Breaking Barriers: Women in Croatian Higher Education, 1892–1942[1]

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I. Introduction

"Yesterday afternoon I attended a lecture for the very first time. You know how it felt! Happiness and a certain kind of fear merged in my soul, that sense of uncertainty, where to go, which door to enter."[2] Zdenka Marković, who became a distinguished Slavicist, wrote these words in 1902 to her former schoolmate and close friend Elza Kučera. Women had been granted the right to enroll at the University of Zagreb only a year earlier and Zdenka found herself standing at the threshold of exciting new possibilities, while simultaneously confronting the uncertainty and challenges inherent in venturing onto previously untraveled paths.

The admission of women into higher education represented a profound shift in their social position. It was inseparably linked to the organization and activities of the women's movement, women's gradual inclusion in the public sphere, and their entry into the world of paid white-collar labor. This transformation, however, cannot be understood as the result of a single legislative breakthrough alone. Rather, it unfolded as a long and uneven process that began with the opening of secondary education to women,

1 This work was supported by the Croatian Science Foundation as part of the project "Women and Changes: Women as Subjects of Historical Changes in Croatia" (IP-2024-05-3847).

2 NSK (National and University Library in Zagreb), R4771b, "1902-1905 Letter from Zdenka Marković to Elza Kučera", October 22, 1902. Cited in Tihomir Vukelja and Tihana Luetić, *Prirodoslovke i matematičarke. Prve žene u hrvatskoj akademskoj prirodoslovno matematičkoj zajednici* (Zagreb, 2024), 92. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

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well before the first formal university enrollments. Even after legal barriers had been lifted, women continued to face less visible, but no less restrictive cultural norms, professional obstacles, and entrenched prejudices that shaped both their educational trajectories and their future opportunities. Particularly long and difficult was the path leading from student status to an academic teaching position within the university itself.

The history of women's education represents a well-established and widely researched field in both European and Croatian scholarship. Over the past several decades, a number of authors, including, among others, Dinko Župan, Tihana Luetić, Štefka Batinić and myself, have examined various aspects of women's education in Croatia, focusing on specific themes within this field. These studies have typically addressed well-defined problems, individual educational institutions, or particular groups of female students within clearly delineated historical periods. Together, they have laid important foundations for the development of a more comprehensive analysis, one that brings together multiple historical processes, moves beyond conventional chronological dividing lines (such as the First World War or the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), and presents a coherent narrative tracing women's educational trajectory. Such an approach makes it possible to follow developments from the first instances of women's entry into advanced education to the period in which female students became well represented and gradually began to establish pathways into academic professions.

To provide such a comprehensive perspective, the chronological scope of this article spans half a century, framed by two key moments. It begins with the establishment of the Women's Lyceum in Zagreb, the first *Gymnasium* (college-preparatory secondary school) for women, which laid the formal and conceptual groundwork for women's entry into the university and provided crucial networks of support, among peers as well as with professors, in overcoming obstacles along the way. The article then follows the gradual opening of individual faculties at the University of Zagreb, tracing not only the lived experiences of female students but also broader



Figure 1. Zagreb University, 1910. Photo: Éva Marton. Museum of Arts and Crafts, Zagreb, Croatia - CC BY-SA.

shifts in their numbers, social position, ambitions, and their perceived roles within academic and professional life.

Geographically, the focus is on Croatia. To be precise, throughout the entire period under consideration both the first women's *Gymnasium* and the country's sole university were in Zagreb. The political context within which women pursued higher education was far from static, however. In 1918, Croatia underwent a fundamental transformation, changing from a peripheral region of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, where Croatian lands had been divided between the Austrian and Hungarian parts, into the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia). Within this new state, Zagreb would long occupy the position of a major cultural and economic center.

The aim of this article is to identify the wide range of barriers women encountered along their educational paths and to situate their experiences within the broader educational, political, and cultural developments that defined the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. The article's first part examines the gradual removal of formal legal barriers to women's access to secondary and higher education in Croatia. The second part argues that, even after these restrictions were lifted, women continued to face persistent social, professional, and cultural obstacles, which they negotiated through family support, informal networks, and women's organizations.

II. Legal Barriers to Women's Education and the Path towards Reform

During the nineteenth century, the significance of education was fundamentally transformed as schooling became crucial for building modern bureaucratic states, shaping collective identities, structuring social hierarchies, and regulating access to labor markets. Across Europe, this led to reforms aimed at modernization, standardization, and secularization, seen in Austria-Hungary in the late 1860s, in France with Jules Ferry's reforms of the 1880s, and in England through legislative acts between 1870 and 1892.[3] These were dynamic processes shaped by tensions between liberal and conservative forces, balancing aspirations for teachers' professional autonomy with demands for centralization and bureaucratization.

Croatian educational reforms unfolded within the same timeframe, reflecting disputes between Church and State and mirroring initiatives from the imperial government. Educational debates, however, extended beyond secularization to include the choice of language of instruction (Croatian, German, or Hungarian), curricula, and the interpretation of cultural and historical narratives. The key turning point came in 1874, when reforms affecting primary schooling and higher education were enacted. The Act on the Organization of Public Schools and Teacher Training Colleges standardized primary education, initiated its secularization, mandated five years of compulsory schooling, and regulated teacher training and professional status.[4] Primary schools were divided into four-year mandatory lower public schools and three- or four-year „civil schools" (later renamed higher public schools) intended for students who wished to continue their education but did not plan to attend a *Gymnasium* or *Realschule*.[5] The reform formed part of Ban Ivan Mažuranić's broader modernization program, which aimed to liberalize Croatian legislation and strengthen Croatia's autonomy within Hungary. His successor, the pro-Hungarian Ban Khuen-Héderváry (1883–1903), sought to reverse these changes by lowering educational standards, promoting Hungarian in schools, and placing teachers under stricter state supervision.[6] Nevertheless, the reform's main principles remained in force throughout the period discussed here.

3 Julia Zinkina, Andrey Korotayev, and Alexey I. Andreev, "Mass Primary Education in the Nineteenth Century", in *Globalistics and Globalization Studies: Global Transformations and Global Future*, ed. Leonid E. Grinin, Ilya V. Ilyin, Peter Herrmann, and Andrey V. Korotayev (Volgograd, 2016) https://www.sociostudies.org/upload/sociostudies.org/almanac/globalistics_and_globalization_studies_5/063-070.pdf

4 Dinko Župan, "Utjecaji Mažuranićeve reforme školstva na pučko školstvo u Slavoniji (1875-1885)," *Scrinia Slavonica* 2/1 (2002): 277-285, https://hrcak.srce.hr/10398.

5 Ibid.; Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Reforma obrazovnog sustava kao jedno od ključnih društvenih pitanja 19. Stoljeća," *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskoga fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu* 39/1 (2007): 61-65. https://hrcak.srce.hr/49080

6 Mirjana Gross, "Modernizacija – sastavnica hrvatske nacionalne integracije u drugoj polovici 19. Stoljeća," *Historijski zbornik* 52 (1999): 151.

In 1874, the University of Franz Joseph I was established in Zagreb. Following the Austrian model of a fully-fledged university, it included faculties of Law, Theology, Philosophy, and Medicine, with the latter beginning operation only in 1917.[7] Following the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, the University saw significant changes. The loss of Austro-Hungarian academic networks and funding structures posed a considerable challenge. State scholarships were first centralized in Belgrade, after which their numbers dropped dramatically, while most of the private foundations folded following the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy due to devaluation of the now-defunct state currency and their prior investments in government war bonds. By contrast, Zagreb University was reorganized along the lines of the University of Belgrade, achieving greater academic autonomy and introducing the position of docent (assistant professor) as the lowest full academic rank with full rights. During these years, it also developed into a Croatian and partly regional academic center, with the establishment of new faculties, including the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry (1919), the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (1924), and the Faculty of Engineering (1926), while the School of Economics and Commerce was granted faculty status in 1925, although it remained outside the University. The pharmaceutical course was expanded into a four-year program in 1928.[8]

Secondary education followed the mid-nineteenth-century monarchical pattern: *Gymnasium*, *Realschule*, and vocational schools. The *Gymnasium* offered an eight-year classical curriculum culminating in the *matura* exam required for university entry. The *Realschule* emphasized modern languages, science, and technical training and was gradually expanded into four-year minor and seven-year full programs, though these remained less socially and academically prestigious than attending a *Gymnasium*, partly because further study required going to Austria or Hungary. To bridge the divide, Minister of Education Izidor Kršnjavi, inspired by his travels through the Scandinavian countries, proposed *Real-Gymnasiums*, schools that would offer both training in modern languages and science and preparation for the *matura*. Following initial public resistance, the transformation of *Realschulen* into *Real-Gymnasiums*

7 Vlasta Švoger, "Modernizacija visokog školstva u Habsburškoj Monarhiji i utemeljenje modernog sveučilišta u Zagrebu 1874. godine", in *Studije iz povijesti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu*, ed. Velimir Veselinović (Zagreb, 2025), 22-27. Students who left formal education after completing lower public school were required to attend an additional year of *opetovnica* [continuation school], where they revised the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

8 Hodimir Sirotković, "Sveučilište između dva rata (1918-1941)," in *Spomenica u povodu proslave 300-godišnjice Sveučilišta u Zagrebu*, vol. I, ed. Jaroslav Šidak (Zagreb, 1969), 126, 142-144.

finally began in the mid-1890s.[9] Alongside them, various vocational schools, especially teacher-training institutions, provided one- to four-year professional programs.

