

The Catholic Model of Education in the Theory and Practice of the National Women's Organisation (1919–1939)

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Piwowarczyk, M. (2024). The Catholic Model of Education in the Theory and Practice of the National Women's Organisation (1919–1939). *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 16/2024/1, 83–93.
<https://doi.org/10.5817/cphpj-2024-005>

The article presents the political, social, and educational activities of one of the largest Catholic socio-political women's organizations operating in interwar Poland. The goals and areas of the organization's diverse activities have been outlined, focusing primarily on the work to activate women in social life and their pursuit of equal rights, which was combined with the traditional role of women defined by social norms and the social teachings of the Catholic Church. The article also discusses the traditional family model and upbringing promoted by the association, as well as the role of women (femininity) in both private and public spaces.

Keywords: *National Women's Organisation, Second Polish Republic, traditional upbringing, women's organisations*

Introduction

The National Women's Organisation (Narodowa Organizacja Kobiet - NOK) was one of the largest socio-political women's associations operating in Poland during the two decades of the interwar period.¹ It originated from the Catholic-nationalist camp and was a Catholic and national organisation that firmly embraced Christian morality and was devoted to building private and public space in accordance with the teaching of the Catholic Church and in line with love for Poland. It set itself the goal of serving "God and the Homeland".

The birth of the NOK took place after Poland regained independence (officially on November 11, 1918) and was directly linked to the first parliamentary elections (1919). The future members of the organisation were

¹ This period is referred to in Polish historiography as the Second Polish Republic (II Rzeczypospolita). It was a historical Polish state that existed between 1918 and 1939. The name emphasizes continuity with the First Polish Republic (1569–1795), which was dissolved by the partition treaties signed between Austria, Prussia, and Russia between 1772 and 1795.

devotedly involved in the electoral action preceding the voting for candidates for the Legislative Sejm.²

After the elections, the women decided to continue their activities in the day-to-day representation of ladies' interests as the NOK, politically and, above all, socially. On 7th May 1919, the statutes of the organisation were approved and it continued uninterrupted until September 1939.³

In 1931 it had a membership of more than 78,000 women engaged in activities in nearly 200 branches (local clubs) throughout Poland.⁴ Its membership was made up mainly female activists of Polish nationality, "*above all the wives of dignitaries, clerks, merchants, members of the liberal professions, female members of the social elite, most often from the landed gentry and intelligentsia*"⁵ who were involved in social and political life.

Among the leaders of the NOK there were 9 female activists that were also MPs. The female politicians of the interwar period that were associated with the organisation were Gabriela Balicka (MP for National Democracy, member of the Legislative Sejm of the first, second and third terms, i.e. in 1919–39), Irena Puzynianka (Chairwoman of the NOK in 1921–1929, MP for National Democracy during the first term; in 1929 she resigned as chairwoman due to the fact that the NOK was made dependent on National Democracy, which she strongly opposed; in 1930, a split occurred as a result of which 80 activists left in order to form the National Council of Polish Women), Maria Holder-Eggerowa (MP during the first term 1922–1927), Wanda Ładzina (MP during the first term), Zofia Sokolnicka (MP for National Democracy during the first term), Halina Felicja Stęślicka (MP during the first term), Helena Grossmanówna (MP during the 3rd term 1930–1935), Ewelina Pełowska (MP during the 3rd term), Zofia Zaleska (MP for National Democracy during the 3rd term), and Józefa Szebeko (first Chairwoman of the NOK in 1919–1921, senator during the 1st term 1922–1927).⁶ The group of NOK leaders also included Aleksandra Zarzycka, Aniela Zdanowska, Izabela Dobrzyńska-

² Kotowski, R. (2009). Między polityką a działalnością społeczną – Narodowa Organizacja Kobiet w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. In A. Janiak-Jasińska, K. Sierakowska, A. Szwarz (Eds.) *Działaczki społeczne, feministki, obywatelki... Samoorganizowanie się kobiet na ziemiach polskich po 1918 roku (na tle porównawczym)*. Tom II, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, p. 276.

³ Ibid., p. 278.

⁴ Ibid., p. 285; Also: Dufurat, J. (2017). Prasa polityczna organizacji kobiecych w Polsce w latach 1917–1939. In M. Dajnowicz, A. Miodowski (Eds.) *Polityka i politycy w prasie XX i XXI wieku. Prasa organizacji politycznych*, Białystok: Wydawnictwo HUMANICA Instytut Studiów Kobiecych, p.42; Skibiński, P. (2018). *Polska 1918*. Warszawa: Muza. Sport i Turystyka, p. 444.

