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## The educational dimension of the activities of the Women's Self-Help Association\*\*

Edukacyjny wymiar działalności Stowarzyszenia Samopomoc  
Społeczna Kobiet

### Abstract

**Aim.** In Poland during the Second Republic, women played an important role in shaping the social and economic foundations of the reborn state. One of the key manifestations of their involvement was the creation of women's organisations, including the Women's Social Self-Help Association. The organisation not only supported the activation of women, but also contributed to the development of the idea of cooperatives in Poland, playing an important role in the process of building a civil society. The purpose of this article is to analyse the activities of the Women's Social Self-Help Association in the context

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of the development of cooperatives and their impact on strengthening the socio-economic position of women in the Second Republic.

**Methods and materials.** The analysis is based on available archival materials, including reports of the Association, legal documents, and the women's press of the time, and the social press. Historical methods, including source criticism and comparative analysis, were used to provide a comprehensive picture of the organisation's activities.

**Results and conclusion.** The research indicates that the Women's Social Self-Help Association played a key role in promoting the idea of cooperatives as an effective tool for combating poverty and social exclusion. At the same time, the organisation contributed to increasing social awareness of the role of women in public and economic life. The results emphasise the importance of women's organisations in shaping a modern society based on solidarity and cooperation.

**Keywords:** Second Republic, civil society, cooperatives, Women's Social Self-Help Association, women's organisations.

### Abstrakt

**Cel.** W okresie II Rzeczypospolitej kobiety odegrały istotną rolę w kształtowaniu społecznych i ekonomicznych fundamentów odrodzonego państwa. Jednym z kluczowych przejawów ich zaangażowania było tworzenie organizacji kobiecych, w tym Stowarzyszenia Samopomoc Społeczna Kobiet. Organizacja ta nie tylko wspierała aktywizację kobiet, lecz także przyczyniała się do rozwoju idei spółdzielczości w Polsce i odgrywała ważną rolę w procesie budowy społeczeństwa obywatelskiego. Celem artykułu jest analiza działalności Stowarzyszenia Samopomoc Społeczna Kobiet w kontekście rozwoju spółdzielczości oraz wpływu kobiet na umacnianie ich pozycji społeczno-ekonomicznej w II Rzeczypospolitej.

**Metody i materiały.** Analiza opiera się na dostępnych materiałach archiwalnych, w tym sprawozdaniach Stowarzyszenia, dokumentach prawnych oraz *ówczesnej* prasie kobiecej i społecznej. Zastosowano metody historyczne, w tym krytykę *źródeł* i analizę porównawczą, w celu przedstawienia wszechstronnego obrazu działalności organizacji.

**Wyniki i wnioski.** Badania wskazują, że Stowarzyszenie Samopomoc Społeczna Kobiet odegrało kluczową rolę w promowaniu idei spółdzielczości jako skutecznego narzędzia walki z biedą i wykluczeniem społecznym. Jednocześnie organizacja przyczyniała się do wzrostu *świadomości* społecznej na temat roli kobiet w *życiu* publicznym i gospodarczym. Wyniki podkreślają znaczenie organizacji kobiecych w kształtowaniu nowoczesnego społeczeństwa opartego na solidarności i współpracy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** II Rzeczypospolita, Stowarzyszenie Samopomoc Społeczna Kobiet, organizacje kobiece, spółdzielczość, społeczeństwo obywatelskie.

