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ACTIVE WOMEN HAVE BEEN HERE FOR A LONG TIME. CONTRIBUTION OF THE WOMEN'S CITIZEN WORK UNION TO BUILDING COMMUNITY

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The aim of this article, which is historical and pedagogical in nature, is to describe and analyse women's social activities in the context of initiatives undertaken by the Women's Civic Work Union. This was one of the most active associations of the Second Polish Republic, engaged not only in activities on behalf of women but also of children, families, and society at large. The article particularly emphasises the importance of the association's activities in shaping the community.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The analysis was based on historical research methodology. The study focuses on document analysis, a method used in scholarly research on the history of education. The source base includes archival and printed sources, official documents, publications, press articles, and interwar and contemporary literature on the subject.
- ▶ *Score/results* – Research indicates that women associated with the Women's Civic Work Union played a significant role in shaping social bonds and fostering community spirit during the interwar period. By organising grassroots initiatives and educational, outreach, and activism activities, they contributed to integrating local communities, strengthening interpersonal solidarity, and creating spaces for collaboration. The women of the Women's Civic Work Union not only supported individuals but also actively built the foundations of civil society, promoting attitudes of responsibility, mutual assistance, and social activism.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – The originality of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach. It demonstrates an understanding of the significance of initiatives dating back almost a century, and can serve as a valuable reference point for contemporary social and local strategies aimed at (re)building and strengthening social ties through associational activities.

| **Keywords:** woman, Second Polish Republic, associations, Women's Civic Work Union

1. Introduction

Studies on the history of women in the 20th century have a long history in the Polish historiography. A number of publications have been devoted to women's achievements in various spheres of social life. An undisputed role in the research on the social history of women in the Second Polish Republic in this regard has been played by scholars such as Wiesław Caban, Iwona Dadej, Małgorzata Dajnowicz, Joanna Dufurat, Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska, Dobrochna Kałwa, Agnieszka Kaczmarska, Urszula Kozłowska, Teresa Kulak, Adam Miodowski, Monika Piotrowska-Marchewa, Tomasz Sikorski, Agnieszka Szudarek, Andrzej Szwarc, Anna Żarnowska, and others.

To date, interdisciplinary research on women's history in the interwar period is integrative and multifaceted. It focuses on women's social roles, everyday life, women's emancipation, and their involvement in many areas of public life, including culture, education, and politics. The continuing interest in women's history has enabled the presentation of new findings regarding their activity within associational structures.

According to various estimates, in the interwar period in Poland there were from forty to over sixty women's associations, varying in terms of goals, methods of operation and social base [Dufurat, 2017: 31–48].

The associations played a significant role in the social life, fulfilling a variety of functions depending on their nature, goals, and activities. They built a sense of community by representing the interests of their members, conducting charitable and aid activities, as well as educational and cultural activities. Often, also engaging in social and political life, they undertook initiatives for social change, promoting democratic values, and supporting the development of civic participation. Women also actively participated in the activities of these associations, assuming responsibility for organising events, conducting aid and educational activities, and representing the interests of local communities. Their involvement was an important element of social change and the emancipation of women in the public sphere. The authors who wrote about the activities of associations include Julian Marian Auleytner, Jan Bełcikowski, Katarzyna Ceklarz, Sławomir Kantyka, Piotr Kędzia, Katarzyna Krysztofek, Jarosław Olbrychowski, Janusz Pawlak, Joanna Sosnowska, Agnieszka Suplicka, Leszek Wilczyński, Maria Wierzbicka and others.

During the Second Polish Republic, women gained greater opportunities for action and greater independence in both social and public life. The granting of voting rights – both active and passive was a groundbreaking symbol of the

changes in their social status that occurred after Poland regained independence in November 1918.

As Joanna Dufrat writes: “The interwar period was a continuation of the modernization processes initiated in Europe in the 19th century. In the social sphere, these processes were manifested, among other things, in progressive urbanization, the spread of education, the growth of life aspirations and individual susceptibility to change, and the secularization of norms and values. Equally important were the accompanying changes in the customs and social status of women” [Dufrat, 2020: 811].