In these reforms, the importance of gender increased with the level of schooling. Primary education was open to all, and girls, like boys, were required to attend five years of schooling. They could continue their education in "secondary public schools" or, more acceptably, in "secondary schools for girls."[10] However, girls' education was understood differently, with authorities emphasizing gender segregation, moral instruction, and the regulation of female behavior.[11] Girls could also attend vocational schools, training for occupations such as dressmaking, millinery, midwifery, and bookkeeping.[12] Nevertheless, their educational opportunities narrowed sharply after the age of fifteen. They could not enroll in the upper grades of the *Gymnasium*, take the *matura* (qualifying exam for university admission),[13] or attend university lectures. The only path to a university education was through women's teacher-training schools, which often occupied a no-man's-land amidst the conflict between church and state over the control of female education.[14] By the end of the nineteenth century, only one such institution remained in Northern Croatia, run by the Sisters of Charity and criticized by some for promoting German cultural narratives and limiting "progressive" pedagogical ideas.[15]

As elsewhere in Europe, this framework was both class-based and gendered. Lower-class women entered the workforce out of economic necessity, while middle- and upper-class women were expected to find fulfillment through marriage and family life. Women's access to higher education was often dismissed as a private matter, family strategy or ultimately only a "women's" issue.

9 Vlasta Švoger, Ivana Horbec, „Nacrt temeljnih načela javne nastave u Austriji (1848.) - osnova modernizacije školstva u Habsburškoj Monarhiji", *Anali za povijest odgoja* 12/12 (2013), 15, 30. https://hrcak.srce.hr/334445; Štefka Batinić, "Hrvatski školski sustav u XX. stoljeću", *Anali za povijest odgoja* 2/2 (2003), 55. https://hrcak.srce.hr/334748

10 The history of secondary schools for girls in Croatia dates back to 1868.

11 Dinko Župan, *Mentalni korzet. Spolna politika obrazovanja žena u Banskoj Hrvatskoj (1868-1918)* (Osijek – Slavonski Brod, 2013), 125-140.

12 Antun Cuvaj, *Građa za povijest školstva kraljevine Hrvatske i Slavonije*, X (Zagreb, 1913), 245-251.

13 In Austria, women were permitted to take the *Matura* exam as external candidates starting in the 1870s.

14 The first Women's Teacher Training College was opened by the Sisters of Charity in Zagreb in 1848. Later, from 1865 to 1875, the order also operated a college in Đakovo. Its closure coincided with the establishment of the state-run Royal Women's Preparatory School [*Kraljevska ženska preparandija*] in Zagreb, which existed for only eight years. In southern Croatia, a Women's Teacher Training College was established in Dubrovnik in 1875, while in Istria, a similar school would eventually open in Pazin in 1912. Župan, *Mentalni korzet*, 158-166.

15 Dragutin Franković, *Povijest školstva i pedagogije u Hrvatskoj* (Zagreb, 1958), 170.

Therefore, it was precisely female teachers, writers, and women's associations who brought women's educational rights into public debate and challenged existing barriers.

III. Renegotiating the Limits of Women's Education

In the major cultural and national centers of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, women's educational activism was largely organized through associations such as the Association for Extended Women's Education [Verein für erweiterte Frauenbildung] (1888); Czech Women's Industrial Association [Ženský výrobní spolek] (1871), Minerva Association for the Foundation and Maintenance of the Girls' *Gymnasium* (1890); the Hungarian National Association for Women's Education [Országos Nőképző Egyesület] (1868). Together, these organizations created an institutional network of vocational courses, girls' schools, and women's secondary education, while also advocating for expanded educational opportunities.[16]

In Croatia, by contrast, no comparable association existed at this time. As an agrarian country with a relatively small bourgeois civil society until the late nineteenth century, Croatia lacked the capital and social foundations necessary to sustain such initiatives. Modernizing projects, first promoted by Vienna for administrative purposes and later adopted by national movements seeking greater political autonomy, developed under significant structural constraints. Territorial fragmentation, limited capital, the economic crisis of the 1870s and 1880s, and the subordination of Croatian economic interests to Vienna and Budapest slowed social transformation. It was only in the mid-1890s that a more consolidated bourgeois society began to emerge.[17] Within this context, the development of women's secondary schools and associations followed a reverse trajectory. The first major women's association focused on female education and employment was founded only in 1900, supporting the already established Temporary Women's Lyceum.[18]

16 "Minerva. Verein für Frauenbildung," *Ariadne. Frauen in Bewegung 1848–1938,* Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, https://fraueninbewegung.onb.ac.at/node/30.; "Verein für erweiterte Frauenbildung," *Ariadne. Frauen in Bewegung 1848–1938*, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, https://fraueninbewegung.onb.ac.at/node/474; Katalin Kéri, "The Topic of Girls' Education in Hungary in the Late 1800s," *e-Eruditio* 7/ 2 (2023): 40–49, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1416686.pdf.; Marie L. Neudorflová, *Česke ženy v 19. století. Ůsilí a sny, úspěchy i zklamaní na cestě k emancipaci* (Prague, 1999), 116-142; Stjepan Radić, *Djevojački sviet - izabrane pripovijetke čeških spisateljica*, (Zagreb, 1902), XXIV-XXXVI.

17 Arnold Suppan, *Oblikovanje nacije u građanskoj Hrvatskoj 1835-1918* (Zagreb, 1999), 141-155, Gross, 151; Cvjetko Milanja, *Konstrukcije kulture: modeli kulturne modernizacije u Hrvatskoj 19. Stoljeća* (Zagreb, 2012), 73.

18 Martina Piškor, Ines Sabotič, "The Ladies Society and Ladies Club: Two Examples of Women's Associations in Zagreb," *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskoga fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu* 55/1 (2023): 265-287. https://doi.org/10.17234/RadoviZHP.55.1

The advancement of women's educational rights relied heavily on the initiatives of prominent women teachers. Their professional position improved significantly during Ivan Mažuranić's educational reforms, which professionalized teaching and equalized the rights and salaries of male and female teachers. By the late nineteenth century, women teachers had become active participants in public debates, publishing pedagogical, popular, and literary works and advocating for women's education. Among them, Marija Fabković and Marija Jambrišak played a particularly instrumental role. Fabković was a Czech-born teacher who settled in Croatia after marriage. Her direct, modern and feminist attempts to transfer feminist initiatives from the Czech to the Croatian context, however, often encountered indifference or resistance, revealing the limited resonance of explicitly feminist agendas in the local environment.[19] A different strategy was adopted by her younger colleague Marija Jambrišak, a graduate of the Vienna Paedagogium. Jambrišak argued that in Croatia, "to fight for the full equality of women in every respect would amount to abandoning common sense."[20] Instead, she based her arguments for the reform of girls' education on traditional values and gender roles. Yet, her proposal to the Zagreb City Council for extending secondary schools for girls by two to three years, cautiously referring to such an institution as a "lyceum," was still unsuccessful.[21]

Nevertheless, these initiatives brought Croatia into broader debates on women's education across the Dual Monarchy. While opponents claimed that higher education threatened women's "natural sphere" and social order, supporters emphasized female honor, social necessity, and national interests. In Croatia, discussions focused on daughters from impoverished civil service families, who lacked dowries and required respectable professions. Educated women were also presented as better mothers and, above all, as transmitters of national culture. In the context of nation-building, women's higher education was therefore justified not only as a social necessity but also as a project serving the nation's moral and cultural development.[22]

19 Mihajl Ogrizović, *Marija Fabković* (Zagreb, 1973); Fabković: "Hrvatskim gospojama," *Obzor* (1872) no. 4.

20 Marija Jambrišak, "O uzgoju že, ske mladosti," *Pučki prijatelj* (1873) no. 24.

21 "Kakva je naša viša djevojačka škola i je li opravdana želja za njezinom reformom," *Narodne novine* (1890) no. 93; "Djevojački licej u Zagrebu," *Hrvatska* (1891) no. 259; Marija Jambrišak, "Iz škole u život," *Godišnje izvješće viših i nižih djevojačkih škola i ženske obrtne škole Zagreb* (1890) vol. 1 (Zagreb, 1891).