The Women's Social Self-Help Association was one of the pro-Sanation women's organisations in the inter-war period, promoting and implementing in its activities – especially with regard to women and their families – the idea of mutual assistance in the care, educational and economic dimensions. The association was founded in 1935 on the initiative of Zofia Moraczewska and related activists of the Women's Civic Labour Union, which had been in operation since 1928 (Piwowarczyk, 2013, 2016)\*. The impetus for this new initiative was the growing conflict in the Main Board of the Union of Women's Civic Labour since 1933, the background of which were disputes between Z. Moraczewska and the other leaders of the Union in the assessment of the political activities of the Nonpartisan Bloc for Cooperation with the Government and its leaders, with which the Union of Women's Civic Labour was ideologically and politically linked. As a result of the growing conflict, Z. Moraczewska resigned from her position as president of the Union on December 17, 1933, and after losing the elections to its authorities – at the beginning of February 1935 – she finally left the organisation (Moraczewska, 2018). At the same time, she took steps to create a new space for her social, political and educational activities. As early as April 13, 1935, she founded a new, independent women's association of a social, educational and economic nature – the Women's Social Self-Help Association (SSK). On May 12, 1935, during the organisational convention of the SSK in Warsaw, attended by nearly 650 delegates from all over the country, the formal shape and character of the organisation was defined, as well as its aims and scope of activities (Cybulska, 2021). During the deliberations, there was a particularly strong emphasis on the Association's desire to avoid any political affiliation. It was emphasised that the organisation should focus its activities primarily on organising mutual assistance in various areas of both social and economic life, as well as on initiating and conducting self-education of female members, supporting and undertaking childcare work, and fostering life entrepreneurship and promoting women's cooperativism (Chojnowski, 1996; Dufurat, 2013; Florczak, 2003). The Main Board of the SSK was elected, which included, among others, Z. Moraczewska (chairperson, held this position until September 1939), Hanna Szaniawska, Hanna Huszcza-Winnicka, Natalia Steinowa, Kazimiera Żuławska, and Janina Komornicka (Dufurat, 2013; Moraczewska, 1940-1948)\*\*. Shortly after the reunion, Z. Moraczewska and her closest associates set about creating the organisational structures of the Association.

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\* In the inter-war period, the Union of Women's Civic Labour was one of the largest and most influential Sanacja women's organisations in Poland. At its peak, it had over 37,000 members. It was founded in March 1928 and operated continuously until the outbreak of the Second World War.

\*\* Among those active in the SSK were Helena Kozicka, Janina Duninowa, Janina Paprocka, Janina Kruk-Strzelecka, Sabina Różycka, Maria Rychterówna, and Leokadia Śliwińska.

The organisation did not begin its proper, practical activities until the autumn of 1935. By the end of 1936, the Association had organised 39 circles in the country, which in the spring of 1939 already gathered nearly 2,700 members. The Warsaw circles had the largest number of women (*Minutes of the First General Meeting...*, 1936; *Report on Activities...*, 1939; *Bulletin of the Main Board...*, 1936; Dufurat, 2013; Moraczewska, 1940-1948)\*. In March 1937 – despite earlier declarations by the organisation’s female leaders to avoid any political connections and affiliations – the SSK declared its accession to the *Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego* [Camp of National Unity] as a member organisation, which ultimately determined the political face of the Association and its affiliation with the governmental grouping until the outbreak of the Second World War (Archive of New Files; Chojnowski, 1996; Cybulska, 2021).

The first General Assembly of SSK Delegates was held on 4 October 1936 in Warsaw (*Biuletyn Zarządu Głównego...*, 1936; Cybulska, 2021; Moraczewska, 1940-1948)\*\*. During the congress, the *Ideological Declaration* was passed, which precisely defined the aims and tasks of the Association. The general aim of the SSK was to “work for the good and power of the Republic of Poland” (*Samopomocna Społeczna Kobiet...*, 1936, p. 2). The leaders and members of the organisation defined their tasks in detail in the *Declaration*. They wrote that:

[...] it is our task to serve Poland with all our strength, to release her essential creative forces, thus building her greatness. We are ready at any time to defend you and to this end we will concentrate the forces of society [...]. We believe that our society will be able to emerge from itself, consciously and voluntarily, a moral force that will unite and strengthen the whole nation, ensuring the comprehensive

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\* According to Z. Moraczewska herself, by the end of 1937, there were 30 SSK circles in the country: in Lviv, Lutsk, Łódź, Katowice, Poznań, Kielce, Radom, Białystok, Brest-on-the-Bug, Skarżysko, Vilnius, Pionki, Kraków, Lublin, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Sosnowiec, Debica, Olkusz, Konskie, Kalisz, Lubartów and Milanówek, as well as 8 circles in Warsaw.

