

www.forumhistoriae.sk



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



© 2025 The Author(s)
© 2025 Institute of History,
Slovak Academy of Sciences

The Success of the Demands of Women and Feminists and the Power of Antifeminism in Slovene Territory before the Second World War

Irena Selišnik – Ana Cergol Paradiž

Keywords

women's movement, feminist movement, gender, Carniola, Slovene history, 19th century, 20th century, discourse, motherhood, suffrage, labor market, reproductive rights, Great Depression, demography

DOI

[10.31577/forhist.2025.19.1.2](https://doi.org/10.31577/forhist.2025.19.1.2)

Author

Irena Selišnik
Department of History
Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
Aškerčeva cesta 2
1000 Ljubljana
Slovenia
Email: irena.selisnik@ff.uni-lj.si
ORCID: 0000-0002-8834-8735

Ana Cergol Paradiž
Assistant Professor
Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana,
Aškerčeva 2
1000 Ljubljana
Slovenia
e-mail: Ana.Cergol@ff.uni-lj.si
ORCID: 0000-0002-6054-497X

Cite

SELIŠNIK, Irena – CERGOL PARADIŽ, Ana. The Success of the Demands of Women and Feminists and the Power of Antifeminism in Slovene Territory before the Second World War. In *Forum Historiae*, 2025, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 19–38, doi: [10.31577/forhist.2025.19.1.2](https://doi.org/10.31577/forhist.2025.19.1.2)

Abstract

SELIŠNIK, Irena – CERGOL PARADIŽ, Ana. The Success of the Demands of Women and Feminists and the Power of Antifeminism in Slovene Territory before the Second World War.

The present paper examines the dialectical relationship between the women's and feminist movements in the Slovene lands during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and in the aftermath of the First World War, as well as the antifeminist responses that emerged in both the media landscape and in structural political measures. The establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes brought about significant political and cultural transformations alongside rapid modernization, which led to a redefinition of antifeminist discourse and the introduction of new state policies aimed at restricting the participation of women in public life. While earlier opposition to women's emancipation was often grounded in moral arguments, this gradually gave way to pseudoscientific frameworks such as (racial) anthropology and eugenics, with medicine increasingly becoming the dominant lens through which resistance to gender equality was articulated. The article pays particular attention to how the Great Depression and the demographic crisis influenced the debates surrounding women's suffrage, access to the labor market, and most notably, reproductive rights. Additionally, special emphasis is placed on how these issues intersected with contemporary constructions of motherhood—an aspect frequently overlooked in existing scholarship on the topic.

Amid the variety of the 19th century social movements advocating for the emancipation of different segments of society, the women's movement holds a particularly important position within this historical context. Many scholars have examined the movement's development through both international and global perspectives, noting how similar challenges and issues of emancipation mobilized women around the world.¹ In certain campaigns, women crafted informed responses through the comparative analysis of shared experiences and developed action plans aimed at promoting change across

The article was written in the scope of project J6-4602 Materinstvo in reproduktivna politika v 19. in 20. stoletju, which is co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

- 1 OFFEN, Karen. Understanding International Feminisms as 'Transnational' – an Anachronism? May Wright Sewall and the Creation of the International Council of Women, 1889–1904. In JANZ, Oliver – SCHÖNPFLUG, Daniel (eds.) *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective. Networks, Biographies, Gender Orders*. New York; Oxford : Berghahn, 2014, p. 28; OFFEN, Karen. *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2000.

numerous countries.² This transferability of collective action—referred to as a “modular repertoire”—gave rise to the *belle époque* of feminism³ at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, forming what could be seen as a genuine “social movement industry.”⁴ However, the success of the movement also spurred anti-feminist responses, which, as analyzed by Herrad Schenk and later Ute Planert, can be understood as a direct reaction to the demand for emancipation, typically aimed at women’s organizations and their agendas.⁵

Scholars have often distinguished between the women’s movement, which appeals to women as a social constituency and uses women as an organizational category, and the feminist movement, which seeks to challenge and transform the structural subordination of women to men.⁶ Both factions must be understood as diverse and internally heterogeneous.⁷ Similarly, antifeminist movements were neither uniform nor internationally coordinated, but rather varied in their motivation, expressions, and socio-political contexts.⁸ From around 1850 onward, intellectuals began to engage with the “woman question” through the lenses of anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and sociology, using these disciplines to support the prevailing gender order, agreeing with theological discussions on the subject.⁹ In the latter half of the 19th century, explicitly anti-feminist organizations emerged, emphasizing a “natural order” and resistance to change. One of the primary goals was to prevent women’s suffrage, positioning themselves in direct opposition to the feminist movements.¹⁰

Anti-feminist organizations and authors opposed both the women’s and feminist movements by invoking arguments about women’s “distinct psychology,” the moral decay of the family, societal chaos, and the breakdown of appropriate social roles, especially motherhood.¹¹ These themes permeated the work of sociologists, theologians, writers, criminologists, and other social scientists, and the ideas of foreign experts resonated in Slovenian discourse as well. At the same time, Slovenian opinion-makers, influenced by the context of the Habsburg Monarchy and later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as well as the specific politi-

2 OFFEN 2014, p. 37.

3 COVA, Anne. International Feminisms in Historical Comparative Perspective: France, Italy and Portugal, 1880s–1930s. In *Women’s History Review*, 2010, vol. 19, no. 4, p. 596.

4 RUPP, Leila. *Worlds of Women. The Making of International Women’s Movement*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 13.

5 PLANERT, Ute. *Antifeminismus im Kaiserreich. Diskurs, soziale Formation und politische Mentalität*. Göttingen : Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1998.

6 MARX FERREE, Myra – McCLURG MUELLER, Carol. Feminism and the women’s movement: A global perspective. In SNOW, David A. – SOULE, Sarah A. – KRIESI, Hanspeter (eds.) *Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Malden, Mass : Blackwell, 2004, p. 577.

7 Of course, the women’s movement and the feminist movement do not necessarily overlap, and at the same time can also include men. Thus, as Karen Offen and Ilse Lenz have pointed out, the important role played by men either as members or as allies of the women’s movement should not be neglected. OFFEN 2000, p. 21; LENZ, Ilse. Equality, Difference and Participation: The Women’s Movement in Global Perspective. In BERGER, Stefan – NEHRING, Holger (eds.) *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective. A Survey*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 451.

8 LENZ 2017, p. 451; DELAP, Lucy. Feminist and anti-feminist encounters in Edwardian Britain. In *Historical Research*, 2005, vol. 78, no. 201, pp. 377–378.

9 OFFEN 2000, p. 130.

10 KIMMEL, Michael S. *The History of Men*. New York : State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 78.

11 OFFEN 2000, pp. 190, 196.

cal-ideological conditions in Slovenia, developed their own arguments, shaped by the unique circumstances of the region.

Historiography first turned its gaze toward the history of feminist movements and more broadly, the evolution of women's organizations, largely overlooking the anti-feminist responses they elicited. Only in recent years has this countercurrent drawn greater scholarly interest, especially in countries like the United States, Canada,¹² the United Kingdom,¹³ Italy¹⁴ and Germany.¹⁵ In Slovenian historiography, however, despite a growing body of work on feminism, the analysis of anti-feminism has remained strikingly underexplored.