22 Tihana Luetić, "Prve studentice Mudroslovnog fakulteta kr. Sveučilišta Franje Josipa I. u Zagrebu," *Povijesni prilozi* 21/ 22 (2002): 167-171 https://hrcak.srce.hr/28671; Tihana Luetić, "Breaking into the Men's World: First Female Students' Experiences at the Royal University of Francis Joseph I in Zagreb," *History in Flux* 5 (2023): 62, https://doi.org/10.32728/flux.2023.5.3; Kamila Staudigl-Ciechowitz, "The Long Struggle to Open Austria's Law Faculties to Women. From the First Woman Doctor of Law to the First Female Law Professor," *Journal on European History of Law* 13/ 2 (2022): 12-15; Ida Ograjšek, "Zastupljenost ženskog pitanja u hrvatskim glasilima na kraju 19. Stoljeća," *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskoga fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu* 34-35-36/ 1 (2004): 92-96, https://hrcak.srce.hr/49178.

Croatian girls gained the right to a *Gymnasium* (college-preparatory secondary school) education roughly at the same time as girls in the major capitals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Temporary Women's Lyceum in Zagreb opened its doors in 1892, the same year as the Girls' *Gymnasium* of the Association for Extended Women's Education in Vienna (1892), only two years after the "Minerva" Girls' *Gymnasium* in Prague (1890), and four years before the Veres Pálné Girls' *Gymnasium* in Budapest (1896). It is worth noting that all the other mentioned schools were established as private institutions by women's associations, whereas the Zagreb Lyceum was founded as a state institution. Despite the publicly predominant attitude towards the purpose of female education, it proved to be a more ambitious institution than what Marija Jambiršak had initially demanded. Indeed, Izidor Kršnjavi later emphasized that he strategically retained the name "Lyceum" instead of "Gymnasium" to "avoid public alarm."[23] In doing so, he likely relied on the established practice of opening *lyceums* in other parts of the Monarchy as institutions that promoted a "feminine" type of education that didn't confer the right to enroll in university.[24]

At first glance, the Zagreb Lyceum appeared to conform to this broader trend, with a curriculum that included domestic science, singing, painting, needlework, and world literature, while its final examination lacked the legal status of a *matura*. However, it was a far more complex institution, adapted to the specific socio-political context of Croatia and broader reformist aims. Conceived as an eight-year school, the first four grades followed an expanded curriculum of the "higher school for girls" (Viša djevojačka škola, for girls aged 10-15), while the final four grades offered three distinct tracks: pedagogical, general, and Latin. The first functioned as a teacher-training program, the second emphasized modern languages, and the third provided preparation for the *matura* and university studies.[25] This structure allowed the Lyceum to address the need for a state teacher-training institution, while also serving as a testing ground for Izidor Kršnjavi's concept of the *Real-Gymnasium* within, as he put it, the "marginalized sphere of female education."[26] The institution's pioneering character was reflected in its prolonged "temporary" status until its transformation in 1913

23 Isidor Kršnjavi, *Primjedbe uz Načela o uređenju srednjih škola u Kraljevini Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca* (Zagreb, 1919), 7.

24 Juliane Mikoletzky, "An Unintended Consequence: Women's Entry into Engineering Education in Austria," *History and Technology, an International Journal* 14/1-2 (1997): 31-48, DOI: 10.1080/07341519708581920, 35.

25 Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Odgovorne pred historijom. Prve učenice Privremenog ženskog liceja," *Historijski zbornik* 59 (2006): 69-92. https://hrcak.srce.hr/317049.

26 Kršnjavi, 7.



Figure 2. Graduates of the Women's Lyceum in Zagreb, 1899. Josipa Steinkuš (standing) became the first Croatian woman to specialize in Greek philology and later taught at the Lyceum. Photo: G. & I. Varga. Croatian School Museum, HŠM Mf 1108.

into the Royal Women's *Real-Gymnasium*. Furthermore, it fostered a distinct identity among its students and helped prepare the way for women's access to higher education. Although Zagreb University remained closed to women, the Lyceum diploma was recognized by universities in Switzerland, and its graduates could sit for the *matura* at secondary schools for boys. In the following decades, the women's *Real-Gymnasium* expanded rapidly, with institutions established throughout Croatia.[27]

The next frontier was university education, where a recognizable pattern began to emerge across the Dual Monarchy. Initially, women were permitted to attend university lectures only as auditors, without the right to take examinations; from the mid-1890s onward, they gradually gained the right to enroll as regular students (Budapest, 1895; Vienna and Prague, 1897). This process also followed a distinct institutional trajectory: women were first

27 Dubravka Miljković and Štefka Batinić, "Iz povijesti hrvatskoga srednjega školstva u razdoblju od 1918. – 1940," *Napredak* 152/3-4 (2011): 511-514. https://hrcak.srce.hr/82.

admitted to Faculties of Philosophy, followed by Medicine, while access to Law remained the final frontier.

The University of Zagreb mirrored this incremental model. Its doors were first nudged open in 1895, when female teachers from the Lyceum were allowed to attend lectures as non-degree students. Once the first cohort of Lyceum graduates had completed their final year, individual applications for admission began to arrive, only to be initially rejected.[28] Some of these women subsequently enrolled as external students, others pursued their studies in Vienna, Prague or Zurich,[29] while others remained within the teaching profession. Finally, a 1901 decree permitted women to enroll at the Faculty of Philosophy, which encompassed a broad spectrum of disciplines in both the humanities and the natural sciences, including a pharmaceutical course. Interest among women, however, remained fairly modest. Overall, until the outbreak of the First World War, women constituted less than ten percent of the student body at the Faculty of Philosophy.[30] Although changes in the enrollment of female students during the First World War have not been systematically studied, personal testimonies suggest that the number of women at universities increased at that time. "You can tell that the country is at war even at the university. There are far more young women than young men attending lectures, which saddens me greatly,"[31] wrote Croatian-Hungarian poet and translator Gizzella Tarczay Papp in 1916.

In 1918, women gained the right to study law and medicine. Three years later the Vidovdan Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes guaranteed equal access to higher education for all citizens, thereby extending this right to women across the full range of faculties and courses as well as new academies that would emerge in the following years. The new state framework also brought about a shift in prevailing attitudes toward the position of women. The lack of a sustained focus on the question of women's rights limited women's chances of winning political rights, but it also allowed Serbian women to begin enrolling at the "Belgrade Higher School," the predecessor of the University of

28 The first request for regular enrolment was submitted by Marija Göszel in 1898. Vukelja, Luetić, 73.

29 See Luka Boršić and Ivana Skuhala Karasman, "Prve hrvatske studentice na Sveučilištu u Zürich," *Metodički ogledi* 3/1 (2025): 45-67. https://hrcak.srce.hr/335175; Iskra Iveljić, "Kroatische Studenten und Professoren in Wien (1790-1918)," in *The Entangled Histories of Vienna, Zagreb and Budapest (18th-20th Century)*, ed. Iskra Iveljić (Zagreb, 2015), 291-335.

30 Tihana Luetić, "Počeci visokoškolskog obrazovanja za žene u Hrvatskoj i usporedba sa stanjem u susjednim zemljama," *Historijski zbornik* 59 (2006): 64-65. https://hrcak.srce.hr/317048; Tihana Luetić, "Breaking into the Men's World," 59–61; Tihana Luetić, "Prve studentice Mudroslovnog fakulteta," 167–207.