\*\* At the congress, a new SSK Main Board was elected, with Z. Moraczewska continuing as chairperson. It was composed of Natalia Steinowa, Irena Szydłowska, Janina Komornicka, Hanna Szaniawska, Kazimiera Żuławska, Sabina Różycka, Henryka Witkiewiczowa, Franciszka Kutnerówna, Janina Kruk-Strzelecka, Janina Żbikowska, Antonina Siedlecka. Section chairpersons were also elected: The Family Self-Help Section was headed by Małylda Szelestowa, the Women’s Civic Self-Education Section by Helena Kozicka, the Propaganda and Press Section by Zofia Moraczewska, the Economic Self-Help Section by Adela Domanusowa, the Income and Finance Section by Ada Kalusińska, and the Youth Section by Danuta Kobylańska. An Organisational Court was also established, to which were elected: Henryka Pawlewska, Kazimiera Grunertówna, Zofia Zawisza-Kernowa, Maria Rychterówna and Wanda Lorentzowa.

development of the State. Convinced that the prerequisite for the emergence of such a force is healthy social and economic relations, that it is born of a deep civic awareness of the whole society, called to co-operate and share responsibility for the fate of the State, we desire: conscious civic discipline and solidarity, equality of all citizens in the face of rights and duties, respect for human dignity, fair evaluation of personal values and merits, substantial realisation of women's constitutionally reserved rights. We want to create such conditions in Poland so that every person who is able to work can have this work ensured, so that work is fairly paid, the protection of work duly organised and respected. We will strive for a reform of our system in the spirit of social justice – a reform that is deeply thought out and introduced gradually and consistently (*Samopomocna Społeczna Kobiet*, 1936, p. 2).

According to §3 of the SSK Statutes, the main aim of the organisation was “[...] to organise for its female members, through joint efforts, mutual assistance in the economic, welfare and self-education fields” (*Statutes of the Association...*, 1935, p. 3). Certain means and tasks were to be used to achieve this goal: “[...] to search for and create new gainful employment establishments for female members; to organise legal and medical advice for female members; to organise care for children and young people; to carry out educational and self-educational cooperation by means of lectures, readings and popular talks, reading rooms and members' common rooms” (*Statutes of the Association*, 1935, pp. 3–4).

For the practical implementation of the ideological guidelines and the adopted goals and tasks of the SSK, the specialised sections set up at the General Board were to serve: Women's Civic Self-education, Family Self-help, Propaganda and Press, Youth and Economic Self-help

The Women's Civic Self-Education Section, headed by Helena Kozicka, was mainly responsible for spreading education among women. It comprised three sub-sections: reading, culture and discussion meetings. Its main objective was to shape pro-state, civic social attitudes among women, as well as to raise political and legal awareness in line with the SSK's ideological guidelines, and to raise general culture. Traditional forms of activity were used to realise these aims, above all lectures and talks organised by the reading sub-section in SSK circles. Educational and popular science courses were held, and there were numerous lectures on Polish history, as well as on socio-economic issues, women's affairs, household, hygiene and co-operatives. The section also set up (in many area circles) libraries and discussion clubs, ran literacy courses for illiterate women and educational courses for female members. In 1936 alone, 226 talks were organised and delivered, of which 87 were on historical issues, 16 on sightseeing topics, 27 literary discussions, 87 highly popular social talks (including talks on women's

issues in the broadest sense), 40 occasional talks, and 9 on legal topics (Cybulska, 2021; *Our Work...*, 1936).

Family-oriented outreach and educational activities were carried out within the SSK by the Family Self-Help Section. The work of this section – under the chairmanship of Matylda Szelestowa – was carried out in four main directions: providing pedagogical and psychological counselling to members of the Association, providing medical assistance to women and their families, organising holiday camps for members of the organisation and their children, and providing legal advice. Within the section, four sub-sections were set up: a pedagogical one, whose main task was to provide specialist educational and upbringing advice; a medical one, organising free medical advice from specialists, such as paediatricians, gynaecologists, laryngologists, a colony section, whose task was to organise and run summer camps for SSK members and their children, a legal section, organising free advice given by specialists and lawyers cooperating with the SSK (Cybulska, 2021; Luiderówna, 1936; Szpilrajnowa, 1939).

