

# Gender and the interrupted development of professional nursing in Lithuania

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**Introduction.** Lithuanian women were subjected to many of the same influences and trends that were exhibited in the United States in the early 1900s. The study of nursing in Lithuania offers an opportunity to compare the evolution of nursing in the United States with that in a small European country. For Lithuanian nurses, knowledge of their own history might help them to better understand the origins of their discipline and the social forces that have shaped it. The purpose of the publication is to present a discussion of changes and trends in Lithuanian nursing during the 20th century and the latest developmental changes in Lithuanian nursing as a predominantly female profession.

**Material and methods.** Historical inquiry was used to research and analyze written nursing history in Lithuanian libraries, archives and schools of nursing.

**Results.** Although medical education in Lithuania was established at the university level in 1922, nursing education remained based in vocational training schools until 1990. Lithuanian women had few career choices and nursing knowledge may have improved a woman's desirability as a wife and mother. Nurses remain in mid-level positions due to lack of visibility and fewer opportunities for promotion by men in the highest administrative positions who do see their increased effectiveness.

**Conclusions.** Over the last decade, Lithuanian nursing has been rapidly evolving and racing to reclaim its place among nursing in Western countries. From a historical perspective, Lithuanian nurses need to strengthen networking and cooperation with nurses from other countries, to enhance the development of female nursing leaders, and to increase credibility and access to research environments.

**Key words:** nursing, gender, women, Lithuania, historical inquiry

## INTRODUCTION

Lithuanian women were subjected to many of the same influences and trends that were exhibited in the United States in the early 1990s. Two types of segregation occurred. First, the horizontal segregation as certain type of work was designated for women. Within the positions of wives and mothers and providers of secretarial or sales services women were poorly paid and had little opportunity for advancement. Second, there was vertical segregation as men assumed administrative and higher level positions within female occupations (1).

F. Nightingale, viewed as the founder of modern nursing, argued that nursing was an ideal profession for women who were expected to care for others (2, 3). She was, indeed, correct, but she did not foresee that nursing would become a respectable profession for both males and females.

The study of nursing in Lithuania offers an opportunity to compare the evolution of nursing in the United States with that in a small European country, noting trends general to nursing and those that were clearly products of local circum-

stances including World War II and fifty years of Soviet occupation.

The purpose of this study was to discuss changes and trends in Lithuanian nursing during the 20th century and the latest developmental changes in Lithuanian nursing as a predominantly female profession. More specifically, this study contributes to an understanding of Lithuanian nursing as well as provides a basis for understanding international nursing.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

For Lithuanian nurses, knowledge of their own history might help them to better understand the origins of their discipline and the social forces that have shaped it, and allow them to proceed with change. The changes that occurred specifically in Lithuanian nursing are presented in comparison and contrast to the changes that affected nurses and women in the United States. The United States has a large Lithuanian émigré population that has maintained ties throughout the 20th century with Lithuania. For example, Dr. Jonas Šliūpas was active both in the United States and Lithuanian nursing in the early 20th century along with his daughter. Therefore, the

conditions for nursing and women in the United States had an influence on the evolution of women's roles and nursing in Lithuania.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Historical inquiry, used for this study, involves the selection of a topic that will provide a relevant contribution to the field, in this case a period of Lithuanian nursing history (4). History connects us with a heritage and confers on us an identity, personally and professionally; it serves as the collective memory of accomplishments in nursing (5). The re-establishment of Lithuania's independence in 1991 resulted in easier access to Lithuanian libraries and archives. A cumulative written nursing history in Lithuanian libraries, archives and schools of nursing was not found by the principal investigator, who fluently reads, writes and speaks Lithuanian. Primary source materials, eyewitness accounts of events, as well as secondary source materials, descriptions or reactions to someone else's account of an event, were examined in the Antakalnis archives and Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania, both located in Vilnius, Lithuania. There was no need for particular arrangements as there was free public access to the archives and to Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania.

These materials included official documents, records, correspondence and journal articles pertaining to nursing education and practice. Each document reviewed was coded according to topic and date. One file contained a chronological order of events while another file contained information sorted by topic. The topical coding corresponded with the stated research questions for this study. The chronological coding of data facilitated linkages between events.