31 Gizzella Tarczay Papp, "Nevjerna rijeka. Priča s priobalja rijeke Save," prepared by Ana Batinić and Ivana Sabljal, in *Moderne misleće žene. Intelektualna povijest žena u Hrvatskoj 19. i 20. stoljeća* 1, ed. Marijana Kardum and Ana Batinić (Zagreb, 2025), 181.

Belgrade, almost unnoticed from the late decades of the nineteenth century.[32] During the interwar period, the University of Belgrade even appointed its first female docent, Ksenija Atanasijević, thus contributing to the normalization of women's presence in higher education. The number of female students in Croatia rose rapidly during the interwar period. By the eve of the Second World War, women accounted for approximately twenty percent of all university students and represented more than half of the enrolment at the Faculty of Philosophy and in pharmacy.[33]

Formal educational qualifications did not, however, necessarily translate into professional opportunities. From the outset, the first generation of female graduates encountered legal barriers. Thus the 1888 Héderváry Act required celibacy from female teachers in Croatia, reflecting the belief that married women should devote themselves to family life and should not compete with male or single female teachers for employment. Although the regulation formally remained in force until the collapse of the Monarchy, it was often circumvented because educational expansion created a shortage of teachers.[34]

The First World War began to soften the boundaries between "male" and "female" occupations, undermining assumptions about women's incapacity but also heightening public awareness of the issue. In the postwar period, legal provisions formally embraced the principle of equality, yet its implementation in practice remained inconsistent. The Vidovdan Constitution (1921) and the Civil Service Act (1923) guaranteed equal access to public employment, yet numerous sectoral regulations continued to restrict women's careers. For example, the Law on State Transport Personnel (1923) limited women to clerical and auxiliary positions despite proclaiming equal access in principle.[35] Female law graduates encountered some of the greatest obstacles. A 1928 decree barred them from judicial appointments, although they could still qualify as lawyers. Writing at the time, the lawyer Ida Knežević argued that excluding women from the judiciary undermined the status of all women in the legal profession, while broader legal inequalities (women were still excluded from serving as witnesses to wills or as guardians)

32 Luetić, "Počeci visokoškolskog obrazovanja za žene u Hrvatskoj i usporedba sa stanjem u susjednim zemljama," 67.

33 Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Ženska strana Zagrebačkog sveučilišta u međuraću," in *Zagreb 1924. – 1930. i 1945. – 1967. Društvo, kultura, svakodnevica: Znanstveni skup s međunarodnim sudjelovanjem Desničini susreti 2018*, ed. Drago Roksandić (Zagreb, 2019), 235–267, doi: 10.17234/Desnicini_susreti2018.15.

34 Dubravka Dulibić-Paljar, "Zakonski celibat za učiteljice: kulturni fenomen 19. Stoljeća," *Croatica et Slavica Iadertina*, 19/1 (2023): 169-177, https://doi.org/10.15291/csi.4305.

35 Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, *Opasne iluzije. Rodni stereotipi u međuratnoj Jugoslaviji* (Zagreb, 2014), 253-254.

further constrained their careers.[36] Furthermore, gender discrimination was not explicitly prohibited. Teachers complained that there were more unemployed female than male teachers, as "women's applications were only considered once those of men had been dealt with."[37] Women chemists noted that "when an engineer is required, one may hear: just don't send a woman,"[38] while banks openly advertised positions seeking male candidates only.[39] Thus, in contrast to the breakthrough achieved in higher education, overcoming legal barriers to employment proved to be the battle that would extend deep into the twentieth century. Similarly challenging and long-lasting were the subtle obstacles woven into personal identities and prevailing cultural conceptions.

IV. Cultural Barriers

Among the first cohort admitted to the higher grades of the Lyceum only five girls chose to pursue the Latin track qualifying them for higher education. In the pivotal year 1901, the University of Zagreb enrolled only three regular female students. Throughout the first decade following the expansion of educational opportunities, female enrollment in the Latin track and at the university remained consistently low, showing only a modest increase. The abolition of formal legal restrictions had resolved only part of the problem. Women's educational trajectories were shaped by far more delicate obstacles than legal provisions: their own ambitions, convictions, identities, and the expectations placed on them by their families and by society. Young women first had to want to pursue higher education, and in doing so disregard the deeply ingrained social and possibly personal belief that studying was incompatible with their feminine nature and social role.

Alternative visions of womanhood played an important role in this process, particularly the emergence of the feminist "New Woman" at the turn of the century and her consumer-oriented, globally popular successor, the "modern girl" of the 1920s. Although both concepts mostly existed as admired or criticized discursive constructs, they nevertheless became powerful symbols of modernity

36 Ida Knežević, "Stručni problemi žena pravnika u Jugoslaviji," compiled by Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak in *Moderne misleće žene: Intelektualna povijest žena u Hrvatskoj 19. i 20. stoljeća*, ed. Marijana Kardum, Ana Batinić (Zagreb, 2025), 230; Ida Knežević, "Žena u našoj advokaturi," *Odvjetnik. Glasilo advokatske komore u SRH* 9 (1968): 300-305.

37 IAB (Historical Archives of Belgrade), UOŽ (Unverzitetski obrazovane žene), 1939/3, appendix 4.

38 IAB, UOŽ, 1939/3, appendix 6.

39 Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, *Opasne iluzije*, 262.

and of the changes on the horizon. They introduced into the public sphere a prototype of a woman who questioned traditional norms, sought education and professional opportunities, and demanded political, personal, and sexual liberation.[40]

In Croatia, the idea of the "New Woman" was promoted, albeit indirectly and only partially, by prominent late-nineteenth-century teachers such as Milka Pogačić, Marija Jambrišak, Natalija Wickerhauser, and Jagoda Truhelka, as well as the journalist and writer Marija Jurić Zagorka. Through their education, public engagement, promotion of "women's issues," and socially transgressive conduct – such as drinking tea alone in a café, cutting their hair short or choosing to leave arranged marriages or abusive husbands – these women gradually wove an alternative model of womanhood into the Croatian public sphere.[41] They thus offered young girls a meaningful point of identification and support as they contemplated paths beyond the conventional. Their influence extended far beyond the classroom. Lyceum teachers often maintained contact with their successful former students, encouraging them and following their careers with interest and pride.[42]

After the war, actresses, aviators, beauty queens, professionals, and other "modern girls" became a regular presence in the growing number of women's magazines. The most influential of these publications was *Ženski list* [Woman's Paper], edited by journalist, writer, and women's rights activist Marija Jurić Zagorka. Significantly, Zagorka founded the magazine out of patriotic conviction after rejecting an offer from the German publisher Ullstein to edit a Croatian edition of its women's magazine. As she later recalled: "I told him about my past, when I fought in the streets against German influences . . . The proposal was therefore absurd . . . I also warned

40 Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester and New York, 1997); Alys Eve Weinbaum et al. eds., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, NC, 2008).

41 Tomislav Topolovčan, "Značajne učiteljice iz povijesti hrvatskog školstva u vrijeme Ivana Filipovića: komparacija djelovanja Marije Fabković, Marije Jambrišak i Milke Pogačić," in *Zbornik radova sa znanstvenog simpozija Dvjestota obljetnica rođenja Ivana Filipovića (1823. – 2023.) održanog u Osijeku 23. i 24. lipnja 2023,* ed. Snježana Dubovicki, Emina Berbić Kolar, Anica Bilić, et al. (Osijek, 2025), 287-311; Ana Batinić, "Plemkinje duha: Marija Jambrišak - Jagoda Truhelka - Zdenka Marković," *Nova Croatica* 2 [32]/2 [52] (2008): 197-215. https://hrcak.srce.hr/17466; Tihana Bertek et al., *In the Footsteps of Fierce Women,* transl. Marija Marčetić, Nikola Sarnavka, and Toni Zadravec (Zagreb, 2022); Slavica Jakobović Fribec, "Marija Jurić Zagorka: protagonistica nenapisane povijesti hrvatskog feminizma," *KNJIŽEVNA REPUBLIKA, časopis za književnost* 5-6 (2006): 43-52.