This article will examine the success of the women's and feminist movements in the Slovenian part of Austro-Hungary, and later in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Kingdom of SCS, renamed Kingdom of Yugoslavia), and the anti-feminist response in the media landscape and measures in different governmental policies from the turn of the century through the onset of the Second World War. The present analysis focuses primarily on issues related to women's suffrage and integration into the labor market, with particular attention given to the demographic and pro-natalist discourse and the issue of illegal abortions, which can be interpreted as a "catalyst for antifeminist sentiment."¹⁶ The article explores how these topics intersected with perceptions of motherhood, an aspect crucial to understanding anti-feminism yet often overlooked in research on the subject.¹⁷ The methodological approach of this article combines elements of discourse analysis¹⁸ and intellectual history to explore the dynamics of women's rights and antifeminist discourse in the early 20th century Slovene environment. Drawing on a discourse analysis, the article examines how language, representation, and institutional rhetoric shaped public understandings of gender and modernity. At the same time, the present study incorporates intellectual-historical insights to trace the development, transmission, and transformation of feminist and antifeminist ideas within the broader socio-political and cultural context.¹⁹

The Women's and Feminist Movements in Slovene Lands

In Slovenia, the latter half of the 19th century saw the formation of women's associations and informal groups primarily engaged in charitable work. Com-

12 STRONG-BOAG, Veronica. Independent Women, Problematic Men: First- and Second-Wave Anti-Feminism in Canada from Goldwin Smith to Betty Steele. In *Histoire sociale/Social history*, 1996, vol. 29, no. 57, pp. 1–22.

13 BONIN, Hugo. "Woman Suffrage Would Undermine the Stable Foundation on Which Democratic Government is Based": British Democratic Antisuffragists, 1904–1914. In *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, 2021, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 137–160; HEILMANN, Ann – SANDERS, Valerie (eds.) The rebel, the lady and the 'anti': Femininity, anti-feminism, and the Victorian woman writer. In *Women's Studies International Forum*, 2006, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 289–300; DELAP 2005, pp. 377–378.

14 BERARDI, Silvio. The Italian Positivist Culture: From Anti-Feminism to Social Emancipation of Women. In PAOLONI Paola – LOMABRDI Rosa (eds.) *Gender Issues in Business and Economics. Selections from the 2017 Ipazia Workshop on Gender*. Cham : Springer, 2018, pp. 95–107.

15 PLANERT 1998; STIBBE, Matthew. Anti-Feminism, Nationalism and the German Right, 1914–1920: A Reappraisal. In *German History*, 2002, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 185–210.

16 PLANERT 1998, p. 110.

17 STRONG-BOAG 1996, pp. 1–22.

18 FOUCAULT, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York : Pantheon Books, 1972.

19 ANTIĆ GABER, Milica. Mapping women's and gender studies in the academic field in Slovenia. In *CEPS journal*, 2017, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 9–27.

pared to Western Europe, these associations emerged relatively late in Slovenia, as women in predominantly Protestant regions had been active in philanthropy since the early 19th century.²⁰ The first known women's association in Carniola was likely Evangelischer Frauenverein Laibach (the Evangelical Women's Association in Ljubljana), established in 1856. This group united Evangelical women in Ljubljana, including not only Germans, but also English and Swiss members.²¹ A decade later, affluent German and Slovene bourgeois and noblewomen came together under the leadership of Baroness Bach to found the Society of Merciful Ladies—a precursor to today's Red Cross.²²

The Society of Christian Love for Women of St. Vincent de Paul is another example from this era. It was founded in 1882, almost two decades after similar organizations had emerged in other Austrian provinces during the 1860s and 1870s.²³ Informal networks of national-minded ladies also participated in a range of charitable ventures, such as establishing a public kitchen in Ljubljana in the 1870s.²⁴

In 1897, with substantial support from the city of Ljubljana, Gospodinjska šola (the Housekeeping School Association) was founded to educate young women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds on household management. This initiative followed the Austrian model of Dr. Migerka's Haushaltungs-Abendkurse, and numerous other housekeeping courses followed, promoting new urban standards for domestic work.²⁵ Men encouraged this type of women's involvement, viewing it as entirely compatible with the expected role of women in society.

In the 1880s, Slovenian society also encouraged women to join the female branches of Družba svetega Cirila in Metoda (CMD, the St. Cyril and Methodius Society), likely modeled on Deutscher Schulverein. Women became actively involved in strengthening the Slovenian national movement, with the first women's branch of the CMD established in 1887 in Trieste, which raised funds to support Slovenian schools and kindergartens. The 1890s saw the establishment of Katoliško društvo za delavke (1894, the Catholic Association for Female Workers) within the Christian social movement, led by Janez Evangelist Krek. Professional associations also emerged featuring female teachers, such as Katoliško društvo slovenskih učiteljic (1896, the Catholic Association of Slovenian Teachers) in the Littoral region, which connected female professors

20 PERROT, Michelle. Stepping Out. In FRAISSE, Genevieve – PERROT, Michelle (eds.) *A History of Women in the West: IV. Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*. Harvard: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 450–451.

21 SERŠE, Aleksandra. Evangelijsko žensko društvo v Ljubljani 1856–1945. In *Etnolog*, 2001, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 57–68.

22 The association was renamed Gospejino društvo v pomoč ranjenim in bolnim vojakom in v podporo vojaškim bolnišnicam, afterwards it was again renamed Žensko podporno društvo za ranjene vojake na Kranjskem. Dopisi. In *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice*, 1870, vol. 28, no. 31, p. 251; Dopisi. In *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice*, 1866, vol. 24, no. 25, p. 203.

23 SCHMITZ, Erich von. Vinzenz-Konferenzen – persönliche Hilfe im weltweiten Verbund – Methoden und Leitlinien. In *Mittel-Europäische Gruppe für Vinzentinische Studien*, 1997, vol. 40, p. 56.

24 ŽIGON, Tanja. Dunajčanka v Ljubljani: medkulturno delovanje Hedwig pl. Radics – Kaltenbrunner. In *Dve domovini*, 2012, vol. 36, pp. 157–168.

25 Ustanovitev Gospodinjske šole. In *Dom in svet*, 1898, vol. 11, no. 18, pp. 7–9.

from the Gorizia Teacher Training College,²⁶ and Društvo slovenskih učiteljic (1898, the Society of Slovenian Teachers in Carniola). These types of associations formed much later, as female teachers in the Austrian part of the monarchy had established their own societies as early as the 1870s.²⁷

The Society of Slovenian Teachers was created to represent women's interests, as the existing teachers' association did not address issues specific to women.²⁸ They advocated for equal pay for equal work and opposed the celibacy requirement for female teachers, although public reactions were often hostile, as women were now advocating independently for their own interests rather than aligning with their male counterparts. The publication *Učiteljski tovariš* defended the demand for higher salaries for male teachers, arguing:

Male teachers are permitted to teach all classes in both boys' and girls' schools, in Lower Austria for example are with the exception of three schools in all girls' schools men head principles. The legislator tries to show with this policy that male teachers have greater and more challenging role, which therefore justifies a higher salary, not merely as family providers.²⁹

At the turn of the century, numerous calls from Slovenian periodicals published in Carniola and Austrian Littoral such as *Vesna*, *Slovanski svet* and especially *Slovenka*—the first Slovene women's newspaper³⁰—for women to organize in support of broader women's issues emerged. Suddenly a range of societies appeared representing the general interests of women. The liberal Splošno slovensko žensko društvo (1901, the General Slovenian Women's Society) found premises alongside Gospodinjska šola, which owned a large kitchen and two rooms on Rimska Street.³¹ Members of this society also contributed to the founding of the first Žensko telovadno društvo (1901, the Women's Gymnastics Society). The society promoted liberal ideas and, through its affiliation with Bund Österreichischer Frauenvereine, an organization uniting women's associations within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, it became part of the International Council of Women.

The Social Democrats established the women's society Veda (1900) in Idrija, with the encouragement of leading Social Democrats Ada and Etbin Kristan, who were active in Idrija at that time. Later, under the initiative of Anton and Ružena Kristan, a cooperative was formed to support local lace-makers.³² In Ljubljana, the first women's social-democratic society, Vzajemnost, began in 1911, with its members engaging in celebrations of International Women's Day.

26 HOJAN, Tatjana. Žensko učiteljišče v Gorici v strokovnem časopisju. In TUL, Vlasta (ed.) *Učiteljice v šolskih klopih: zbornik ob 130. obletnici ustanovitve Slovenskega učiteljišča za dekleta v Gorici*. Nova Gorica : Pokrajinski arhiv, 2005, pp. 91–110.