⁵ Kotowski, R. (2009). Między polityką a działalnością społeczną..., p. 278.

⁶ Dufurat, J. (2017). Prasa polityczna organizacji kobiecych w Polsce..., p. 35; Also: Kotowski, R. (2009). Między polityką a działalnością społeczną..., p. 280–283.

Rybicka, Maria Demelówna, Maria Sobańska, Zofia Kirkor-Kiedroniowa and Irena Pannenkowa.

The NOK collaborated with the Popular National Union (which morphed into the National Party in 1928) and was actively involved in political action until 1926.⁷ The primary function of the activity was parliamentary. The ladies were very active in terms of legislative work. In the parliament, they spoke out on a great many issues of social life, such as social welfare, law and administration. They devoted much space to issues relating to children and family. By way of example, Gabriela Balicka struggled for the state to take care of the youngest citizens left without parental care, neglected in terms of upbringing. She called for termination of parental rights to be only possible by a court ruling as there were no uniform rules on the matter at the time. Maria Holder-Eggerowa, in turn, called for penalties for parents for abandoning their families. And together they strove to regulate the legal situation of illegitimate children and to extend the protection of the mother and infant.⁸

*“The MPs being members of the NOK were interested in the education of young people as they noted the neglect of the state in this respect. In their view, the system of education should be based on national or even Catholic-national ideas. It should provide an alternative to the state education, which is subordinated, in their opinion, to the politics of the time.”*⁹ All the actions by female deputies associated with the NOK stemmed from their conviction of the need for the unity of the Catholic and national camp and the *“defence of faith and morals against anti-religious, subversive, anti-national, anti-social and anti-state influences.”*¹⁰

Consequently, they included among their main tasks the *“recognition of the family as the basic cell of society, the indissolubility of the sacrament of marriage, the recognition of the school as an aid and complement to the family in teaching and upbringing, and therefore the demand for the religious school; keeping watch over the souls of children and young people as the most important national treasure.”*¹¹

However, political activism was only a part of their work and became a tool to popularise their own/organisational ideals.

⁷ Skibiński, P. (2018). *Polska 1918...*, p. 445.

⁸ Kotowski, R. (2009). Między polityką a działalnością społeczną... op. cit., p. 282; Also: Mysiakowska-Muszyńska, J. (2015). ‘W imię Boga i Ojczyzny!’ Działalność społeczno-polityczna Narodowej Organizacji Kobiet 1919–1939 – wybrane zagadnienia. In Dzieje najnowsze, Rocznik XLVII–2015,3, p. 43; *Dziesięciolecie Pracy Narodowej Organizacji Kobiet w Łodzi, Łódź 1928*. p. 42.

⁹ Kotowski, R. (2009). Między polityką a działalnością społeczną..., p. 282.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 283.

¹¹ Ibid.

After the May Coup¹², the NOK continued to be influenced by National Democracy, but its involvement in political life waned. Definitely, throughout its existence, social work and educational work stood out in the foreground. That was the essence of the action and activity of the members of the association. The leaders of the organisation believed that their main role/work in society was/should be eminently educational.¹³

Objectives of the Organization's Activities

The aim of the association was to work for the equality and activation of ladies in public life, to promote the traditional model of family, patriotic and Christian attitudes, and to support the cultural and economic development of the country. The leaders of the organisation believed that equality had to be combined with the traditional role of women as defined by the moral norms and social teaching of the Catholic Church.¹⁴

In view of the changes in the status of women, this role (educator and housewife) was to be fulfilled not only in private life, but also in the public sphere,¹⁵ hence their keen interest in matters of family, marriage, children, upbringing and issues relating to combating any social pathologies.¹⁶

Equal rights, however, did not mean an identical position in the life of the nation, but gave the opportunity to participate in public life according to different values and patterns than was the case for men because unlike men, they put moral issues first.¹⁷

The leaders often explained that the association aimed to encourage females to participate consciously and actively in both political and social life “*on the basis of Christian, national and democratic principles.*”¹⁸

¹² The May Coup was a military coup d'état in Poland, carried out in Warsaw between May 12-15, 1926, by Marshal Józef Piłsudski, resulting in his assumption of de facto power (Piłsudski became the Minister of Military Affairs and General Inspector of the Armed Forces, while Ignacy Mościcki, recommended by Piłsudski, was elected President). The coup initiated a 13-year period of authoritarian rule by the ruling camp under the leadership of Józef Piłsudski, commonly referred to as the “Sanation” regime.

¹³ Kotowski, R. (2009). *Między polityką a działalnością społeczną...*, p. 282.