In this article, I attempt to explore the activities of one such association – the Women’s Civic Work Union – with particular emphasis on its social activism aimed at representing women’s interests in the public sphere, highlighting the need to build community bonds. The literature on the subject still lacks sufficient information on associations founded and led by women. Furthermore, the current state of research on the activities of the Women’s Civic Work Union (ZPOK) has gaps and requires examination from different research perspectives.

2. Women’s Civic Work Union

The Women’s Civic Work Union (ZPOK) operated from 1928 to 1939 and was one of the largest women’s organisations under the Sanation regime, openly identifying with the ruling camp in Poland. The ZPOK operated nationwide, with headquarters in Warsaw and a network of branches and circles [Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet: Deklaracja Ideowa: przyjęta w dn. 30 IX 1934 r. Przez Nadzwyczajny Walny Zjazd Delegatek Z.P.O.K].

The origins of the ZPOK, however, date back to the period before 1918, when a women’s movement associated with the independence left was developing, which put the idea of gender equality and granting women political rights at the forefront. Already in a free Poland, activists associated with the women’s movement capitalised on the situation following the May Coup and campaigned for the Sejm and Senate elections at the turn of 1927–1928, winning three seats.

The Women’s Civic Work Union (ZPOK) integrated women with shared interests, values, and goals, creating a community based on cooperation and support. The ZPOK’s goal, as stated in its 1928 statute, was “to strive for the rebirth of Poland in the spirit of essential internal independence by: a) spreading and deepening the idea of Polish statehood; b) implementing the principles of true

democracy; c) ensuring women a direct influence on the state and social life of Poland” [Statut Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet 1928: 3]. The union aimed to achieve its intended goal by: “a) organising lectures, talks, and self-education circles; b) establishing workshops for women and young people; c) establishing care homes for women, centers, community centers, clubs, dormitories, nurseries, and kindergartens for preschool children; d) publishing magazines and publications devoted to women’s issues” [Statut Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, 1928: 3].

The founders of the union were supporters of Józef Piłsudski’s policies [Dufrat 2013: 10]. It was one of three women’s political entities operating in the Second Polish Republic – alongside the National Organization of Women and the Political Club of Progressive Women – that included political goals in their statutes. Furthermore, it was the largest women’s organisation associated with the ruling camp in Poland from May 1926 to 1939 and one of the largest women’s associations of the interwar period – alongside the National Organization of Women – to have its own parliamentary representation [Dufrat, 2013: 10–11].

The group of outstanding activists included, among others: members of the Main Board of the ZPOK with its chairwoman Zofia Moraczewska, Maria Bartłowa, Halina Chełmicka-Jaroszewiczowa, Zofia Daszyńska-Golińska, Bronisława Dłuska, Hanna Hubicka, Maria Jaworska, Wincenta Konarzewska, Julia Kratowska, Janina Strzelecka, Leokadia Śliwińska, Wanda Twardowa.

3. The contribution of ZPOK women to community building

The organisation emphasised the need for women to participate in public and political life. The association also engaged women in a range of social activities. The diverse nature of the association’s activities was a response to the enormous needs and difficulties of the state. The scope of women’s activities is impressive, as their initiatives played a significant role in providing assistance and strengthening the newly reborn state, thus fostering the need to build a community [Dufrat, 2005: 197–200].

Women were active in social and political affairs, working to promote social change, democratic values, and women’s civic participation. The union advocated for equal access to education, the elimination of stereotypes and prejudices regarding women’s social roles, and sought legislative change by eliminating policies that disadvantaged women [Statut Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, 1928: 3].

The Association represented women's interests, acting not only on behalf of its members but also more broadly – as a women's advocate before public authorities, institutions, and other organisations. It fulfilled this role, among other things, through charitable and outreach activities, helping women and their families in difficult life situations and offering them concrete forms of support.

The Association was active in the fields of culture and art, organising artistic events, exhibitions, and concerts, supporting the development of culture and creativity. It conducted journalistic and publishing activities, publishing books, magazines, and instructional publications covering all areas of the organisation's work. Among the organisation's publications were the biweekly "Praca Obywatelska", published from 1928 to 1939, and the weekly "Prosta Droga", published from 1930 to 1939 [Dufrat, 2019, 117–129; Piwowarczyk, 2018, 93–114].