42 Ana Batinić, "Pisma Jagode Truhelke Zdenki Marković," *Kronika Zavoda za povijest hrvatske književnosti, kazališta i glazbe HAZU* 13-14-15 (2004): 113-198; Camilla Lucerna, "Natalija Wickerhauser," *Izvješće Privremenog ženskog liceja i s njim spojene vježbaonce koncem školske godine 1906/7* (Zagreb, 1907), 3-7; Ivana B. Spasović, "Dr. Milica Bogdanović – dar, san i put," in *CRNI KABINET: OBRAZOVANJE, ZDRAVLJE I ROD*, ed. Lidija Dujić, Maša Grdešić, Suzana Coha, Anita Dremel, Sandra Prlenda (Zagreb, 2024), 18-20.

him that if he attempted to find another person for this undertaking, . . . I would launch my own magazine without a penny."[43] Zagorka consciously promoted American culture as a counterweight to what she perceived as dominant German cultural influence. Central to this vision was the figure of the "modern girl" as an alternative model of modernity. The magazine declared: "Today, the question is no longer whether one should engage in sport, but rather which sport to choose."[44] Its pages featured women skiing, playing tennis, driving automobiles, and pursuing professional careers, while articles addressed women's employment, professions, and scientific work.[45] Smiling, stylish, and active, these women challenged conventional ideals of femininity and encouraged readers to imagine new social roles. Thus, Zagorka presented a successful American businesswoman: "Dorothy Shaver is an attractive young woman who appreciates perfume, flowers, elegant dresses, lipstick and powder, and other cosmetic refinements . . . for she believes that a woman, no matter how accomplished she may be in her profession, must be equally accomplished in her womanhood."[46] This model thus successfully presented higher education and professional achievement as integral elements of modern femininity.

For many women, the decision to take advantage of new educational opportunities was a deeply personal one. Even though supporters of expanding women's education had to battle claims of self-serving ambition and the accusation that it was just a strategy for securing a better marriage, the first female students embraced these emerging opportunities with unmistakable anticipation and excitement. In her student address at the Lyceum's opening, future math professor Marija Göszel recalled the mix of disbelief and hope that the sudden news of new educational opportunities had evoked: "With such joy our parents told us that a women's lyceum would be opened; with such excitement we asked them what a lyceum was and whether we, too, would be allowed to attend that new school. And then, at last, the day dawned that would be written in golden letters in the annals of Croatian education."[47] Similarly, student Zdenka Marković confided to her friend Elza Kučera: "I entered the university. Elza, I am happy now! Do you

43 Marija Jurić Zagorka, *Kako je bilo* (Belgrade, 1953), 44. Also see Marina Vujnović, "The Emergence of *Ženski list* in the Context of Interwar Croatia and the *Bubikopf* Debate," in *Neznana junakinja-nova čitanja Zagorke*, ed. Maša Grdešić and Slavica Jakobović Fribec (Zagreb, 2008), 237-256; Marina Vujnović, *Forging the Bubikopf Nation. Journalism, Gender, and Modernity in Interwar Yugoslavia* (New York, 2009).

44 "Koji ćete šport izabrati?," *Ženski list* 4 (1937), 8.

45 "Ženska zvanja," *Ženski list* 10 (1927), 26; "Ženska zaposlenja," *Ženski list* 10 (1928), 36; "Ženska zvanja su postojala već u davnini," *Ženski list* 7 (1929), 34; "Žena u diobi rada," *Ženski list* 8 (1930), 8; „Žena naučni i socijalni radnik", *Ženski list* 8 (1930), 9.

46 "Žena i poslovni čovjek," *Ženski list* 11 (1936), 30.

47 *Narodnim novine* 1892. br. 233



Figure 3. Croatian writer, translator, and teacher Zdenka Marković, undated photo by an unknown photographer. Požega City Museum.

believe me? I am so delighted."[48] Gizzella Tarczay Papp wrote in her diary: "I enrolled. I have already begun my third year within the walls of my *alma mater* in Zagreb. Oh, how I love this dear old building!"[49] Several decades later, Milica pl. Bogdanović, the first woman to earn both a degree (in history and geography) and a doctorate at the University of Zagreb, concluded that education had given women the freedom "to earn their own living . . . to marry or not to marry by the right of self-determination, independent of any need for economic security."[50]

However, as secondary and higher education for girls gradually gained public legitimacy, aspiring to them became a status symbol in its own right. Consequently, some young women found themselves pressured by their families to follow these academic paths. In 1910 Zdenka Marković, now a teacher, wondered, "what will become of the many girls choosing the Latin track," and concluded that "many study only to satisfy their own vanity or, at times, the vanity of unreasonable parents."[51]

Young women also tended to prioritize social acceptability when choosing their course of study and future profession. Even after all faculties were formally opened to women, many continued to opt for established pathways. During the interwar period, nearly half of all female students in Zagreb enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy, as another 14 percent chose pharmacology.[52] While those students showed interest in the humanities and natural sciences, this distinction had little impact on their eventual career

48 NSK, R 4771b, Zdenka Marković's letter to Elza Kučera, Zagreb, October 22, 1902. Retrieved from Luetić, "Breaking into the Men's World," 63.

49 Tarczay Papp, "Nevjerna rijeka. Priča s priobalja rijeke Save," 277.

50 *Spomenica u proslavu osamdesete obljetnice rođenja Marije Jambrišak* (Zagreb, 1927), 39-45.

51 Zdenka Marković, "Ženska zvanja," *in Izvješće Zemaljske više djevojačke škole smjera kućanskog u Zagrebu 1909./10* (Zagreb, 1910), 32.

52 Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Ženska strana Zagrebačkog sveučilišta u međuraću," 244-249.

paths. Most programs within the Faculty of Philosophy ultimately prepared women for teaching positions, a profession that accorded with traditional notions of women as educators and one in which earlier generations of female teachers had already established a foothold.

Some students, however, pursued uncharted paths. Medicine and Law each attracted around fifteen percent of female students, while only a small number enrolled at the Faculty of Engineering, initially in architecture and later, in the 1930s, in chemistry. Theology and veterinary medicine remained the least attractive fields, as they conflicted with contemporary expectations regarding acceptable occupations for women.[53] Women physicians generally entered professional life with greater ease than women in other pioneering fields. This was largely due to the shortage of medical personnel and the fact that, when the Faculty of Medicine in Zagreb opened, seventeen women doctors were already active in Croatia after completing their studies at universities abroad, including Zurich, Vienna, and Geneva.[54] After graduation, women doctors often found employment, particularly in pediatrics, internal medicine, dentistry, and public health. Kornelija Sertić, one of the first female graduates of the Zagreb Faculty of Medicine, built a notable career in pediatrics and public health,[55] while Anka Orešković-Zdunić became Croatia's first woman specialist in rheumatology.[56] By contrast, women trained in law faced far greater obstacles. The first woman to pass the Zagreb bar exam, Marija Ilić (Agapova), soon left legal practice for a librarianship in Belgrade.[57] Nevertheless, several women succeeded in establishing independent law practices, including Antea Vujić-Mainkas Barbot in Osijek, Mira Winter, Ida Knežević, Jelisava Bačić and Eva Komloš in Zagreb or Erna Bergstein Finzi in Bjelovar.[58]

V. Family Support and Public Opinion

Family support was always a key factor, but it played an especially important role in the educational trajectories of women. In a society in which women's mobility and behavior were still regulated

53 Ibid.

54 Marko Kolić, "Liječnice i farmaceutkinje u Banskoj Hrvatskoj," *Povijesni prilozi* 44/ 68 (2025): 207-243. https://doi.org/10.22586/pp.v44i68.30510

55 *Hrvatski muzej medicine i farmacije*, "Kornelija Sertić", https://hmmf.hazu.hr/kornelija-sertic/, accessed May 15, 2026.

56 Ivica Vučak, Marko Kolić, „Anka Orešković-Zdunić (Karlovac, 30. 1. 1900. - Zagreb, 8. 12. 1969.)- stogodišnjica promocije prve hrvatske reumatologinje", *Liječničke novine*, 25/ 240. (2025): 76-79

57 Mira Kočonda Vodvarška, "Dr. Mara Ilić, prvi ženski advokat u Zagrebu," *Ženski pokret* 10 (1927): 4; Jelena Tepavac, "Marija Ilić Agapova - Heroina beogradskog bibliotekarstva," https://www.011info.com/ko-je-bio/marija-ilic-agapova-heroina-beogradskog-bibliotekarstva, accessed May 15, 2026.