¹⁴ Kałwa, D. (2000). Model kobiety aktywnej na tle sporów światopoglądowych. Ruch feministyczny w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. In A. Żarnowska, A. Szwarc (Eds.) *Równe prawa i nierówne szanse. Kobiety w Polsce międzywojennej*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG, p. 151; Also: Kotowski, R. (2009). *Między polityką a działalnością społeczną...*, p. 279.

¹⁵ Kałwa, D. (2000). Model kobiety aktywnej na tle sporów światopoglądowych..., p. 151.

¹⁶ Kotowski, R. (2009). *Między polityką a działalnością społeczną...*, pp. 281–282.

¹⁷ Kałwa, D. (2000). Model kobiety aktywnej na tle sporów światopoglądowych..., p. 151.

¹⁸ Dufurat, J. (2011). Narodowa Organizacja Kobiet i Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet – podobieństwa i różnice. Kilka uwag o funkcjonowaniu społeczno-politycznych organizacji kobiecych w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej, In W. Wrzesiński, M. Masnyk, K. Kawalec (Eds.) *Polska leży na Zachodzie. Studia z dziejów Polski i Europy dedykowane Pani Profesor Teresie Kulak*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, p. 576.

Thus, “*under the brand of NOK, there were women oriented towards the interests of the nation according to the order: home, homeland, religion.*”¹⁹

The Traditional Model of Family and Upbringing

In its programme and activities, the organisation promoted the model of traditional family and upbringing in line with the moral norms and social teaching of the Catholic Church.

The programme emphasised the traditional role of females as wives, mothers and educators of future generations, called upon to protect the family hearth, guardians of the faith and of the “*national spirit.*”²⁰

The duty of a wife and mother was to nurture piety, thrift and truthfulness in the home and family, to shape national-patriotic and Christian attitudes, and to spread national education and culture. She was supposed to be a beacon of morality and to safeguard the family from “*any decaying influence*” thus giving expression to the belief that only “*a healthy family produces a healthy society.*”²¹

One of the NOK leaders, Wanda Ładzina, saw the “*sources of the nation’s vitality and the building of a strong state precisely in the family. She saw a clear connection between the condition of this basic social cell and the observance of ethical principles in interpersonal relations.*”²² In 1927 she wrote about the importance of women: “*The state is made up of families. The stronger and healthier the families, the stronger the foundations of the State. The basis of the family is the woman as wife and mother. She raises her children to be citizens.*”²³ Among the duties that the State should fulfil, in Ładzina’s opinion, she mentioned enabling the family to develop and providing it with decent living conditions.²⁴ She wrote: “*in order for a wife and mother to perform her duties well, she should have the best possible conditions created for her maternal and spiritual life.*”²⁵

In the model of upbringing promoted by the association, the lady was expected to occupy a central position within the family and the home, being responsible not only for the upbringing of children, but also for the functioning, order and harmony of the private space in organisational and moral terms.

¹⁹ Maj, E. (2016). Wzorce aktywności kobiet w Narodowej Demokracji (1893–1939). In T. Kulak, M. Dajnowicz (Eds.) *Drogi kobiet do polityki (na przestrzeni XVIII–XXI wieku)*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Chronicon, p. 167.

²⁰ Dufurat, J. (2011). Narodowa Organizacja Kobiet i Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet..., p. 576.

²¹ Kotowski, R. (2009). Między polityką a działalnością społeczną..., p. 282.

²² Mysiakowska-Muszyńska, J. (2015). ‘W imię Boga i Ojczyzny!’ Działalność społeczno-polityczna Narodowej Organizacji Kobiet..., p. 35.

²³ Ładzina, W. (1927). *Ratujmy rodzinę!*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Księży Pallotynów, p. 8.

²⁴ Mysiakowska-Muszyńska, J. (2015). ‘W imię Boga i Ojczyzny!’ Działalność społeczno-polityczna Narodowej Organizacji Kobiet..., p. 35.

²⁵ Ładzina, W. (1927). *Ratujmy rodzinę!*... op. cit., p. 8.