Among the important tasks the women set for themselves within the association's activities there was initiating various forms of socio-cultural activity. They organised talks, lectures, civic education courses, and meetings to celebrate national holidays and celebrations. The association also initiated events that integrated the local community, such as dances, balls, dances, festivals, performances, lotteries, exhibitions, and trips to centres and workplaces. These activities aimed not only at cultural development but also at strengthening social ties and promoting civic engagement.

Various types of summer camps provided space for building community: holiday camps, military-recreational camps, traveling camps, and camps held in permanent facilities – hostels and boarding houses. For example, summer camps ("recreational and recreational camps") for working women were recreational and restful. They were paid and primarily intended for women with manual labour. However, the fees were not high, making the offer attractive to many women, both financially and programmatically [Piwowarczyk, 2021: 86].

To promote reading, the ZPOK established libraries, reading rooms, and community centres. These were established from 1930 onwards within individual branches, primarily in large and medium-sized cities, and were a fundamental form of educational and caregiving work. For example, in 1935, there were 76 community centres operating in Poland [Praca Światlicowa. Instrukcja dla świetlic ZPOK, 1934].

The Union demonstrated a particular interest in family issues. According to the ZPOK's philosophy, supporting families was to foster the development of the country. It also undertook practical care activities and provided various forms of assistance, particularly for children from the poorest families affected by unemployment, illness or alcoholism.

The broad spectrum of tasks assigned by the union emphasised the need to educate the society. Therefore, many of the union's initiatives focused on social work for the youngest, focusing on caregiving, educational, and caregiving activities. To this end, the ZPOK organized Mother and Child Care Stations, operated Mother and Child Homes, closed and open nurseries, orphanages, "Drops of Milk," Jordanian gardens, boarding schools and orphanages, community centres, summer and day camps, kindergartens, foster homes, feeding programs, and financed the establishment of schools and preschools [Jaroszevska, 1933; Majewska-Borowska, 1933; Lewińska; Czałczyńska-Podolska, 2016: 116; Instrukcja dla wiejskich dziecińców sezonowych Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, 1937].



Photo 1. The consecration ceremony of the "Jagódka" children's playground of the Women's Civic Work Union in Leszno, 1932. Source: National Digital Archives, Reference Number: 1-N-2826.

With the insufficient state's resources, the association began organising pre-schools at its own expense. The support for children included providing spaces where the youngest children were cared for by professional teaching staff and ensuring favourable conditions for the mental, physical, and moral development of the children. To ensure the efficient organisation and operation of preschools,

the association issued special instructions on how to establish and run them. Examples of preschools operated by the ZPOK in the Białystok Voivodeship include private preschools located in Białystok, Bielsk Podlaski, Kolno, Łomża, Supraśl, Wołkowysk, and Zambrów [Suplicka, 2024: 61–84].

The Association conducted educational activities, training sessions, and propaganda campaigns to raise public awareness of specific issues. Education was a key path to social advancement and the increased independence for women. During the Second Polish Republic, the education system created new educational opportunities for women. The introduction of modern general secondary schools for girls and boys, offering identical curricula and levels of instruction, was a significant step towards equality. For the first time in the history of the Polish education, girls' schools were formally equalised with boys' schools. In practice, however, despite legal access for women to all levels of education, the actual opportunities for obtaining an education remained significantly limited for many of them. Secondary vocational schools were the primary place where girls could pursue their education. The ZPOK also made its mark in this area by establishing private schools where girls could pursue their education. Most often, these schools offered opportunities to acquire a profession and, consequently, gainful employment. Such institutions operated in Brzeżany, Hrubieszów, Krzemieniec, Kowel, Kutno, Lida, Łomża, Stryj, Suwałki, Vilnius, and Warsaw [Suplicka, 2015: 14–142, 319, 327–329].

The union's activists distinguished themselves by their exceptional solidarity and ability to organise grassroots initiatives, which often became the foundation for the functioning of local communities. Their involvement created a space for support, cooperation, and the development of civic activity. An important aspect of the Women's Civic Labour Union's activities included organising courses and training, developing manufacturing activities based on cooperative principles, providing seasonal employment for women, and creating real opportunities for gainful employment.