58 Ida Knežević, "Žena u našoj advokaturi," 300-305.



Figure 4. Dr. Elza Kučera at the Royal University Library, today's National and University Library in Zagreb, where she served as deputy director from 1920 to 1942. Unknown, c. 1919. Print collection, National and University Library Zagreb.

by strict social norms, female students required a more stable environment and a more reliable network than their male counterparts. In practical terms, this meant financial security, emotional support, and safe and respectable accommodation. Parental correspondence and autobiographical writings frequently reveal a strong sense of parental pride and encouragement. "My dear girl! Be healthy and happy and enjoy the enormous beauty of science,"[59] wrote the Croatian scientist Oton Kučera to his daughter Elza during her studies in Zurich. Similarly, Slavicist Božena Kralj secured her mother's support even for the uncertain prospect of spending a semester in Moscow at an institution that had not yet admitted women.[60] Evidence from the ambitious, though methodologically inconsistent survey conducted by the Association of University Women in Yugoslavia in the 1930s indicates that the vast majority of female students were supported either by both parents or by a widowed mother.[61]

Securing accommodation was a considerable challenge in a rapidly expanding university city. Male students frequently described their cramped, damp, and noisy lodgings in vivid detail. According

59 NSK R 4771b, Oton Kučera's letter to Elza Kučera, Zagreb 23 October 1906. Cited in Luetić, "Breaking into the Men's World," 67.

60 Tihana Luetić, "´Pa, mora i to biti!´ – 'sveučilištarka' i prva 'Domagojka 'Božena Kralj," *Croatica Christiana periodica* 38/ 73 (2014): 127-43.

61 Ljiljana Turkalj Šarić, "Studij žena po fakultetima u Zagrebu i univerz. žena u karijeri u Zagrebu i Savskoj banovini," prepared by Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, in *Moderne misleće žene: Intelektualna povijest žena u Hrvatskoj 19. i 20. stoljeća*, ed. Marijana Kardum and Ana Batinić (Zagreb, 2025), 180-216.

to the historian Tihana Luetić, before the First World War the average male student changed address about five times during his studies. By contrast, female students typically remained at the same address throughout their entire academic careers.[62] This pattern shifted as the number of women students grew into the thousands, and the scholarship system collapsed after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the interwar period some of the female students ended up in the free but extremely poor women's residence on Josipovac or in the somewhat better dormitory on Mlinarska Street. However, female students' living conditions generally remained comparatively more stable and appropriate. They could rely on family and social networks or secure accommodation in expensive private boarding houses for young women.[63] Reports from university health services further suggest that female students were less likely to seek medical assistance or to dine in student cafeterias, concluding that "parents are more reluctant, unless they have sufficient means, to send their daughters away from home."[64] Such a standard of living, however, required stable financial resources.

Describing her fellow students, Gizzella Tarczay Papp wrote: "Most of the girls . . . came from so-called 'good families.' By contrast, the young men were largely poor, yet studious, attentive, and serious."[65] The social profiles of the earliest female students studying at both the Lyceum and university in the interwar period reveal a consistent pattern. Although they were not a socially homogeneous group, female students were disproportionately drawn from urban upper- and middle-class backgrounds compared to their male counterparts. They came primarily from administrative, entrepreneurial, and intellectual circles, often hailing from Zagreb and its surrounding area.[66] Daughters of rural and working-class families were exceedingly rare and typically required much broader networks of support to succeed. A telling example is Josipa Steinkuš, the talented daughter of a locksmith from Varaždin, who became the first Croatian female classicist. Her path to higher education was made possible through the support of her teachers in Varaždin, a family friend in Zagreb, and Lyceum teachers who took

62 Tihana Luetić, *Studenti sveučilišta u Zagrebu (1874.-1914.)* (Zagreb, 2012), 121-134.

63 Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Ženska strana zagrebačkog sveučilišta," 250-251.

64 Andrija Štampar, "Razvitak socijalne i zdravstvene zaštite visokoškolaca," *Liječnički vjesnik* 63 (1941), 105.

65 Tarczay Papp, "Nevjerna rijeka. Priča s priobalja rijeke Save", 281.

66 Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Odgovorne pred historijom," 76; Luetić, "Prve studentice Mudroslovnog fakulteta," 183; Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Ženska strana zagrebačkog sveučilišta," 252.

her into their home after that friend passed away.[67] While families generally provided a foundation of support for female students, starting a family of their own soon became a major source of frustration, especially for those determined to continue their careers.

Entering the world of paid employment was generally viewed as an acceptable fallback option for women, something they could turn to if they failed to marry or if their husband's income proved insufficient. The pursuit of higher education, however, destabilized this assumption. Young women who had invested significant emotional and financial resources into earning a degree were not inclined to give up their newly acquired independence or the sense of social purpose that accompanied it. "As soon as the human [man] within her comes into conflict with the woman, she sacrifices the woman so that she may remain human [man], so as not to fall back into zoology,"[68] wrote student of classical philology Mira Kočonda in 1908. Her article, "The Progressive Woman and Contemporary Men," written as she was embarking on her professional and personal life, called for a clearer definition of the social position of this small yet distinctive group of educated women, as well as a rethinking of their place within marriage. It sparked thoughtful responses from two feminist-oriented writers and journalists as well as two patronizing, cynical reactions from a journalist and a well-known Croatian author.[69] This first feminist debate in Croatia already brought into focus the relationship between educated women, marriage, and employment. The questions it raised would continue to shape public discourse throughout the period under consideration. Surveys carried out by the Association of University Women in Yugoslavia and by various women's magazines of the 1920s and 1930s reveal women torn between traditional expectations and their own wishes.[70] None of the available choices appeared favorable: abandoning a career into which they had invested so much, giving up the motherhood they still desired, or attempting to combine both and accepting the inevitable sense of guilt and the double burden that came with it. Young Mira Kočonda saw the solution in the need to change men's attitudes; married feminist writer Zofka Kveder saw it in

67 Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Odgovorne pred historijom," 83-84.

68 Mira Kočonda, "Napredna žena i današnji muškarci," *Zvono* 2/50-51 (1908): 779. In the Croatian language, the word *čovjek* can mean both "human being" and "man." In this context, however, it does not denote a male subject but rather the human as a cultural and rational being, set in opposition to "woman," which is framed in terms of biology.

69 Marija Jurić Zagorka, "Napredna žena i današnji muškarci (odjeci)," *Zvono* 3/1 (1909): 11-14; Zofka Kveder-Jelovšek, "Moderna žena i brak," *Zvono* 3/1 (1909): 14-16; Stjepan Parmačević, "Muškarac i žena," *Zvono* 3/1 (1909): 16-17; Antun Gustav Matoš, "Naprednjače i brak," *Hrvatsko pravo*, January 9, 1909, 2-3.

70 IAB 1939/3, prilog 1; IAB, UOŽ, 1936/Pravilnici, „Žena u profesiji"; "Anketa," *Ženski list* 9 (1929), 32-33.

the pragmatic technical modernization of household management; Belgrade law student Radmila Radonjić suggested the introduction of paid domestic help.[71]

At the same time, married educated working women faced considerable public pressure, as their careers were portrayed as selfish, harmful to family life, and a threat to male employment, particularly during the Great Depression.[72] Such attitudes often translated into policy: salary reductions for married women, career obstacles or dismissals. "All signs suggest that dark days lie ahead for working women," warned Yugoslav/Slovenian feminist Alojzija Štebi in 1933, pointing to measures such as restrictions on women's teacher training, exclusion from higher pedagogical institutions, preference for male candidates, and quotas limiting women's employment.[73] Further concern was caused by legislation proposed in 1934, which would allow the dismissal of married women from civil service positions if their husbands were also state employees. These measures prompted a coordinated response from the Yugoslav Women's Alliance, the Alliance of the Women's Movement, and the Association of University Women, which organized conferences, submitted petitions, and appealed to state authorities in defense of women's right to work.[74] Although their actions prevented large-scale dismissals, these debates must have reminded female students that their professional careers remained constrained by expectations surrounding marriage, family, and social norms, inevitably influencing their choice of studies.

71 Kočonda, "Napredna žena i današnji muškarci"; Kveder-Jelovšek, "Moderna žena i brak"; "Moderna devojka, pravnik i književnik," *Ženski svet*, 4 (1930), 10.