The changes that occurred in Lithuanian nursing were compared and contrasted to the changes that affected women in the United States. A comparison with Poland, which is much closer to Lithuania, failed due to a lack of published, available material about the history of Polish nursing. Out of 44 articles found in Medline and CINAHL concerning Polish nursing history, 38 were retrievable, but only three contained information pertinent to this investigation. The Polish articles did emphasize the impact of health care in the United States upon a geographically remote area such as Poland and further justified the comparison between nursing in the United States and Lithuania.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Lithuanian nurses as women and professionals

In the United States, as in European countries, it was difficult for a woman to obtain an education and training in a specialized field in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Universities were male dominated and although some allowed females to attend lectures, few were willing to grant degrees for women. In the United States, the transition from hospital nurses' training school to university education for nurses slowly evolved in the 1900s. Nursing leaders were rethinking the use of nursing students in staff hospitals (6, 7). Nursing education in the United States moved to the university level to improve the image of

nurses as well as to provide a well-balanced, university education for women (8).

The recorded history of Lithuanian nursing begins after World War I. During the period of Russian imperial domination, nurses' training programs had been instituted in Vilnius in 1895 and in Kaunas in 1897. In 1919, while a program of higher courses was evolving into a university in Kaunas, the Red Cross organized nurses' training courses (9, 10, 7). Not all government administrators thought that nurses needed official training. Gusievas wrote that the *gailestingosios seserys* (sisters of mercy) were a community, not a profession (11). Although medical education in Lithuania was established at the university level in 1922, nursing education remained based in vocational training schools until 1990.

The subordination of women to men occurred in the predominantly female profession of nursing. In the workplace, nurses followed physicians' orders. Positions of leadership and authority were filled by males in both medicine and nursing despite the number of females in both disciplines. In fact, nursing education and practice were dominated by male physician educators and administrators (7). The six instructors in the first nurses' training course were physicians and only one was a female (10).

The conditions for Lithuanian nurses in the first half of the 20th century were consistent with those in the West. During the same time period in the United States, there was little thought for remuneration beyond room and board for the performance of one's duty (3). Demographically, Lithuanian nurses were consistent with the characteristics of nurses in the United States. Most Lithuanian nurses were not married and had no children. Nurses' training, then, was a good preparation for marriage (12). Lithuanian women had few career choices, and nursing knowledge may have improved a woman's desirability as a wife and mother.

Men were not interested in nursing although the number of male nurses has risen over several decades in the United States and Europe. Nurses' salaries and status were low and did not appeal to men who had many other opportunities available to them. Nurses were seen as extensions of the physician's arm. Their role was to gather information, a tedious task consistent with women's work overall, and report it to the physician.

Promotion for a nurse in the United States usually meant less time spent at the bedside. Nurses moved into academic or administrative positions and no longer provided daily care for patients (8). Since Lithuanian nursing paralleled Western development up to World War II, promotion for Lithuanian nurses was, most likely, similar to promotion for nurses in the United States and moved the Lithuanian nurse further from her patients.

Women, and specifically nurses, in the West gained recognition and respect during times of extreme unrest. During times of war, boundaries between women's work and men's work were eroded as women performed men's work as well as, or better, than men. Men, able to defend their country, left to perform this duty. For nurses, war meant that more people would need care. More nurses were trained, but education was controlled usually by government agencies and not managed

by nurses. Standards for education were decreased so that more nurses could be trained in a shorter time period.

In Lithuania after World War II, the focus was on improving both nursing education and practice. These improvements continued until Soviet occupation when, again, the length of nurses' training depended upon societal needs. Soviet occupation in Lithuania resulted in little or no change in Lithuanian nursing. Nursing education remained at the diploma and vocational school level. The literary discussion did not change much from the 1950s through the mid 1980s. In addition, the role of the Lithuanian nurse as patient advocate was suppressed during and after World War II. Once Lithuania regained her freedom in 1990, Lithuanian nurses were able to function more independently and further the professional interests of nursing.

### Current changes and alterations in Lithuanian nursing

Traditional nursing before 1990 included the subservient role of nurses to physicians. Their instructors at medical schools also were medical doctors with different specialities, but without education and training in professional nursing.

The inveterate attitude that nurses must be content with traditional nursing roles and leave research, education and setting standards to those better suited – physicians and other health professionals – was very damaging for the profession. During 16 years of independence, there has been an obvious transition in the scale of values from the socialist principles of equality and collectivism towards the principles of individualism. In this context, it is much more important to organize circumstances and situations in such a way that it would be possible and useful for a person to do what has to be done for the society (13).

Nursing as a profession in Lithuania was again “discovered” 18 years ago. From September 1990, nurses have been overcoming the traditional stereotype attributed to their profession. As Lithuania sought membership in the European Union, post-secondary education reform began in 2000 to meet the EU standards. In place of professional schools, two levels of higher education were established: non-university and university studies. This reorganization closely resembles two steps of entry into the nursing profession providing higher non-university and university nursing education. The trend in EU Member States is toward university level nursing education because of the increasing complexity of health care delivery and the need to deliver care in that complex system. Nurses are educated not just to provide service, but also to develop professional practice. Nursing students are recognized as bold, demanding, and motivated for future professional challenges and achievements.