Before the war, culture and education were areas in which the women of the ZPOK invested with great commitment. Organising training courses and opening libraries and community centres undoubtedly fostered the intellectual development of the society.

The Women's Civic Work Union also dealt with girls and boys at moral risk, who were placed in closed institutions that carried out resocialisation activities based on strict rigors [Piwowarczyk, 2018, 175–192]. It also played an important role in caring for women, organising material, economic and home assistance for them.



Photo 2. ZPOK kindergarten in Vilnius, 1932. Source: National Library, Reference Number: F.69872/II.

It is also worth emphasising a significant area of women's activity: ad hoc aid campaigns. This type of initiative maintained a significant growth in the 1930s, during the Great Economic Depression. The Women's Civic Work Union undertook numerous initiatives aimed at children, providing material assistance and hygienic and medical care. Soup kitchens were established and food drives were organised, along with social workers and hygienists visiting families. Material assistance was also provided. Shelters and care homes were established for orphaned, abandoned, and disadvantaged children.

Women became involved in organising leisure activities. They organised therapeutic camps, summer recreation camps, and day camps. The primary goal of the ZPOK was to provide care, education, and treatment during the camps, thus addressing the deficiencies resulting from the families' hygienic, economic, material, and moral conditions.

The primary goal of the therapeutic summer camps was to provide the widest possible access to healthcare for children suffering from conditions requiring climate and spa treatment. These camps served not only children from

middle-income and wealthy families, but above all – due to the social nature of the initiative – they were available to the poorest children and those whose parents were unemployed. Therefore, the organisation of the summer camps took into account the need to provide the largest possible percentage of children from these most vulnerable backgrounds with appropriate therapeutic and rehabilitation care [Akcja kolonijna Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, część I. Kolonia wypoczynkowa, 1937; Akcja kolonijna Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, część II. Kolonia lecznicza, półkolonia, dzieciniec wiejski letni, Warszawa, 1938].

4. Conclusions

The examples of the initiatives presented above demonstrate that one of the fundamental dimensions of ZPOK's activities was the community spirit, clearly present both in the organisation's ideology and in its daily activities. ZPOK not only provided a platform for support for women but also actively built social bonds in local communities, strengthening a sense of belonging, solidarity, and civic responsibility.

The communal nature of ZPOK's activities was, therefore, a response to the needs of the era – a counterbalance to the numerous problems of the interwar period. By building community, women not only gained space for development but also had a real impact on shaping social life in the Second Polish Republic.

Women associated with the Women's Civic Work Union played a significant role in community service and supporting the idea of the community in the interwar period. By organising grassroots initiatives, educational, outreach, and activism activities, they contributed to integrating local communities, strengthening interpersonal solidarity, and creating spaces for collaboration. Their involvement in continuing education courses, cooperative activities, childcare, and support for families in difficult economic situations constituted a real response to social needs. Women of the ZPOK not only supported individuals but actively built the foundations of civil society, promoting attitudes of responsibility, mutual assistance, and social activism. It is worth noting that the examples cited in this article are not exhaustive; they are merely informative.

Despite the passage of time, the need for the existence and formation of associations remains unwavering. It's difficult to imagine a modern democratic society without an active non-governmental sector. They constitute not only a crucial element of collective life but also an effective tool for meeting the needs of

individuals and social groups. They facilitate the achievement of common goals through self-help, cooperation, and the development of civic engagement.

Currently, in an era of globalisation and of rapid technological development, it is worthwhile to revisit these ideas to strengthen social ties and truly improve the quality of life in both cities and rural areas. Contemporary educational programs can draw on these experiences, promoting access to knowledge and culture for all social classes. The experiences of pre-war social initiatives can significantly contribute to the contemporary reality; despite the passage of time, they remain not only a source of inspiration but also examples of concrete and proven solutions. The activities of former associations, although rooted in the realities of a bygone era, can provide a valuable point of reference for today's projects and strategies, especially in the social dimension. Associations are voluntary and lasting cooperatives of citizens whose goal is not profit, but the implementation of specific social, cultural, and educational activities – serving both the common good and the individual needs of their members. The pre-war women's initiatives offer valuable inspiration that can be successfully applied in today's world. It is therefore worth examining history to draw from it and to create a better future.

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