72 Ograjšek Gorenjak, *Opasne iluzije*, 259-264.

73 Alojzija Štebi, "Što se sprema ženama," *Ženski pokret* 9-10 (1933): 102.

74 Ograjšek Gorenjak, Opasne iluzije, 259-264.

VI. Professional Barriers: Isolation, Scrutiny, and Opposition

In an education system and a society where gender segregation was the norm, the arrival of women at universities caused a profound shock. Young women moving freely through shared spaces without chaperones, socializing and interacting with their male peers, provoked curiosity, discomfort, and often outright disapproval. Studies from other universities describe a range of strategies devised to manage this new reality, from assigning women separate seating to placing them under the supervision of professors who would

escort them into lecture halls.[75] Yet the concern was not only about female modesty. Perhaps even more pressing was the fear that women's presence would distract male students and undermine the quality of teaching. "When there were no women in medicine yet . . . the academics worked normally," a professor at the University of Lviv in Poland nostalgically recalled, and then "she" arrived and disrupted everything. "All the colleagues . . . are looking at her instead of the professor; their hands go to their collars as they adjust their cuffs."[76]

Personal accounts by female students across Europe frequently speak of isolation and a sense of being set apart in overwhelmingly male environments. Comparable sentiments appear in the recollections of Croatian women. In her letters, Zdenka Marković traced a spectrum of discomfort, from "God help me! A dreadful feeling," when she found herself the only woman in the lecture hall, to an almost "pleasant" sense of relief when joined by two other female students in Slavic studies.[77] Decades later, in her short autobiography, she still felt compelled to contrast this experience of isolation and subtle gender clustering in the "cold" and "rigid" academic atmosphere of Zagreb with the far more multicultural and stimulating environment she encountered during her later studies at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland.[78] This impression undoubtedly reflected not only the constant, curious gaze of male colleagues but also a deeper personal uncertainty. There simply were no clear social norms governing informal interaction with young men of the same age. In such situations, were they to behave as women who must treat every sign of attention with caution, or as fellow students free to speak more openly than convention typically allowed in mixed company?

As pioneers, first in secondary, and then in higher education, these young women were also subjected to constant public scrutiny. Both their academic progress and their behavior were observed with suspicion. Former Lyceum students recall regular inspections by Izidor Kršnjavi, while their headmaster forbade them from having any male escort, family or not, on their way to school.[79] Female university students encountered a wide range of criticism in the

75 Vuklelja, Luetić, 90-91; Georgia Oman, "Segregation, Regulation, and the Gendering of Space at the University of Wales, Bangor, 1884–1907," *Women's History Review* 29 /2 (2020): 308–30. doi:10.1080 /09612025.2019.166 0056.

76 Romana Pachucka, *Pamiętniki z lat 1914–1936* (Wrocław, 1958). Cited in Marta Kargól, "Dressed for Knowledge: Fashioning the First Female University Students from Central and Eastern Europe (1860-1910)," *The Journal of Dress History* 4/4 (2020): 59.

77 Vuklelja, Luetić, 93.

78 Zdenka Marković, "Autobiografija," u *Autobiografije hrvatskih pisaca*, prepared by Vinko Brešić (Zagreb, 1997), 641.

79 "Naša ženska sveučilišna mladost," *Hrvatski đak* 1 (1907), 9.

press, from claims that they were too "colorless" to make any meaningful contribution to Croatian science and culture, to accusations that their primary aim was to provoke "sexual desire in men."[80] Faced with such pressures, many sought to cultivate an image that would allow them to blend into their surroundings. Polish historian Marta Kargól has argued that the first generation of female students at central European universities developed a style of dress that deliberately distanced them both from the mannish image of the "suffragette" and from the more glamorous fashions associated with the marriage market. Instead, they adopted a modest, restrained, and serious yet still distinctly feminine style, often posing in photographs with recognizable attributes such as glasses, a pencil, or a book.[81] The resulting aesthetic began to fade after the First World War as the number of female students increased sharply and they came to embody the emerging ideal of the energetic, fashionable "modern girl." The women's press followed this shift with interest and enthusiasm, charting this transformation from women with "a man's coat, low heels, and glasses on the nose" to composed young women for whom "remaining a lady" posed no contradiction.[82]

However, increased visibility also brought new anxieties and renewed public suspicion. Within a few decades, female students had shifted from being a curious and unsettling novelty to being perceived as a genuine threat, associated with the feminization of professions, the erosion of prestige once secured through male exclusivity, and fears over shrinking employment opportunities. While historian Tihana Luetić's research points to largely positive interactions between the earliest Croatian female students and their professors, later generations recall more troubling experiences. Physics students in the 1930s remember a professor who refused to begin his lecture unless half of his female students left the room, while psychology students describe being mocked and harassed by both peers and professors.[83]

Marginalization did not end with graduation. On the contrary, only then were young women forced to swallow the bitter pill of reality. Women teachers struggled to advance into leadership positions;

80 Ibid., "Kolegicama studenticama," *Jugoslavenska žena*, 3/7 (1919): 343.

81 Kargól, 46-81.

82 *Žena i svet* 3 (1929), 11. Retrieved from Stanislava Barać, "Žena i svet (1925–1941) između moderne i nove žene: ambivalencija ilustrovanog ženskog (modnog) magazina," *Književnstvo: časopis za studije književnosti, roda i kulture* 4/4 (2014), https://journal.knjizenstvo.rs/index.php/knjizenstvo/sr_Latn/article/view/344.

83 Andrea Feldman, "Prilog istraživanju historije ženskih organizacija. Udruženje univerzitetski obrazovanih žena," *Žena*, 44/2-3 (1986): 52; Luetić, "Breaking into the Men's World," 65-67.

women chemists faced a job market that overwhelmingly favored their male counterparts, and women lawyers and pharmacists found themselves sidelined even within their own family businesses. Some female university graduates entered openly misogynistic workplaces where they were subjected to bullying before being dismissed as "hysterical."[84] An academic career remained largely out of reach. Women could occasionally find work at university as illustrators or assistants. Elza Kučera even held a position as an adjunct docent for a time. But it was not until 1942 that a woman, Blaženka Peičić-Marković, was appointed as a docent in the Department of Pathology – after having served as an assistant for seventeen years. In the aftermath of the Second World War, however, the new Yugoslav authorities reviewed all appointments made during the era of the collaborationist Independent State of Croatia, and most promotions from that period were annulled, eventually opening up more opportunities for women. Blaženka Peičić Marković was reappointed as a docent in 1954, after which she embarked on a rapid academic rise, eventually becoming a full professor (1964) and the first female dean (1966–1968) of the newly established School of Dental Medicine at the University of Zagreb, the first woman ever to hold the position of dean at the University of Zagreb.[85]

VII. Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

In their struggle for equal opportunities in education, women had to overcome prejudice and marginalization through a combination of patience, flexibility, and strategically coordinated efforts. The strategies they employed changed over time in response to shifting social attitudes. The earliest initiatives took shape in a society deeply skeptical of the need for women's education, and its proponents therefore framed their efforts within established, traditional narratives. The most prominent public advocate of women's education in the nineteenth century, Marija Jambrišak, upheld patriarchal values and conventional gender roles. This approach proved effective. She not only emerged as the "driving

84 Ana Solter, Jelena Seferović, "´Živčano ozbiljno oboljele´" ili one koje se ne uklapaju?- prve žene u Arheološkom muzeju," in *Historija zaborava. Prve žene zagrebačkih muzeja*, ed. Ana Solter (Zagreb, 2025), 114-146; Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, "´Prijelazna generacija´ i ´krčiteljice puteva´. Samorefleksija i samopercepcija intelektualki u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji," in *Zbornik Božene Vranješ Šoljan*, ed. Damir Agičić et al. (Zagreb, 2022), 236.