The most active pedagogical sub-section organised the so-called “Life Advice Centres” at many SSK chapters throughout the country, which, as one SSK activist Maria Minchejmerowa wrote (1938), “[...] would constantly watch over the private lives of their members [...], their worries, pains, failures and life difficulties should always find there clear and explicit advice, help and moral support, and often even intervention” (p. 3). In these “Advice Centres,” women were educated on how they should

[...] raise children rationally, how to educate them and where to educate them, how to arrange marital cohabitation so that it is not a hopeless ordeal, but a joyful life privilege [...], how to keep the flat clean, maintain personal hygiene and, when raising children, maintain normal marital cohabitation (Minchejmerowa, 1938, p. 4).

The section was highly appreciated and popular with women and young mothers.

Shaping the views and political attitudes of the leadership of the SSK circles, in line with the ideological direction and goals of the Association, as well as propagating its programme, was dealt with by the Propaganda and Press Section working under the leadership of Z. Moraczewska and Henryka Witkiewiczowa. In the form of so-called discussion evenings, i.e. discussion meetings organised weekly at the headquarters of the SSK Main Board in Warsaw, efforts were made to strengthen and “deepen the ideological uniformity” (Cybulska, 2021, p. 286) of the organisation’s members, as well as to popularise the ideas of self-help, cooperation and activity in the economic field.

Based on this assumption, we undertake the work of harmonising and crystallising the views of our members by initiating discussions on state, educational, local

government, social and economic issues, as well as women's issues [...], we are primarily concerned with the emergence of a unified mental attitude among those who are appointed by the will of the general membership to leadership positions in the organisation [...], these discussions will facilitate harmonious, unified work with our members in the Warsaw Circles and the provision of referents, so much desired by SSK circles all over the country (Moraczewska, 1936, pp. 17–18)

The section's primary tasks also included supporting its own low-circulation press organ: the monthly "Bulletin of the Main Board of the Association of Women's Social Self-Help," published since November 1935.

The main task of the Youth Section, working under the leadership of Danuta Kobylanska, was to raise the civic awareness of children and young people, to meet their educational needs in this spirit and to shape their characters (Cybulska, 2021). The activists of the SSK used traditional forms of action in this work – mainly talks and active participation in national holidays.

The preparation of broad masses of women for individual and group (collective) economic activity and education in this area was carried out mainly by the Economic Self-Help Section and the sub-sections operating within its structure: women's vocational preparation, income workshops, commercial agency, workers' rest homes, and above all the cooperative sub-section. The Economic Self-Help Section was led extremely efficiently by Adela Domanusowa.

As one of the most appropriate forms of collective, socio-economic and educational work, SSK activists considered co-operatives "as a forge of characters and a school of solidarity" (*Bulletin of the Main Board...*, 1936, p. 3). The leaders of the Association declared: "we wish to unite Polish women *en masse* in cooperative action, which may become a lever for the future order, based on the brotherhood of common effort" (*Bulletin of the Main Board...*, 1936, p. 3).

SSK leaders understood and treated cooperatives as a special form of education – just like other pro-sanction women's organisations\* – through which women learnt social forms of work, mutual aid and cooperation. Activists of many women's organisations took the view that working in various types of cooperatives could develop a sense of agency, the ability to act, resourcefulness and independence in life, the ability to organise individual and social economic life, and the willingness to help others (Magiera, 2011). It has been claimed that the implementation and development of the cooperative movement will contribute to a significant improvement in the material, economic, cultural, social and civic life of the broad masses of society, including women. Thus,

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\* Among others: Women's Civic Labour Union, Society of Working Women's Clubs, Ladies' Home Union, Women's Military Prep Organisation, Police Family, Military Family.



activists of women's organisations perceived cooperatives as an extremely important social, educational and cultural factor, emphasised the importance of cooperatives in the ethical shaping of individuals and society, thinking about the welfare and needs of others, preparing women for public life, raising the importance and rank of women in family and social life (Magiera, 2011).