27 HAUCH, Gabriella. Arbeit, Recht und Sittlichkeit: Themen der Frauenbewegungen in der Habsburgermonarchie. In RUMPLER, Helmut – URBANITSCH, Peter (eds.) *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918, Band VIII/1: Politische Öffentlichkeit und Zivilgesellschaft*. Wien : Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006, p. 973.

28 KUŠEJ, Mateja. *Prve učiteljice, prve pisateljice – kdo jih še pozna?* Celovec : Slovenska prosvetna zveza, 1996, p. 40.

29 ANON. Učiteljicam v pojasnilo in preudarek. In *Učiteljski tovariš*, 23 March 1906, p. 106.

30 ŠTEBI, Alojzija. Aktivnost slovenske ženske. In GOVEKAR, Minka (ed.) *Slovenska žena*. Ljubljana : Splošno žensko društvo, 1926, p. 165.

31 MAJARON, Danilo. *Letno poročilo Gospodinjske šole v Ljubljani za prvo društveno in šolsko leto 1897/98*. Ljubljana : Gospodinjska šola, 1898, p. 10.

32 KOPAC, Josip. O preteklih dneh. In *Pod lipo*, 1925, vol. 2, no. 7, pp. 111–112.

Within the Catholic faction, the initiatives for women's organizations continued. Krščanska ženska zveza (1901, the Christian Women's Union) was established, modeled on Vienna's Christlicher Frauenbund. The Christian social movement also organized women workers and members of different Catholic associations into Ženski odsek Slovenske krščanskosocialne zveza (1902, the Women's Section of the Slovenian Christian Social Union). Young women gathered in Dekliški krožki (the Catholic Girls' Circles), which spread from Styria to Carniola, where they became known as *Bogomila* and represented groups within educational societies.³³ Each of these societies operated within distinct political camps in Slovenia, closely monitoring the activities of rival organizations and often responding to the success of competing women's societies with strongly anti-feminist reactions.

It is worth noting that calls for women's suffrage and other radical demands by women were not a major focus of contemporary media discourse, as even the Slovenian Catholic faction supported women's voting rights—anticipating that women voters would favor the Catholic conservative party. This stance on suffrage posed greater challenges for the liberal and social-democratic factions.³⁴ The Conservative Catholic party supported the view that women were the most reliable supporters of the Catholic camp. In spite of that, anti-feminist rhetoric was rooted in Catholic ideology, which previously proclaimed, “women in public—remain silent!”³⁵ and later, while the Women's Gymnastics Society was founded, the Catholic newspaper *Slovenec* labeled the society's leaders “deranged Amazons.”³⁶

The Catholic faction also hosted lectures by international theologians on the “woman question,” such as one by Augustin Rösler, who criticized the “modern women's movement,” claiming it reflected a lack of self-sacrificial love among women.³⁷ Anti-feminist arguments opposing women's emancipation resonated across the German-speaking world and beyond,³⁸ with Rösler's book presented as a Catholic response to the Social Democratic text by August Bebel, *Die Frau*.

After the First World War, women's associations in Slovenia became more numerous, with some intensifying their discourse into an unequivocally feminist stance. Even before the war, a variety of associations—such as the General Slovenian Women's Society, Vzajemnost, the women's section of the Slovenian Christian Social Union, and the Society of Slovenian Teachers—advocated for women's suffrage and entry into the political sphere. Although the pre-war voting rights of female taxpayers were revoked by law after the war, the feminist movement now demanded suffrage with even greater resolve. In 1920, numerous rallies were organized in support of women's voting rights, primarily led by Krekova

33 SELIŠNIK, Irena. *Volilna pravica žensk kot demokratična novost: Dejavniki, ki vplivajo na njeno uveljavitev na Slovenskem* (Ph.D. thesis). Postojna : University of Ljubljana, 2007, p. 54.

34 SELIŠNIK 2007, pp. 61, 77.

35 MAHNIČ, Anton. Pisma o vzgoji: Kak poklic imajo ženske v človeškem društvu. Kako jih moramo vzgajati. In *Rimski katolik*, 1891, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 23.

36 Iz novega mesta. In *Slovenec*, 5 February 1901, p. 3.

37 P. RÖSLER, Augustin. In *Slovenec*, 30 December 1907, p. 3.

38 OFFEN 2000, p. 197.

prosveta (the Krek's Education Society, formerly the Catholic Association for Female Workers, now also including organized domestic workers and clerks) and the Catholic camp, which anticipated support for the Catholic Party from women voters.³⁹

Demands for women's suffrage, equal pay for equal work, and reforms to family law emerged as central concerns of the Slovene women's movement. Women's associations across Slovenia's three main political camps found common ground in resisting efforts to curtail women's rights within family law, particularly in response to the possible imposition of Serbian inheritance legislation. The most progressive faction of the Slovene women's movement, affiliated with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, went further by advocating for the recognition of paid domestic labor and for women's unrestricted access to all professions.

In the interwar period, Slovenian liberal and social-democratic women's societies joined the Slovenian branch of Jugoslovanske ženske zveze (the Yugoslav Women's Union), which itself was affiliated with the International Council of Women. Whereas before the war, the international involvement of Slovenian women's societies was limited to correspondence, their role expanded considerably afterward. Many international congresses of women's organizations became opportunities for prominent leaders of the women's movement to exchange ideas and strategies and to bring new issues back to Yugoslavia and Slovenia.⁴⁰ In-depth analyses conducted on Yugoslav conditions according to the methodology established by the International Council of Women placed the country's situation within a broader, global framework.⁴¹

Whereas calls for suffrage had previously been limited to petitions and articles, the interwar period saw the use of printed leaflets, special assemblies, posters, and postcards addressed to parliament members, alongside legal analyses highlighting the importance of women's voting rights and addressing issues such as women's labor market position, the status of domestic workers, single mothers, pregnant women, and unemployed women. The progress of women's emancipation was reflected in the growing number of employed women, including at universities, an increasing number of female high school and university students,⁴² a declining birth rate, and fewer marriages. Additionally, there was mounting pressure from women's organizations for legislation to improve the status of mothers and female citizens.⁴³ Women also took on new roles in athletics and began representing the state at international competitions, symbolizing the widening sphere of female participation in public and national life.

39 SELIŠNIK, Irena. 1920 kot leto intenzivnih prizadevanj za volilno pravico žensk. In *Studia Historica Slovenica : časopis za humanistične in družboslovne študije*, 2023, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 145–168.

40 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK, Ida. „Prijelazna generacija“ i „krčiteljice puteva“ Samorefleksija i samopercepcija intelektualki u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji. In AGIČIĆ, Damir – IVELJIĆ, Iskra – ANUŠIĆ, Nikola – OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK, Ida (eds.) *Zbornik Božene Vranješ Šoljan*. Zagreb : FF Press, 2022, p. 225.

41 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK 2022, p. 226.

42 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK, Ida. *Opasne iluzije. Rodni stereotipi u međuratnoj Jugoslaviji*. Zagreb : Srednja Evropa, 2014, p. 255.

43 See more: CERGOL PARADIŽ, Ana – SELIŠNIK, Irena. Akterke ženskega gibanja na socialnem področju: kontinuitete in prelomi. In *Socialno delo*, 2023, vol. 62, no. 2/3, pp. 111–128.