85 Ranka Franz-Štern, "Žene na Sveučilištu u Zagrebu – od prvih studentica i nastavnica do da nas,"*Sveučilišni vjesnik* 48/1-4 (2002): 31–33; Marko Kolić and Sven Seiwerth, *102 godine Zavoda za patologiju* (Zagreb, 2025), 138-139; Ivica Šute, "Sveučilište u Zagrebu 1918-1990," in *Sveučilište u Zagrebu 350 godina*, ed. Mirjana Polić Bobić (Zagreb, 2019), 56-71.

force" behind the Lyceum, effectively acting as its head in all but name, but also succeeded in redirecting funds from the Jelisaveta Foundation – established in memory of the late Empress Elisabeth (Sisi) – towards the creation of a boarding facility for its students.[86]

The founding of the Lyceum represented a major milestone that opened up entirely new strategic possibilities. In a strictly gender-segregated society, it was considered preferable for girls to be taught by women, but the female teachers lacked adequate formal training. To address this, they were granted permission to attend university lectures, thereby tentatively opening the doors of higher education to women. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the Lyceum also became a central hub of women's activity in Croatia, fostering networks that its alumnae would later draw upon in a wide range of initiatives. Many of the first female graduates, including Milica pl. Bogdanović, Josipa Steinkuš, and Mira Kočonda, found employment as teachers at the Lyceum after completing their education. Others could rely on connections formed there in pursuing professional opportunities. When Milica pl. Bogdanović set out to organize the Children's Literature Association, she reached out to fellow Lyceum alumnae through newspaper appeals. Likewise, the founding committee of the first feminist organization, the "Women's Movement" Society, included numerous former Lyceum students, headed by its first president, Mira Kočonda. When the Yugoslav Association of University Women sought to establish a branch in Zagreb, it relied precisely on the networks of Mira Kočonda and Adela Broch, while another Lyceum alumna, Olga Osterman, became its first president. Even moments of controversy, such as the brief appearance of the journal *Eva*, which presumptuously and inappropriately claimed to spearhead the women's movement in Croatia, were addressed through meetings of Zagreb women convened at the Lyceum itself.[87]

The formation of women's associations enabled the institutionalization of collective strategies, the coordination of activities aimed at advancing women's educational and professional goals, and the establishment of intergenerational networks of support. Female students in Croatia did not succeed in forming

86 Zdenka Marković, *Naš licej- o šesedesetgodišnjici njegova osnutka jeseni 1892* (Zagreb, 1953), 6; Cuvaj, XI, 393-399; Piškor, Sabotič.

87 Ana Batinić, "Književnice iz ´podmornice´ ili ´trganje spona´ – Društvo hrvatskih književnica (1936. – 1941.)" *Rad HAZU*, [forthcoming]; Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, "(Re)shaping the Associations of University Women in Zagreb (1931-1955)," *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskoga fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu* 55/ 1 (2023): 289-318. https://doi.org/10.17234/RadoviZHP.55.13; "Poziv na konferenciju," *Eva* 7-8, March 5, 1928.

an autonomous permanent women's student club. The Yugoslav Club of Female Academics, founded in 1920, and later attempts in 1933 and 1935 to establish an Association of Female University Students were all short-lived.[88] Female students eventually organized, instead, as a junior section within the Zagreb branch of the Association of University Women of Yugoslavia. Although later socialist-period historiography often interpreted these youth branches as channels appropriated by the illegal Communist Party for political mobilization and propaganda, in their contemporary context they functioned primarily as spaces of mentoring and assistance, where younger students received guidance, protection, and encouragement from senior students to pursue similar paths. Students retained autonomy in organizing their own activities while also benefiting from shared resources, including meeting spaces, language courses, and classes in rhythmic gymnastics. Senior members further supported them by arranging affordable meals, offering discounts in their pharmacies, and providing free medical consultations.[89]

Of greater significance were the activities of the Alliance of the Women's Movement, of which the Croatian "Women's Movement" Society was a member, and the Association of University Women of Yugoslavia. These organizations offered women a platform to analyze their social position, articulate their views, and advance public initiatives advocating women's right to education and employment. The Association of University Women of Yugoslavia actively lobbied state institutions on behalf of its members, securing, among other achievements, the appointment of the first female head of a girls' *Gymnasium* in Zagreb.[90] In collaboration with the Alliance of the Women's Movement, it also launched a public campaign during the Great Depression to counter widespread criticism of married women in the workforce, likely helping to prevent their mass dismissal. Crucially, the arguments advanced in these debates had shifted. No longer grounded in patriarchal or traditionalist reasoning, they increasingly reflected a new vision of womanhood, one that asserted women's right to personal development, emancipation, fulfilment, and dignity.[91]

88 Ograjšek Gorenjak, "Ženska strana zagrebačkog sveučilišta," 254.

89 Ograjšek Gorenjak, "(Re)shaping the Associations of University Women in Zagreb," 297.

90 Paulina Albala, *Deset godina Udruženja univerzitetski obrazovanih žena u Jugoslaviji 1928-1938* (Belgrade, 1939), 57.

91 Ograjšek Gorenjak, "´Prijelazna generacija´ i ´krčiteljice puteva´," 23.

VIII. Conclusion

Croatia both reflected and diverged from broader regional patterns in women's access to education. In many respects, developments in Croatia were deeply embedded in the educational and cultural dynamics of the Habsburg Monarchy, whose influence remained strong long after its dissolution. Croatian reformers and teachers were often trained in Austrian and Czech institutions, while domestic educational reforms frequently drew on models already tested elsewhere in Central Europe. Likewise, Croatian female students shared the aspirations, anxieties, and forms of discrimination experienced by their contemporaries across the region, confronting similar prejudices and relying on comparable strategies of advancement.

These developments, however, were not merely a passive reflection of metropolitan trends. Such influences were selectively adapted to local political, social, and national circumstances, and in some cases, developments even anticipated those of imperial centers. Croatia's weaker economic development and its peripheral and almost colonial position within the Austro-Hungarian framework produced a smaller, less affluent, and later-forming bourgeoisie. This social configuration slowed the diffusion of feminist ideas into the Croatian cultural sphere since feminist thought elsewhere was often sustained by a confident and economically secure middle class. Paradoxically, however, these same limitations contributed to a comparatively rapid institutionalization of women's education. The first Croatian *Gymnasium* for girls was established almost simultaneously with analogous institutions in the more developed centers of the Dual Monarchy but, in contrast to many of them, it was state-funded from the outset. This early and direct involvement of the state in Croatia suggests that women's education carried wider social and economic significance than the public was prepared to acknowledge. At the same time, women's education became an integral part of the broader process of Croatian nation-building. From the very beginning, political leaders recognized the importance of integrating women into this national effort, not only

in their role as mothers of future generations, but as indispensable participants in society itself. The struggle over women's education thus intersected directly with debates about national identity and cultural sovereignty. Providing advanced education for women "in the national spirit" was, accordingly, as much a national project as it was a gendered one.

These interconnections persisted into the interwar period, albeit under altered political circumstances. The abolition of former provincial and state borders strengthened Zagreb University's position as both a national and a regional academic center, thereby encouraging broader access to higher education for women as well as men. The incorporation of Croatia into the Yugoslav state somewhat slowed the development of feminist thought that had begun to emerge in the early twentieth century, influenced by Austrian and Czech urban centers. However, the new political framework also created opportunities for contact and exchange with educated women in Serbia, where public disinterest in women's education had paradoxically allowed for easier access to university studies and earlier academic advancement. Serbian women reached important milestones considerably earlier than their Croatian counterparts, offering both contrasts and points of reference. In the longer term, the Yugoslav framework also fostered new forms of transregional women's collaboration and the organization of joint initiatives across national divides. Within these emerging networks, Croatian women no longer occupied a peripheral position but assumed a more visible and influential role and successfully developed new strategies for advancement of their educational and professional abilities.

Thus, within a relatively short period, women in Croatia progressed from gaining access to *Gymnasium* education to enrolling in all university faculties, in some cases constituting a predominant share of the student body. This development, however, was not linear. Educational gains were accompanied by labor market restrictions, marginalization within academic environments, and persistent tensions between professional ambitions and social expectations. Political, cultural, and economic processes could both

enable and hinder women's participation in education. While educational reforms, new models of femininity, and the women's movement created important opportunities, periods of re-traditionalization, particularly during the Great Depression, could slow or even reverse earlier gains. Moreover, educational advancement throughout this period remained largely confined to women from urban middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Although the number of female students increased over time, both scarcity and numerical growth brought distinct challenges. Early cohorts faced isolation and uncertainty regarding their social position, while later generations encountered growing hostility, as their presence was increasingly perceived as a threat to professional status and labor market competition. In response, women developed a range of strategies to navigate and challenge these constraints. They relied on family support, cultivated informal networks, and increasingly organized through women's associations that provided resources, advocacy, and a platform for collective action. These efforts did not eliminate all barriers. Questions of gender equality at work, the reconciliation of private and professional life, and the recognition of women's academic contributions continued to generate debate throughout the twentieth century and beyond. However, women's academic opportunities and social position changed dramatically in this period. Over the course of fifty years, a recognizable group of educated women emerged, capable of articulating their position, organizing initiatives to advance their status, and asserting themselves not only as a socially useful group but also as individuals with their own goals, aspirations, and needs.

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