As part of the education to cooperativism in the broadest sense, the Economic Self-Help Section recommended that psychological preparation should be carried out among female SSK members (in schools and pedagogical high schools), which was a necessary condition for joining cooperative action. In addition, the main focus was on the organisation and establishment of labour cooperatives

[...] as the type of cooperative work most suited to the needs of today's women's world, which is under the burden of unemployment and poverty; [it was sought to] acquire [...] share capital by setting up the SSK Co-operative Fund to distribute the capital in the form of loans to individual SSK co-operative establishments in the country (Moraczewska, 1938, p. 1).

The co-operative sub-section, in its action of educating for co-operativeness, organised, first of all, specialised courses of co-operative preparation. The first such course, which took place in Warsaw from 19 to 24 October 1936, was intended, according to the assumptions of the organisers, to contribute to the understanding and consolidation of cooperative principles and ideas and to indicate the directions for coordinated action. In the course of the training, it was announced:

[...] fully appreciating the idea of cooperatives, which all over the world and with us in Poland is developing with beautiful results – this means of material and cultural uplift of the broad masses of the working people – our organisation has placed cooperatives in the foreground in the programme of its civic work (Paprocka, 1936, p. 15).

Conditions for the dissemination/popularisation and success of the idea of cooperatives were also identified. It was assumed that:

co-operative, economic activity must be free of politics, [...] there is no place for politics of one party or another in the area of economic activity; this area, for the good of the cause itself, is "taboo" – co-operative activity has no collateral goals, its own goal is quite great, quite important; 2) co-operative activity must be characterised by ethics, [...] ethics of managers, purity of intentions and hands, because the public good, the social good, is also "taboo" and sacred; 3) the third,



essential condition for the success of co-operative work is professionalism, because life today is too complicated to be managed by dilettantes. Besides, it must be stated that cooperative work is a field of work that asks directly for the participation of women: they can give it their care, preventiveness, thoroughness, and conscientiousness (Paprocka, 1936, pp. 16–17).

In order to raise the standard and quality of life of women and their families, it was assumed that the primary task of the Self-help Economic Section – in accordance with §3 of the Statutes – should be to “organise for its members, through joint efforts, mutual assistance in the economic field.” This task was to be accomplished by setting up and running craft, handicraft, manufacturing and trade establishments based on co-operative principles, organising courses on co-operative activity, training and preparing women in a specialised and professional manner for the establishment of co-operatives appropriate to the requirements of the area (Domanusowa, 1936; Economic Self-Help Section, 1939), which, as one SSK activist wrote, “[...] was an excellent means of education, accustoming women to economic resourcefulness, slowly transforming them from passive [...] into brave and resourceful citizens, full of self-confidence and a desire to provide active assistance to the organisers of economic life in Poland” (Gryckówna, 1936, p. 15).

The Economic Self-Help Section, together with its subordinate subsections, was most active among the Warsaw circles. From June 1936 to the beginning of 1939, it organised and ran (with the help of qualified instructors) vocational preparation courses, specialised workshops, production facilities (handicrafts), trade facilities (shops and stalls) and commercial intermediation facilities for its female members as part of a broadly defined economic assistance. The women’s vocational preparation sub-section, whose task was “[...] to educate cadres as well as the most numerous deputation of women to work in various professions, on a cooperative basis” (Moraczewska, 1940-1948, p. 47) organised several specialised (vocational) courses, mainly in the fields of weaving, tailoring and hand and machine tricotting. Vocational training was conducted dynamically and intensively – in less than two years nearly 50 women were trained in machine tricotting alone, about half of whom found employment in Warsaw factories, and 13 of the trained ladies started working in the SSK’s own tricotting workshop. In turn, courses in hand tricotting were completed by more than 200 women, and courses in cutting and sewing underwear by more than 100 ladies (Domanusowa, 1939). Similar specialised courses were organised and run in many SSK circles around the country.