In interwar Yugoslavia, the question of women's work resonated widely, particularly due to the economic crisis. The percentage of employed women in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia rose, with women entering service industries and clerical positions at an accelerated pace, especially in the Slovenian part of the country.⁴⁴ The 1921 Constitution of the Kingdom of SCS promised equality before the law in Article Four and equal access to professions for all citizens in Article 19. These guarantees were echoed in the civil service laws of 1923 and 1931. However, numerous provisions within these laws restricted women's access to "all" positions, as seen in regulations related to attorneys and public transportation jobs.⁴⁵ The employment of female judges, for instance, was limited by the fact that married women could not act as legal guardians or witnesses to wills in Yugoslavia.⁴⁶ Additionally, women received less unemployment support under the 1918 law.⁴⁷

The Kingdom continuously grappled with high unemployment rates, exacerbated by the economic crisis, and in the spirit of protecting the family breadwinner, further restricted the employment of women, especially in clerical and teaching positions. The state imposed quotas on the number of women allowed in certain educational fields that led to public administration careers in education and the post office, and also eliminated cost-of-living allowances.⁴⁸ An amendment to the public school law (1937) stipulated that female teachers would lose their jobs upon marriage, with the sole exception of marriage to a fellow teacher. In the same year, a minimum wage regulation was passed for both sexes,⁴⁹ however, the underlying motive was to improve men's positions in the labor market, as women, being cheaper labor, were seen to be displacing men.⁵⁰

Anti-feminism in Yugoslavia was not merely a matter of discourse, but was systematically and institutionally entrenched, with legislation defining gender relations to clearly establish male primacy and rational authority. This public discourse was further reinforced by Catholic ideology, as well as by certain scientists and publicists who argued that, in the dilemma between women's dual burden of home and career, the family must prevail.⁵¹

44 SELIŠNIK, Irena – CERGOL PARADIŽ, Ana. Spremembe v uradniškem poklicu in njegova feminizacija. In GABRIČ, Aleš (ed.) *Slovenski prelom*. Ljubljana : Slovenska matica, 2019, p. 272; Stanje obaveznosti članov osiguranih članova Središnjeg ureda za osiguranje radnika po mesnim organima industrijskim grupama u mesecu oktobru 1935 god. In *Radnička zaštita*, 1936, vol. 18, p. 42. https://archive.org/details/radnicka_zastita_1931-branimir_haberle/radnicka_zastita_1936-/page/42/mode/2up?view=theaterstr42 [last viewed on 13 May 2025]; I. L. Ženske vedno bolj poplavlajo delovni trg. In *Radnička zaštita* 1931, vol. 13, pp. 438–439; I. L. Žena kot zavarovani riziko OUZDa v Ljubljani. In *Radnička zaštita*, 1931, vol. 13, pp. 678–679. https://archive.org/details/radnicka_zastita_1931-branimir_haberle/radnicka_zastita_1931-branimir_haberle/page/438/mode/2up?view=theater [last viewed on 13 May 2025]

45 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK 2014, p. 252.

46 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK 2022, p. 233.

47 PERIČ, Ilija P. O razvitku službe zbrinjavanja nezaposlenih u Jugoslaviji. In *Misel in delo*, 1938, vol. 4, no. 12, p. 271.

48 SELIŠNIK 2007, p. 24.

49 SELIŠNIK 2007, p. 24.

50 POJE, Andreja – KANJUO MRČELA, Aleksandra – TOMASKOVIC DEVEY, Donald. Enako plačilo za enako delo ali delo enake vrednosti v praksi: primer poklicev medicinska sestra/ medicinski tehnik, policist/policistka in visokošolski učitelj/visokošolska učiteljica. In *Teorija in praksa*, 2019, vol. 56, no. 1, p. 142.

51 For example: I. L. Ženske vedno bolj poplavlajo delovni trg. In *Radnička zaštita*, 1931, vol. 13, pp. 438–439.

During the interwar period, the issue of reproductive rights emerged for the first time, specifically the demand for legal abortion based on medical, ethical, eugenic, and social grounds. This demand was first raised by Zveza delavskih žena in deklet (the Union of Working Women and Girls), founded by the socialist camp in 1924, with active participation from both socialists and communists. In 1933, the union called for permission to terminate pregnancies on social, ethical, and eugenic grounds, joined by the association Ženski pokret (1926, the Women's Progress) and the Ljubljana branch of Zveza akademsko izobraženih žena (1931, the Association of Academically Educated Women), which included professors and graduates. This issue undoubtedly generated significant public debate and opposition at the time.⁵²

Through the women's movement, women increasingly influenced and engaged in the field of social policy, with the first high-ranking female officials, such as Alojzija Štebi, emerging in this period. Women's associations also played a role in shaping and participating in the development of legislation, often with the argument of improving the situation of mothers, as the Vidovdan Constitution already contained an article about the state protection of mothers and small children.⁵³ As Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak notes, Yugoslavia successfully joined the European trend toward building a social welfare state, within which the concept of motherhood was affirmed as a matter of national importance⁵⁴—a position endorsed by the most influential feminists in the country. Through such arguments, women found an unobstructed path to influence state policy.

Anti-feminism as Response

In Ljubljana, as elsewhere in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, strict behavioral norms were enforced in media and in institutional discourse, particularly for middle-class women. For young, well-bred girls, it was considered improper to walk through the city alone, and they were not even permitted to visit Ljubljana's promenade unaccompanied.⁵⁵ When some young women joined a procession through the streets of Ljubljana celebrating the election victory of liberal mayor Ivan Hribar, they received the lowest marks for conduct in college, with some facing potential expulsion.⁵⁶ This was viewed as a serious breach of decorum, especially since students were prohibited from engaging in political activities. During the Austrian monarchy, women were also barred from participating in political associations, which led observers to remark that in Ljubljana, "there are no suffragettes and few emancipated women."⁵⁷

52 CERGOL PARADIŽ, Ana. »Bela kuga«. *Ilegalni abortusi in zmanjševanje rodnosti na Slovenskem v obdobju med obema vojnama*. Ljubljana : Znanstvena založba Filozofke fakultete, 2022, p. 95.

53 CERGOL PARADIŽ – SELIŠNIK 2023, p. 116. See: Article 27 of Constitution of the Kingdom of SCS. *Ustav Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*. Beograd : Geca Kon, 1926, p. 15.

54 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK 2014, p. 258.

55 BIBIČ, Alenka. Milostljive gospice maturantke. In *Tovariš*, 4 June 1973, p. 36; DULAR, Anja. Življenje gojenk v ljubljanski Mladiki (1912–1935). In *Šolska kronika*, 2015, vol. 24, no. 1/2, pp. 57–68.

56 VAŠTE, Ilka. *Podobe iz mojega življenja*. Ljubljana : Mladinska knjiga, 1964, p. 57; HOČEVAR, Pavla. *Pot se vije. Spomini*. Trst : Založništvo tržaškega tiska, 1969, p. 37.

57 SUCHY, Josip. *Ljubljanski tipi*. Ljubljana : n.p., 1924, p. 34.

Before the First World War, suffragettes were labeled as militant, dangerous, and unhinged.⁵⁸ The Austrian-German press offered similarly unflattering portrayals.⁵⁹ Consequently, women's movement activists in the empire consciously avoided militant strategies, wary of such associations.⁶⁰ In the memories of women from Ljubljana, suffragettes appeared as radical figures from distant Britain.⁶¹

In both Ljubljana and Vienna, an intense anti-feminism prevailed in public media, associating any overly radical advocacy for women's rights with a breach of moral standards.⁶² Women who dared to enter the political arena and express views opposing Catholic, conservative, or even liberal positions could expect fierce opposition, often in the form of attacks targeting their sexual morality in the press. In the Austrian half of the monarchy, anti-feminism was an accepted political phenomenon, wielding sexual morality as one of its primary weapons.⁶³ It was no coincidence that *Slovenec* described young women in the procession as: "hoarsely shouting so-called ladies [...] How these girls behaved—shameful! They yelled with farmhands, waved handkerchiefs at men with whom they were evidently too familiar, and moved about like ripe birds."⁶⁴ Such rhetoric underscored the extent to which any public assertion of women's rights was quickly reframed as a moral transgression, reinforcing societal constraints on women's activism.

In the Austrian monarchy, conservatives associated women entering the public sphere with secularization, implying that they were indulging excessively in sexual and other "degenerate" desires. As one commentator noted: "Some claim that an emancipated woman will take lovers more freely and without prejudice, even if married."⁶⁵ However, the monarchy was home not only to conservatives, but also to more radical circles, which developed their own critiques, often viewing the women's movement through a lens of heightened scrutiny. These critiques argued for discarding bourgeois sexual morality, which they saw as subjugating women. Women activists were often characterized as frustrated, envious, or inclined to impose bans on things like prostitution, alcohol, or other forms of entertainment.