Positive attitudes towards nurses as researchers and the foundation of science for nursing expand the perspectives of nursing research development and consolidation of the professional autonomy.

Professional nursing seeks the best care outcomes for patients and their community through research and implementation of evidence-based results. However, all these progressive revolutionary changes are connected with education and science but not with nursing practice and nurses' professional role.

Nursing by its nature was, and still remains, a health-oriented professional practice discipline sustaining close collaboration with many other health specialists. Separation of the roles of nurse and physician socially and professionally remains an urgent task of the profession and one of the most difficult to realize.

Until the number of men in Lithuanian nursing increases substantially, nursing continues to be identified as a female profession. Nurses remain in mid-level positions because they lack visibility and opportunities for promotion by men in the highest administrative positions and policy making who do see their increased effectiveness. Nurses were, and still are, part of the package that hospitals, clinics and health care offices provide in the United States and Lithuania. Their services are difficult to quantify and the cost of nursing is seldom separated from overall medical care (14).

Professionals in predominantly female occupations often do not consider the importance of a mentor relationship in the development of a successful career. Men help each other via the “old boys’ network” and if women are to succeed, they must be socialized into this or comparable networks. Networking aids women in gaining professional visibility, identifying job opportunities, reducing isolationism, supporting professional growth and providing emotional reinforcement. Networking together in a mix-gender support group is equally important for both sides.

### CONCLUSIONS

Over the last decade, Lithuanian nursing has been rapidly evolving and racing to reclaim its place among nursing in Western countries. The change from diploma school to university-based nursing programs, improved continuing education for all nurses, cooperation with nurses from other countries and the need to develop new nursing leaders have all led to major challenges as well as major opportunities.

From a historical perspective, Lithuanian nurses need to strengthen at least several areas for growth and success in their career endeavours. They need to establish supportive activities among professionals, increase credibility and access to research environments, network with both genders and other professionals and establish collaborative relationships in women's health and aging issues.

By virtue of being a female profession, women have encountered barriers to promotion within nursing. This is especially true when promotions are controlled by highest-level male administrators and policy makers.

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## LYTIS IR PAKOPINĖ PROFESIONALIOS SLAUGOS PLĖTOTĖ LIETUVOJE

### *S a n t r a u k a*

**Įvadas.** Esminiai slaugytojų profesijos raidos aspektai Lietuvoje siejami su šios profesijos plėtojimu JAV. Istorinės žinios apie slaugą Lietuvoje padeda tiksliau nustatyti šios profesijos ištakas ir įvertinti profesijos raidą lėmusius socialinius veiksnius.

**Tikslas** buvo atskleisti esmines slaugytojų, kurių dauguma – moterys, profesinės plėtotės kryptis ir pokyčius, įvykusius tam tikrais praėjusio šimtmečio laikotarpiais ir pastaraisiais Nepriklausomybės metais.

**Medžiaga ir metodai:** rašytiniai bibliotekų, archyvų ir slaugytojų mokyklų šaltiniai analizuoti remiantis istorinio tyrimo metodologija.

**Rezultatai.** 1922 m. pradėjus rengti gydytojus universitete, Lietuvos slaugytojai (anuomet – gailastingosios seserys, vėliau – medicinos seserys) daugelį metų buvo mokomi prie ligoninių įsteigtose, o vėliau savarankiškose medicinos mokyklose. Lietuvos moterų karjeros galimybės tais laikais buvo menkos, todėl mokymasis slaugos tapdavo gera proga moters – žmonos ir motinos – vaidmeniui stiprinti. Slaugytojai dėl jų „moteriško veido“ išlieka viduriniu medicinos personalu, mažai pastebimu ir silpnai remiamu vyrų, aukščiausio lygio vadovų ir politikų.

**Išvados.** Pastaruoju dešimtmečiu Lietuvos slaugoje vyko spartūs ir reikšmingi profesijos pokyčiai, grąžinusieji jai pelnytą vietą tarp Vakarų šalių. Remiantis istorine raida akivaizdu, kad slaugytojams privalu stiprinti profesinius ryšius ir bendradarbiavimą su kitų šalių slaugytojais, plėtoti slaugos lyderių moterų karjerą, plėsti ir tobulinti mokslinius tyrinėjimus.

**Raktažodžiai:** slauga, lytis, moterys, Lietuva, istorinis tyrinėjimas