On the other hand, the sub-section of profit-making workshops, headed by Natalia Steinowa, opened and ran its own (association) tricot workshop in Warsaw, in addition to a shoemaking workshop, a plaiting workshop and a buffet with breakfast at the headquarters of the Social Insurance Institution at 1 Mariańska Street, as well

as a lace factory and a cottage industry sewing room. The tricot factory, the plait factory, the stocking and sock factory and the shoemaker's workshop were the most successful (and sufficiently profitable). Sales of these products and services were organised based on obtaining orders from various state institutions, private individuals and social organisations both in Warsaw and nationwide. For example, in order to obtain orders for the products of the tricot workshop, the SSK leaders cooperated with, among others, the Ministry of Military Affairs, the Winter Aid Fund, organisations such as the Women's Military Training Centre and the Scouts. Manufactured products were sold in factories belonging to the state monopoly, factories of the military industry, as well as at their own stalls in city bazaars (Domanusowa, 1939; Moraczewska, 1940-1948). In Sulejówek, where Z. Moraczewska lived, the circle led by her ran, among other things, a multi-trade kiosk and a local handicraft vegetable and fruit processing plant (Cybulska, 2021).

At the end of October 1937, the co-operative sub-section headed by Natalia Heinowa, in agreement with the Society for the Promotion of Labour Co-operatives, organised and ran the so-called "Tailor's Emergency" on a co-operative basis. This one of Warsaw's largest co-operatives employed 15 people at the beginning of 1938 and nearly 30 by mid-1939. The "Ambulance Service" sewed mainly winter coats, ordered primarily by the Winter Aid Fund for the Winter Aid campaign (Steinowa, 1939; Szwakopfowa, 1938). Both the "Ambulance" and the other SSK worker cooperatives belonged, in formal and legal terms, to the "Społem" Cooperative Review Association as a supervisory and controlling institution (Moraczewska, 1940-1948).

Trading and brokering outlets were set up and run by the sub-section of the trade brokerage. Under the leadership of Katarzyna Perczyńska, the activists of the sub-section organised a shop at the headquarters of the SSK Main Board in Warsaw, together with a wholesaler's shop with products/goods made/created by SSK manufacturing workshops from all over the country. The wholesale shop also obtained goods at factory prices from factories and state enterprises. It cooperated in this respect with, among others, factories in Sosnowiec, textile factories in Łódź and the People's Industry Bazaar in Lutsk. Goods purchased at preferential prices were then sold in outlets operating at the SSK circles and in "Społem" shops. Products and goods made in SSK workshops were also presented at the Poznań Fair at their own exhibition stands of women's works (Moraczewska, 1940-1948).

Similar to the Warsaw SSK circles, SSK circles throughout the country undertook activities of a broadly defined assistance and economic activation nature (including vocational courses for women). For example, the SSK circle in Lubartów ran a Cheap Manual Work Workshop, a dry-cleaning shop and organised cutting and sewing courses, the circle in Kielce ran an eatery for the poor and a flower shop, the circle in Dąbrowa Górnicza organised and ran sewing and tricot-making courses, a sewing shop and a grocery shop, the circle in Lublin – tailoring, tricot-making and manual

work courses, the circle in Lutsk had a fruit and juice processing plant, ran workshops manufacturing slippers, gloves for the army, underwear and dealt with commercial intermediation, the circle in Łódź conducted on its own stands and bazaars the sale of food products, the circle in Olkusz organised courses in cutting, sewing and handwork, circle in Sosnowiec – courses in cutting, sewing, tricot tying as well as commercial intermediation, the circle in Poznań – a handwork workshop (Seksja Samopomocy Gospodarczej, 1939; Moraczewska, 1940–1948). The SSK circle in Katowice, on the other hand, organised unique co-operative tourist facility. On the initiative of Elżbieta Szwakopfowa, the cooperative “Przelot” was established in March 1937, running the first cooperative Tourist House in Silesia (Steinowa, 1939; Szwakopfowa, 1938).

The activities of the Women's Social Self-Help Association fitted perfectly into the specificity and character of the social and economic life of the 1930s in the interwar period in Poland. It was clearly ideologically oriented. By bringing together and activating women, the Association fulfilled an important aid and educational function for hundreds of Polish women, their families and children. Although the scope of its activities was not large, the Association contributed to raising the social, economic and cultural level of many women, mothers and their families through support, education and activation, above all economic. It was an educational institution and thus strengthened the Polish family.

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