58 Slovensko politiko rešuje žena. In *Dan*, 31 May 1913, p. 2; Nam ni treba mož. In *Dan*, 29 May 1913, p. 2; Velik požar. In *Dan*, 24 December 1913, p. 2; Sedaj jo bodo pa sufražetke staknile. In *Dan*, 29 October 1913, p. 2; Frontcover. In *Slovenski ilustrovani tednik*, 2 April 1914, p. 1.

59 Die Suffragetten. In *Kikeriki*, 6 July 1913, p. 4; Die Londoner Suffragetten. In *Kikeriki*, 7 December 1911, p. 3; Die Verwandlung der Meider in Manner und umgekehrt. In *Kikeriki*, 14 June 1914, p. 9.

60 BADER-ZAAR, Birgitta. Women in Austrian Politics, 1890–1934: Goals and Visions. In GOOD, David – GRANDNER, Margarete – MAYNES Mary Jo (eds.) *Austrian Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives*. New York : Berghahn Books, 1996, p. 62; BADER-ZAAR, Birgitta. Politische Partizipation als Grundrecht in Europa und Nordamerika. Entwicklungsprozesse zum allgemeinen, gleichen, geheimen und direkten Wahlrecht für Männer und Frauen vom späten 18. bis zum frühen 20. Jahrhundert. In GRANDNER, Margarete – SCHMALE, Wolfgang – WEINZIERL, Michael (eds.) *Grund- und Menschenrechte. Historische Perspektiven - Aktuelle Problematiken*. Wien; München : Querschnitte, 2002, p. 247.

61 VAŠTE 1964, p. 79.

62 ANDERSON, Harriett. *Utopian Feminism. Women's Movement in fin-de-siecle Vienna*. New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1992, p. 1.

63 ANDERSON 1992, p. 1.

64 HOČEVAR 1969, p. 39.

65 ŠUŠTERŠIČEVA, Inka. Emancipacija in žene. In *Ženski svet*, 1938, vol. 16, no. 6/7, p. 175.

On the periphery of the monarchy, particularly in Carniola, this latter type of argument was largely absent, given the lack of radical or bohemian groups, while conservative arguments certainly prevailed. Despite the differences in portrayal, these depictions of women shared a common thread; they were seen as figures who rejected their “proper femininity” and as agents of chaos poised to disrupt the established gender order—an outcome no one in these circles desired.⁶⁶

In defense of the recognized gender order, scientists also joined the fray with a third line of reasoning, primarily from the field of medicine, which emphasized the biological differences between the sexes. This form of anti-feminism, also present in Carniola, argued that physical differences meant women were bound to bodies that functioned differently from men’s—a view documented extensively by a variety of specialists.⁶⁷ This medical discourse would remain influential through the interwar period, as fields like anthropology and eugenics expanded, and medicine became the primary framework for opposing women’s emancipation, gradually replacing the moral arguments that were beginning to lose ground in an increasingly modernized society.

Catholic conservatives rejected what they saw as the liberal elevation of the body, vanity, and ostentation.⁶⁸ In this regard, their perspective sometimes even aligned with women’s movement activists, who also condemned coquettishness and frivolity.⁶⁹ Emancipation, therefore, was not to be associated with “free love,” which was commonly understood in Slovenian society at the time as cohabitation outside marriage, sexual promiscuity, provocative behavior, and declining morals.⁷⁰ Even in the interwar period, the Catholic press warned against

those frivolous, superficial ladies, those elegant, spoiled pleasure-seekers, who, in their vanity and superficiality, have destroyed their own inner virtues, indeed who have embraced the grotesque fashion of low-cut gowns over properly modest dress, becoming a source of scandal and even ruin for those around them.⁷¹

Above all, Catholic conservatives linked emancipation to the threat of the breakdown of the family unit, rejection of motherhood, and abandonment of faith. They argued that women did not need freedom, as they already possessed it in their traditional roles.⁷² Women, they insisted, should remain primarily mothers, as it would be challenging to reconcile a career outside the home with the responsibilities of motherhood.⁷³ This view of motherhood, shaped largely by Catholic theology, was echoed by almost all writers on the subject, even those with differing ideological leanings.⁷⁴

The concept of a “third sex” emerged across Europe as a term capturing the perceived dismantling of the existing gender order. It represented the extreme edge of women’s emancipation—eccentricity and extravagance, with

66 ANDERSON 1992, p. 4.

67 MIHURKO PONIZ, Katja. *Evine hčere: konstruiranje ženskosti v slovenskem javnem diskurzu*. Nova Gorica : Založba Univerze v Novi Gorici, 2009, p. 132; LESKOŠEK, Vesna. *Zavrnjena tradicija*. Ljubljana : cf., 2002, pp. 49, 55.

68 Zakaj so ženske lepše kot moški. In *Slovenec*, 7 November 1904, p. 5.

69 MIHURKO PONIZ 2009, p. 133.

70 LESKOŠEK 2002, p. 175.

71 M. RUCKMICH-IP. Klic današnji ženi. In *Vigred*, 1931, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 4.

72 Feminizem. In *Slovenec*, 15 March 1902, p. 1.

73 LESKOŠEK 2002, p. 163.

74 MIHURKO PONIZ 2009, pp. 39, 46.

women intentionally deviating from prescribed standards of femininity, including in appearance.⁷⁵ In Slovenian discourse, however, there was a consensus against supporting such extremes, and few individuals were strong enough to openly defy these social norms. Perhaps only writer Zofka Kveder fit this mold, though Slovenian media never labeled her as “third sex,” the term “emancipated woman” was sufficient,⁷⁶ signaling a world turned upside down, or a “modern Amazon.”⁷⁷

This label also touched other notable figures, such as Franja Tavčar, a liberal leader of many Slovenian societies, and writer Marica Bartol.⁷⁸ A woman’s entry into a male-dominated sphere was thus framed as a forced intrusion, rather than an organic pursuit of a uniquely feminine domain, reflecting broader anxieties about the disruption of traditional gender roles.

After the First World War, a new term emerged to replace *emancipiranka*—the “new woman.”⁷⁹ This was a woman who had completed secondary school or university, was capable of supporting herself, and could confidently participate in public life. She has short hair and a shorter skirt, yearned for freedom and was aware of her own sexual desires. She was married, but inclined toward a more egalitarian partnership and desired fewer children—an image that crystallized the profound societal shifts unsettling traditionalists.⁸⁰

In Croatia, modernity was personified in the “liberated woman,”⁸¹ while a general concern across Yugoslavia was that gender distinctions were being eroded, giving rise to a so-called “middle sex.”⁸² However, Yugoslav and Slovenian newspapers alike continued to uphold motherhood as the fundamental ideal of a woman’s destiny.⁸³ Catholic newspapers, including those targeting women, particularly emphasized the dangers of excessive emancipation, warning that it would erode the foundations of society, which already harbored strong anti-feminist sentiments.

The difficult economic conditions in Yugoslavia further fueled discussions about the status of women, focusing particularly on their entry into the labor market, which became a focal point for anti-feminist pressure. Lovro Sušnik argued that schools and universities were structured to suit men, suggesting that women should be “freed from the dominance of male frameworks and have their education methodically tailored to their own needs.” He claimed that abstract, dry, rational, and impersonal approaches did not align with the female way of thinking. Female students at universities, he asserted, often felt isolated, struggling with existential worries, emotional distress, and dilemmas over whether they had chosen the right path. Even if they graduated, they would face rejection by men and feel discriminated against. According to this view,

75 Z. [Marica Bartol Nadlišek]. O ženskem vprašanju. In *Slovenka*, 28 January 1899, p. 67.

76 Paradiž za ženske. In *Slovenski list*, 7 April 1900, p. 88; Emancipiranka. In *Slovenec*, 19 April 1905, p. 4; Nazori današnjih emancipirank. In *Slovenec*, 27 October 1901, p. 1.

