gender Equality,” Biblical scholars Dace Balode from Latvia and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow from Norway explore Christian theological perspectives and gender issues. Using the empirical data from the interviews conducted for this project, the authors ask how these women construct theologically based arguments and conceptualise gender equality within these frameworks. They also examine where these ideas come from. From this data, they deduce what they call “a biblical reception at the grassroots,” which sometimes differs from the reception of the Bible in official denominational and communal settings. The paper investigates the ideas and resources Latvian Christian women use while discussing gender equality and religion. Balode and Bjelland Kartzow emphasise how these women use and interpret biblical scriptures, what that implies about their understanding of them and how these relate to gender equality. They conclude that the women interviewed have broad, sometimes even stereotypical, preconceptions about gender roles while at the same time referring to scripture and religious authority. And yet, there also appears to be religious agency in the way they creatively navigate gender equality concerns in relation to religion. The authors underline the significance women can attach to what they consider to be credible sources or ideas in discourses of gender equality by analysing their findings within the theoretical frameworks of gender theory, intersectionality and reception history.

In the second paper of this special issue of the RASCEE journal, “Conceptualisations of Gender Equality and Gender Justice in the Baltic and the Nordic Regions: Estonia and Norway Compared,” philosopher Anastasiia Babash from Estonia and scholar of interreligious studies Anne Hege Grung from Norway provide theoretical research on how gender equality and

gender justice are conceptualised in general and in the contexts of Estonia and Norway in particular. Their paper consists of a theoretical part, which examines the origins of the concepts of gender equality and gender justice and emphasises the importance of addressing dimensions of recognition and distribution. The paper then turns to the specific cases of Estonia and Norway, applying this two-dimensional approach. The authors highlight the contrasting realities in Estonia and Norway: while both countries have legal frameworks for gender equality, there are significant differences in popular support. The paper underscores this contrast by analysing the influence of religious factors on the conceptualisation of gender equality and gender justice in Estonia and Norway. It shows how Estonia's complex relationship with religion, influenced by its Soviet past and nationalist sentiments, poses challenges to promoting gender equality. In contrast, Norway's more substantial religious presence, particularly with the role of the Church of Norway, does not seem to have hindered a wider acceptance of gender equality among the population. Understanding the intersection of religious influences, societal contexts and legal frameworks is crucial in advancing the quest for gender justice in both countries.

The third article of this special issue is "Religious Voices Against 'Gender Ideology' in the Discourse on the Ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Latvian and Lithuanian Media." Here, sociologists Ilva Skulte from Latvia and Gintare Pocė from Lithuania claim that religion plays a public role in the politics of gender in different ways. The paper presents the findings of the authors' analysis of Lithuanian and Latvian media coverage of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, widely referred to as the Istanbul Convention, between 2011 and 2021. During the research project, the Convention was signed by Lithuania in 2013 and by Latvia in 2016, but neither country has yet ratified it. Skulte and Pocė analyse secular and religious media coverage related to this and show that for religious actors, ratifying the Convention would mean supporting the "ideology of genderism" at the state level, which would contradict the "natural rights" of men and women, their "natural roles" and Christian values. The paper shows how public discussions in Latvia and Lithuania often involve religious actors relating to religiously based ideas of gender, yet, particularly in recent debates, they often oppose "gender" as a concept, which they understand to be a social construction being imposed by what the religious actors call "gender ideology." The concern that this "ideology" can take over the legal discourse is a common ground of their argumentation in the discussions on ratifying the Istanbul Convention.

In the fourth paper of this special issue, "Experience and Expectations of Muslim Gender Roles in the Baltics: The 'subaltern' voices in the face of public discourse," theologian Dace Balode from Latvia and scholar of religion Egdūnas Račius from Lithuania observe that women of Muslim background living in the Baltics often get confronted with images of how their societies imagine and perceive gender roles in Muslim communities. However, in their analyses of interviews conducted with Muslim women living in the Baltics, the authors find different interpretations of these images, partly because of the women's own experiences and religious beliefs and partly as a conscious or unconscious reaction to public debates. Through narrating and articulating their personal experiences, it seems that the women aimed to dispel stereotypes about gender relations among Muslims. Balode and Račius explain how most ordinary citizens primarily get to know the cultural traditions or habits of distant societies through mass media. In the Baltics, much of the reporting on Muslim societies and their affiliated cultures is done by journalists who often lack an informed understanding of the complex realities of the societies they report on. Reports on issues such as gender relations and sexuality among Muslims are especially in demand from the public. The authors compare how the interviewed women's perspectives on gender roles among Muslims differ or align with widespread perceptions that are perpetuated in the media. They also demonstrate the wide range of opinions Muslim women in the region can hold regarding these issues.