77 Gospod Fran Klemenčič. In *Slovenec*, 9 March 1903, p. 2.

78 MAHNIČ, Anton. Kaj piše „Marica”? In *Rimski katolik*, 1892/1893, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 114.

79 VERA, Andreja. Današnja žena. In *Ženski svet*, 1927, vol. 5, no. 12, p. 363.

80 CERGO PARADIŽ 2022, p. 52.

81 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK 2014, p. 149.

82 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK 2014, p. 150.

83 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK 2014, p. 155.

women supposedly studied only to prove their strength, though they suffered in doing so, as they were “governed by emotions and heart.”⁸⁴

Such views were not unique to Yugoslavia; they were rooted in the old dichotomy between male reason and female emotion, yet were now framed within the context of contemporary challenges—economic crises and male unemployment. *Učiteljski tovariš* expressed similar opinions, claiming that female teachers, like female civil servants, tended to retire earlier and had a working capacity that was allegedly only two-thirds that of male teachers. Women were also said to take sick leave more frequently.⁸⁵

Where pre-the First World War arguments had been grounded in theology and morality, the interwar period saw these ultimate claims reframed as data purportedly gathered through studies, reflecting a shift toward a pseudo-scientific basis for anti-feminist discourse.

In both the monarchy and the kingdom, anti-feminist discourse received state support, as anti-feminism was embedded within the system, protecting male workers through legislative measures that restricted women's access to certain sectors. The state closely monitored shifts in women's positions in the workforce, noting for instance trends in parts of Yugoslavia where women were increasingly entering the labor market. This shift led to the displacement of men from some of the lowest-paid jobs, a phenomenon partly driven by the varying impact of economic crises across different industries.⁸⁶ The state attempted to counteract this shift through various decrees, such as the establishment of minimum wage laws and specific regulations like the Decree of the National Government of the Kingdom of SCS in Ljubljana on the employment of disabled veterans, which explicitly stated that non-commissioned officers were to be given priority in clerical employment, especially over women, thereby reinforcing a gendered hierarchy within the labor market.⁸⁷

In Slovenia, the Catholic faction reinforced discourse on the need for a “family wage”⁸⁸ to sustain the family unit. Anti-feminism, however, also operated on a micro level, evident in the numerous complaints from department heads who argued that “men do not fall ill as often, and for official reasons, it is highly desirable to have as few female clerks as possible in the office.”⁸⁹ This bias was further evident in the preference for male candidates, perceived as more disciplined and punctual,⁹⁰ and in the dismissal of married women from official positions, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy within the workplace.⁹¹

84 BORŠNIK, Marja. Kaj pa ženske?... In *Ženski svet*, 1932, vol. 10, no. 12, p. 347.

85 Ali je ženska delovna moč cenejša v javni službi? In *Učiteljski tovariš*, 17 May 1923, p. 2.

86 OGRAJŠEK GORENJAK 2014, pp. 74, 85.

87 I. L. Žena kot zavarovani riziko OUZDa v Ljubljani. In *Radnička zaščita*, 1931, vol. 13, p. 678.

88 Ostanite ženske. In *Ponedeljski Slovenec*, 17 October 1932, p. 2; Zahtevamo družinske plače. In *Slovenski delavec*, 24 December 1937, p. 5.

89 Arhiv Republike Slovenije, Fond SI AS 67 (hereafter SI AS 67), Kraljevska Banska uprava Dravske banovine, Splošni Oddelek, 1919–1941, t.e. KARL-KAT, mapa Karlin Zupančič Marija, Uradno poročilo, 24. 7. 1931.

90 SI AS 67, t.e. GORJ-GOŠ, mapa Gorup Ana, Prošnje za službo. Sreski poglavar Maribor levi breg, dne 10. Marca 1925; SI AS 67, t.e. B-BAJ, mapa Bajec Berta, Šefu pokrajinske uprave, 21. 6. 1944.

91 SELIŠNIK – CERGOL PARADIŽ 2019.

Reproductive Rights and Anti-feminist Discourse

Perhaps most vividly, anti-feminism in interwar Slovenia manifested itself in the debates surrounding declining birth rates and the issue of illegal abortions. These discussions emerged in Slovenia somewhat later than in other countries, where concerns over a negative demographic outlook had surfaced earlier.⁹² During the interwar period, however, the discussion intensified, partly due to the aftereffects of the First World War, which had caused a drastic, though temporary, drop in birth rates and claimed the lives of countless young people. Additionally, the demographic ambitions of the new Yugoslav state, its efforts at nation-building, and the increasingly assertive global directives of the Catholic Church all contributed to a heightened focus on reproductive issues.

Advocacy for smaller families and even partial legalization of abortion faced staunch opposition from Catholic-oriented authors and the press.⁹³ Newspapers like *Slovenec* and magazines such as *Mladika*, *Vigred*, *Bogoljub*, *Bogoslovni vestnik*, *Čas*, along with other “clerical” publications, decried daily what they termed the catastrophe of the “white plague”—a term they used to describe the prevalence of illegal abortions and declining birth rates. These publications called upon the authorities to rigorously enforce the strictest measures to curb this “murderer destroying modern states”,⁹⁴ which, as they warned, was “in recent times extending its claws even upon our nation.”⁹⁵

Catholic-leaning writers opposed even medically indicated abortions, such as in cases where the mother’s health or life was at risk, arguing that a mother should bear the risks associated with her “natural calling”—motherhood. Just as a dutiful soldier goes into battle despite mortal danger, so too must a conscientious mother, enduring hardships without “deserting” her duties out of fear. Instead, she is expected to sacrifice herself, martyr-like, for the well-being of her unborn child and the nation.⁹⁶

Conservative authors opposed abortion primarily due to Catholic doctrine, which views the embryo as a person from the moment of conception.⁹⁷ Their staunch opposition was further influenced by traditional Christian beliefs about the immorality of separating sexuality from procreation and a deep-seated fear of “depopulation,” which was closely tied to nationalistic sentiments.⁹⁸

Throughout the interwar period, the Slovenian clerical press issued daily warnings about the potential downfall of the Slovenian nation or the Yugoslav state due to declining birth rates and the possibility of being outnumbered by “more prolific” nations, particularly Italians, as well as Croats and

92 PLANERT 1998.

93 ROŽMAN, Irena. *Spolno življenje in kultura rojstva na Dolenjskem od 2. polovice 19. stoletja do 2. svetovne vojne* (Ph.D. thesis). Ljubljana : Univerza v Ljubljani, 2001; ŽNIDARŠIČ-ŽAGAR, Sabina. Biološki samomor naroda. In BERGOVIČ, Lenca Bogovič – SKUŠEK, Zoja (eds.) *spol: Ž*. Ljubljana : KUD France Prešeren; Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis – ISH, 1996, pp. 146–162; LESKOŠEK 2002.

94 Rod – od hudiča obseden. Strahote bele kuge. In *Slovenec*, 28 December 1929, p. 3.

95 GRAFENAUER, Milica. Iz duhovnega življenja družine. In *Mladika*, 1930, vol. 11, no. 4, p. 157.

96 UJČIČ, Josip. Abortus artificialis. In *Čas*, 1924, vol. 19, pp. 163–171.

97 GRAFENAUER 1930, p. 157.

98 ROŽMAN 2001.

Serbs.⁹⁹ Occasionally, these comparisons were cast in a broader global light, as Slavic birth rates were anxiously measured against those of Germans, and European birth rates against those of Asians, whose populations were perceived to be increasing rapidly. This type of discourse highlights, as authors from other national contexts have also observed, the close ties between anti-feminism, nationalism, and racism.¹⁰⁰

In line with the affirmation of pro-natalism and its perceived positive effects for both individuals and society, Catholic-oriented authors sought to explain the causes of the so-called “white plague.” Unlike writers of other political persuasions, they typically did not interpret the desire to limit births as a consequence of poverty, instead seeing it as a result of overabundance and a moral crisis in the modern era, an era characterized by “hyper-culture,” materialism, and the drifting away from spirituality and Christian values.¹⁰¹ This descent into immorality, they argued, was fueled by the “anti-Catholic press”¹⁰² and the “subversive communist undermining of the family,”¹⁰³ which propagated ethically misguided ideals such as “free love.”