The fifth paper of this issue is called “Taking Part in Global Martyrdom: Solidarity and Discursive International and Interreligious Links in Lithuanian Religious Anti-Genderist Groups.” In it, Lithuanian anthropologist Eglė Aleknaitė presents an analysis of the discursive construction of Christianity and interdenominational relations in the Christian persecution discourse of Lithuanian Catholic anti-genderist groups. The Christian persecution discourse refers to the idea that, in contemporary society, Christians are being persecuted in various areas of public life. This paper provides an analysis based on a case study of this discourse as developed by a Lithuanian public figure, journalist Tomas Viluckas, in the news portal “Laikmetis” (laikmetis.lt) and how the Christian Professional Union, a recently established organisation to promote the rights of Christian workers, has operationalised this discourse. Through this example, Aleknaitė argues that the influence of religion on gender politics is not a one-way street: current debates on gender politics in broader society likewise shape religion and interdenominational relations. The public debates on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Lithuania provided a context that fuelled the perceived relevance of the Christian persecution discourse. The article reveals the multid denominational nature of Christianity in Lithuania and challenges the dominant vision of the national Catholic Church as the sole defender of what is imagined as traditional family values, even if the hierarchy of religious organisations in the country features the Roman Catholic Church at the top.

In the sixth paper of the special issue of the RASCEE journal, an interdisciplinary team of scholars from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – Olga Schihalejev, Laima Geikina, Rimgailė Dikšaitė and Kätlin Liimets – explore how gender equality is taught in classes on religion by analysing a sample of relevant textbooks used in public education in the Baltics. The authors assert that education is one of the most influential tools for social change, and, therefore, general education might be expected to promote official policy and public law, which, in the Baltic states as elsewhere, includes gender equality. Yet, teaching religion has traditionally been male-dominated in these countries, which may represent a challenge. The paper examines how different study materials in the general education curricula of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania represent gender in the context of teaching religion. It contributes to a growing body of scholarship on gender bias in the textbooks of different subjects, as gender bias in the study of religions has attracted little scholarly attention. The paper analyses the general education textbooks used in different Baltic states’ humanities and social studies classes. In Estonia, where only a few schools offer religious education, the authors analyse textbooks and workbooks for civics and citizenship education classes. In Lithuania, they use textbooks for religious education and moral education classes. In Latvia, they examine Christian education textbooks. Abductive content analysis is applied in all three cases, with predetermined categories but some flexibility in relation to the analysed textbooks. Based on this, the authors present their findings. Though the details vary, in the material from all three cases, male characters outnumbered females and texts and pictures about religious traditions were predominantly masculine. In addition, male characters were depicted as powerful and capable of changing public life, spirituality and religiosity. In contrast, female characters were typically relegated to the background or depicted as mothers or wives. The authors conclude that, in the Baltic context, religion(s) and their history are fundamentally patriarchal, as noted by feminist criticism, and this expresses itself in textbooks and workbooks. In conclusion, the paper offers recommendations for future developments and how to prepare textbooks that reflect a more gender-equitable representation of different faiths.

The papers in this RASCEE special issue reflect the interdisciplinary and international character of the ReliGen research project. Although they each explore and engage with different materials, discourses and methods, collectively, they show the complexity of negotiating gender and gender equality at the intersection of religion and political structures and how this plays out differently in various contexts. Not only do religious traditions impact the social, cultural and political web in Norway and the three Baltic states, but religious interpretations of gender

and gender equality are deeply marked by their surrounding contexts and historical legacy. On the one hand, this shows that the actual power of religion and religious organisations is significantly overrated when they are singled out and blamed for the lack of gender equality in people's lived reality. On the other, religion is interwoven with the social fabric, which constitutes how women and men are supposed to live their lives. We hope the research results presented in this RASCEE special issue will contribute to further discussions on the complex intersections of religion, gender and gender equality in the contemporary societies of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

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