These apocalyptic warnings show that the discourse on declining birth rates extended far beyond concerns about demographic numbers, encapsulating a broader anxiety over the transformations taking place in a modernizing society.¹⁰⁴ Historians observing similar trends in more industrialized countries after the First World War noted a fearful reaction against consumerism, mass culture, and changing notions of leisure, which especially appealed to the younger generation.

For critics, these developments created a sense of invasion by selfishness, pragmatism, foreign culture—particularly “Americanism”—and a widening generation gap. They spoke of a “crisis of the family” and the loosening of sexual norms, leading to a prototype of the “new person,” and more pointedly, the “new woman.”¹⁰⁵

Slovenian Catholic pro-natalists also warned against the dangers of a “new” lifestyle, which they believed was detrimental to the “natural calling” of women. One anonymous author bluntly claimed that women had lately become “possessed by the devil, gone mad, vampiric, and obsessed.”¹⁰⁶ In *Slovenec*, they spoke of a “new type of womanhood, striving for lofty goals, knowledgeable and capable in all things, but unfamiliar with one ideal: to be a mother.”¹⁰⁷ According to these authors, “modern women” were abandoning motherhood either due to superficial desires for beauty, a slender figure, and a child-free lifestyle¹⁰⁸ or due to

99 Proti beli kugi. Resna beseda savskega bana. In *Slovenec*, 17 January 1930, p. 3.

100 SALECL, Renata. Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and Anti-Feminism in Eastern Europe. In *New German Critique*, 1992, vol. 57, pp. 51–65; PLANERT 1998.

101 Za zdravje naroda. In *Slovenec*, 7 February 1930, p. 1.

102 Metlika ob novem letu. In *Slovenec*, 3 January 1930, p. 3.

103 Za naše kmetsko potomstvo. In *Slovenec*, 28 May 1933, p. 9.

104 USBORNE, Cornelia. *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany. Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 1992; LAZAREVIĆ, Žarko. Na poti v moderno v “vmesnih časih”. In ŠTEPEC, Marko et al. (eds.) *1918–1941. Ljubljana : Muzej novejša zgodovine Slovenije*, 2011, pp. 24–33.

105 CERGOL PARADIŽ 2022.

106 Rod – od hudiča obseden. Strahote bele kuge. In *Slovenec*, 28 December 1929, p. 3.

107 Materinski dan. In *Slovenec*, 25 March 1930, p. 1.

108 Proti beli kugi. Resna beseda savskega bana. In *Slovenec*, 17 January 1930, p. 3.

a drive for emancipation. As a counterpoint, they frequently offered the image of the “immaculate and untouched Virgin Mary,” who, as the model, was meant to inspire men and women to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their “great and noble vocation,”¹⁰⁹ especially mothers. In line with this ideal vision, Pope Pius XI established the Feast of the Motherhood of Mary, celebrated every 11 October.¹¹⁰

Acknowledging that the “white plague” had not yet spread in Slovenia as it had in other European cities or in regions like Slavonia and Belgrade, Catholic writers occasionally held up not only the Virgin Mary, but also the devout and self-sacrificing—often rural—Slovenian mother as an exemplary figure. This figure was portrayed as someone who “continually regenerates our people through suffering, carrying a masculine energy within her frail body and, like the Maccabean mother, stands firm in defense of our religious and national sanctities.”¹¹¹

Alongside these positive examples, they also painted vivid images of negative cases. Women who consciously rejected motherhood were condemned to damnation, as described by priest Mlekuž in *Bogoljub*:

The fate of married women who have evaded God's blessing in a sinful way is particularly bleak, even devastating [...] If a married woman selfishly renounces this most unique maternal duty, if she shamefully deserts, if she basefully denies and stifles within herself the voice of nature and conscience, then only a special miracle of God's grace can save her from sinking into a sinful quagmire [...] for such wretched women are and will remain traitors—traitors to their homeland, their nation, their femininity, and their very soul.¹¹²

The Catholic discourse on birthrate issues closely aligned with the “biopolitical” interests of the state and, as noted, with the overarching directives of the universal Catholic Church. In 1930, Pope Pius XI issued the significant encyclical *Casti Connubii* (On Chaste Marriage) in response to modernization and emancipation, as well as a reaction to movements such as fascism, neo-Malthusianism, and eugenics. This document provided Slovenian Catholics with clear guidelines on how to address newly arising ethical issues related to family and procreation. The encyclical sharply condemned social, eugenic, and medical justifications for abortion and sterilization, as well as contraception.¹¹³ In a dedicated section, the letter also identified and condemned excessive female autonomy or emancipation as a key threat to family and social harmony.

The encyclical outlined three types of emancipation that it deemed particularly harmful: social emancipation, concerning “leadership within the family;” economic emancipation, regarding the management of property and women's pursuit of paid employment; and physical emancipation, which allowed for “the prevention and destruction of offspring.” The document categorically rejected all three forms, labeling them as

corruptions of woman's nature and noble motherhood, subversive to the entire family [and ultimately], ruinous to women themselves [for] if she abandons her throne, established for her in the family by the Gospel, she will soon fall into her former servitude [...] and become, as she was among pagans, merely a tool of man.”¹¹⁴

109 MLEKUŽ, Mihael. Nesrečni edinci. In *Bogoljub*, 1940, vol. 38, p. 291.

110 KOŠMERLJ, Alojzij. Praznik materinstva preblažene Device Marije. In *Bogoljub*, 1934, vol. 32, pp. 218–219.

111 Materinski dan. In *Slovenec*, 25 May 1930, p. 1.

112 MLEKUŽ 1940, p. 291.

113 Okrožnica papeža Pija XI o krščanskem zakonu. In *Čas*, 1931, vol. 25, no. 6, p. 225.

114 Okrožnica papeža Pija XI o krščanskem zakonu. In *Čas*, 1931, vol. 25, no. 6, p. 231.

Catholic women's magazines and organizations adhered strictly to these principles. In 1934, when three Slovenian women's associations organized a rally demanding the establishment of social, ethical, and eugenic indications for abortion, the Catholic Women's Union promptly organized a counter-rally, calling for the harshest penalties for abortion. This was likely the most vivid public clash between Slovenian feminist and anti-feminist goals in the interwar period, a confrontation staged through these two opposing rallies in the public sphere.

Due to the influence of the Church and Catholic political movements in Slovenia, the anti-abortion "counter-rally" was far more successful in turnout than the rally organized by feminist associations. According to *Slovenec*, approximately 1 200 women attended the event,¹¹⁵ where they adopted a resolution demanding "the harshest punishment—for premeditated murder—for the manufacturers, sellers, and buyers of preventative means that divert marriage from its essential purpose, and equally severe punishment for any press or other propaganda promoting such means."¹¹⁶ The rally featured speeches from theologian Josip Ujčić, journalist Milica Grafenauer, and Anica Lebar, president of the Slovenian Women's Christian Union and editor of *Vigred*, a Catholic women's magazine known for its frequent opposition to abortion legalization.¹¹⁷

In his speech, Ujčić reiterated the principles of Pope Pius XI's encyclical, warning of a crisis in the family and stressing national concerns over declining birth rates. He urged a united effort by "the Church and state to prevent the immense harm that threatens not only the family but also the nation."¹¹⁸ His address reportedly received "frenzied applause."¹¹⁹ Milica Grafenauer followed,¹²⁰ though rather than focusing intensely on the issue of abortion, she emphasized the need for a fairer distribution of resources and support for large families. She went on to condemn the "morally questionable educators" who, without parental consent, promoted ethically unacceptable actions like abortion, thus "corrupting" the youth. This criticism struck a personal chord with feminist Angela Vode, who later recalled the experience in her memoirs:

But the following week, there was fire on the roof. The Catholic women spent the entire week raging and preparing an attack on us, calling a large assembly the next Sunday in Union Hall to denounce us. The representative of the Slovenian Catholic family, M. Grafenauer, led the charge, particularly attacking me and publicly questioning how the authorities could tolerate "such" teachers in the educational system, who corrupted our youth. There were many accusations leveled at us, including from some women who later changed their views [...] They attacked me personally. And I responded to each by asking, "Why do you only have one child?" That hit them the hardest, and it gave me relief.¹²¹

115 Zdrava družina - trdna država. In *Slovenec*, 12 June 1933, p. 1.

116 Zdrava družina - trdna država. In *Slovenec*, 12 June 1933, p. 1.

117 SI AS 1931, t.e. 567, akt 10600/99.

118 Katoliške žene za svetost zakona. In *Slovenec*, 15 June 1933, p. 3.

119 Katoliške žene za svetost zakona. In *Slovenec*, 15 June 1933, p. 3.

120 The issue of declining birth rates was not the only context in which Milica Grafenauer addressed fertility-related topics. She explored this theme in the journal *Mladika* as well as in her two monographic publications on marital and family life. Her arguments consistently adhered to a stance of outright rejection of the legalization of abortion and contraception, alongside advocating for the preservation of (female) chastity before marriage. Unlike some other Catholic authors, she did not approve of (periodic) abstinence within marriage if it was solely the woman who consented to it. GRAFENAUER, Milica. *Ljubezen, zakon, družina*. Gorica : Gor. Mohorjeva družba, 1934; GRAFENAUER, Milica. *Iz duhovnega življenja družine*. Celje : Družba sv. Mohorja, 1938.

121 VODE, Angela. *Spomin in pozaba*. Ljubljana : Krtina, 2000, p. 160.

This account vividly illustrates the personal conflicts that often underpinned the battles between feminists and anti-feminists. It also highlights how, as in other contexts,¹²² Catholic anti-feminists in Slovenia frequently exhibited contradictions between their public advocacy and their private lives.

Supporters of political Catholicism and clergy were likely the most resolute, though not the only Slovenian authors in the interwar period who positioned women's emancipation in opposition to the demographic interests of the nation. Even within the liberal camp, opinions were divided regarding the need for partial legalization of abortion and the issue of declining birth rates. Some liberals indeed advocated for neo-Malthusian principles, while others, similar to Catholics, endorsed pro-natalist views, fearing a faster population growth by other ethnic groups. Among them was the prominent gynecologist Alojz Zalokar, director of a major women's hospital in Ljubljana, who sharply criticized the aspirations of "ultra-feminism," which, he argued, led women—especially from the upper classes—to pursue contraception and "secret abortions."

This emphasis on feminism is somewhat unusual, as the largest mainstream Slovenian women's associations and magazines did not explicitly endorse partial legalization of abortion. The aforementioned "assembly for childbirth regulation" was organized by three numerically smaller (socialist) women's associations.¹²³

As Ute Planert explains, in the German context, opponents of the emancipation of women deliberately attributed the fight for birth regulation and abortion legalization to a (small) group of isolated activists. This strategy made it easier to dismiss these efforts, as it avoided acknowledging the broader reality: these were individual, widespread choices made by ordinary women, against which repressive government measures proved more or less powerless. It represented a space of female autonomy, a revolution not played out in the public sphere but intimately, within the marital bed.¹²⁴

More than pro-natalist convictions, many liberal authors condemned feminism on eugenic grounds. They specifically criticized "genetically superior" women who, in their self-centered pursuit of education and professional careers, renounced their "natural calling" and, by doing so, endangered the nation's vitality. Božo Škerlj, the leading Slovenian (liberal) eugenicist, argued that "it is precisely those women who could afford to have children from a social standpoint, and from whom society, on eugenic grounds, justifiably expects offspring, who are most likely to abort."¹²⁵ Similar views were shared by physician Živko Lapajne and lawyer and university professor Avgust Munda.¹²⁶ They also expressed concern that women from the intellectual elite were harming the nation by bearing fewer children. This anti-feminist discourse, often framed in pseudo-scientific terms, was clearly part of the nation-building process. Central European nations, including the Slovenes, are "distinctly

122 HEILMANN – SANDERS 2006, pp. 289–300.

123 CERGO PARADIŽ 2022.

124 PLANERT 1998.

125 ŠKERLJ, Božo. *Sredstva negativne evgenike*. Golnik : Slovensko zdravniško društvo, 1934, p. 6.

126 CERGO PARADIŽ, Ana. *Evgenika na Slovenskem*. Ljubljana : Založba Sophia, 2015.

modern phenomena,”¹²⁷ shaped by processes of social engineering and collective self-representation. As “imagined communities,” their formation depended on a range of interwoven factors, including centralized administration, industrialization, print culture, education, literacy, the development of a literary language, and the construction of a shared past.¹²⁸ Scholars played an active role in this process by effectively “nationalizing” their academic disciplines.

While before the First World War, in Slovene lands this process was largely driven by writers, clergy, politicians, and social scientists, the interwar period saw an increasing involvement of natural scientists—biologists, physicians, anthropologists, and eugenicists. These actors adapted scientific paradigms, particularly from biology, to serve nationalist goals. They attempted to ground national identity in genetics and blood, conceptualizing the nation as a body and a living organism. The symbolism of blood was especially appealing to nationalists due to its strongly vertical logic, linking the present nation to its mythical projection into the future. This reinforced the notion of the nation as natural, necessary, and timeless. As a result, anti-feminist discourse gained additional legitimacy, not only by appealing to traditional values, but also by invoking the allegedly objective conclusions of the natural sciences and the presumed interests of the nation.¹²⁹

Conclusion

By examining the intersection of women’s political demands and the emergence of antifeminist discourse, the present paper highlights the complex tensions that shaped gender narratives in the Slovene lands during the early 20th century. The aspirations of women’s movements—encompassing suffrage, labor rights, and reproductive autonomy—encountered strong resistance grounded in patriarchal norms, nationalist anxieties, and religious ideologies. Antifeminist rhetoric not only aimed to uphold the traditional gender order, but also mirrored broader societal fears regarding the destabilizing effects of modernity. Whereas pre-First World War opposition was primarily framed in theological and moral terms, the interwar period witnessed a shift toward ostensibly scientific justifications, drawing on medical and anthropological claims. In this environment, demographic concerns and economic instability became increasingly prominent as legitimizing arguments within antifeminist discourse.

At the heart of this struggle lay conflicting visions of womanhood; the emancipated, self-asserting “new woman” versus the idealized maternal figure tied to national and moral revival. This dichotomy underscores how debates over women’s roles transcended individual agency, becoming symbolic

127 KOSI, Jernej. *Kako je nastal slovenski narod: Začetki slovenskega nacionalnega gibanja*. Ljubljana : Založba Sophia, 2013, p. 1.

128 GELLNER, Ernest, *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1983; ANDERSON, Benedict. *Zamišljene skupnosti: O izvoru in širjenju nacionalizma*. Ljubljana : Studia humanitatis, 2007.

129 TURDA, Marius. *Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; TURDA, Marius. *Modernism and Eugenics*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; TURDA, Marius – WEINDLING, Paul J. (eds.) *Blood and homeland: Eugenics and racial nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940*. Budapest; New York : CEU Press, 2007; YUVAL-DAVIS, Nira. *Spol in nacija*. Ljubljana : Sophia, 2009.

of broader societal transformations. By framing women's claims as existential threats to the nation, morality, and the family, antifeminists wielded discursive power to curtail feminist advances, intertwining gender politics with the pressing demographic, cultural, and economic challenges of the time. Nevertheless, the argument of motherhood became in the feminist circles also the strategy to empower women and to improve state social policy.