At the same time, she was involved in social and public activities as an educator and housewife.²⁶

In the NOK programme, the role model for women, wives and mothers was the housewife who mastered the logistics of housework, had charge of the “*female household*”, such as managing the domestic service, establishing domestic order, taking care of order at home. It was her duty to fulfil her role as a daughter, sister, wife, mother and carer. Her social space included motherhood, the upbringing of children, the education of young people in her immediate environment (younger siblings or further cousins). She felt a responsibility to pass on the spiritual legacy of the nation, but also to transmit the culture of the family between generations. By virtue of her role as the “*priestess of the home hearth*”, she had a motivating influence on men, smoothing their manners and inducing them to comply with social norms.²⁷

*“The domain of women’s activity was invariably the home while men’s was professional work. The housewife, depending on her social environment, financial situation and tastes, could be an entertainer at social gatherings in one variant while in another she could be a provident housewife busy in the kitchen.”*²⁸

*“In this model there was obviously also room for public activities, compliant, broadly speaking, with the traditional pattern of positivist origin, i.e. the ladies were expected to set up and run reading rooms, organise discussion meetings, help the poor and, if necessary, play the role of volunteer nurses.”*²⁹ In addition to activities in the purely religious sphere (organising religious courses and retreats) they were to focus on promoting Catholic values and ethical norms and helping women who were “*morally bankrupt*.”³⁰

In the model of family and family upbringing promoted by NOK activists, very often in the pages of their own periodicals³¹, the family was regarded as the most important, first and natural educational environment whose task should be the religious, moral, physical and civic upbringing of children

²⁶ Maj, E. (2016). Wzorce aktywności kobiet w Narodowej Demokracji (1893–1939)..., pp. 158–159.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 158.

²⁸ Chojnowski, A. (2000). Aktywność kobiet w życiu politycznym. In A. Żarnowska, A. Szwarz (Eds.) *Równe prawa i nierówne szanse. Kobiety w Polsce międzywojennej*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG, p. 46.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

³¹ The NOK had 3 titles of its own: the weekly *Gazetka dla Kobiet: z Bogiem dla Ojczyzny* (Gazette for Women: With God for the Fatherland), published in the period 1922–31; the magazine was Catholic and national in character, promoted Polish culture in the Borderlands and encouraged women to take an active part in it; the monthly *Hasło Polki* (Polish Woman’s Slogan), published in Bielsk Cieszyński in 1934–38, which dealt with issues of bringing up children and working for the Fatherland; the monthly *Ruch Kobiety* (Women’s Movement), which was published in Lviv in 1931–35; its pages dealt with equality and NOK activities; Dufurat, J. (2017). *Prasa polityczna organizacji kobiecych w Polsce...*, pp. 42–45.

and the safeguarding of their temporal well-being.³² At the same time it was emphasised that *“the family is the best educational centre for the young generation and the upbringing of offspring is the natural aim of the family while the prerequisite for good cohabitation between spouses is mutual renunciation, patience, compliance and other related social virtues.”*³³

Their own periodicals presented an image of the good Polish woman, mother and housewife, setting out her proper roles and tasks. The magazines gave a lot of practical advice relating to the issue of building a woman’s status in the internal (family) and external (social) environment.

The *“Nationalist Women”* thus advocated a patriarchal family model and the nurturing of the principles of Christian ethics. They paid homage to traditional values and Catholic morality. The model of upbringing and family promoted by the NOK was attractive to the conservative society of the time. As a result, the NOK itself was also very popular. The very name, or more precisely the adjective *“national”*, inspiring emotional support and trust in the majority of the population, was meant to attract people to the national organisation.

Areas of the Organization's Activities

The activists of the NOK were involved in and carried out a wide and varied range of activities thus building a model of an active, committed and responsible woman with a distinctly national-Catholic face.

Despite the fact that the leaders of the NOK declared the importance of political issues, the association in its daily activities did not go beyond the traditional, commonly accepted fields of women’s social activity related to care, education and upbringing. The core of the organisation was formed by socio-educational and charitable activities.

In the political dimension, the NOK was primarily involved in election campaigns for the Sejm and Senate, organising political rallies and conducting election canvassing. It participated in national actions and launched patriotic initiatives. For instance, members of the NOK were involved in the plebiscite in Warmia and Mazury and in Silesia, agitating for Poland. During the Silesian Uprisings they were active in the Silesian Red Cross, and ran dressing and food stations for the insurgents. During the Polish-Bolshevik war, the organisation worked for Polish soldiers by organising tea-rooms at railway stations and sewing uniforms. The female activists also took care of the wounded and invalids and organised a Christmas party for soldiers in the barracks. The NOK also inspired the establishment in 1922 of the Committee for Polish

³² Maj, E. (2016). *Wzorce aktywności kobiet w Narodowej Demokracji (1893–1939)...*, pp. 158–159.

³³ Kirkor-Kiedroniowa, Z. (1988). *Wspomnienia, Cz.2, Ziemia mojego męża*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, pp. 270–272.

Women's Aid to Returning Compatriots which was joined by a number of women's organisations from Warsaw and across the country. A very interesting action undertaken by the NOK was the collection of gold and silver for the currency reform. With the slogan "*a penny each but all*", they collected considerable funds for this purpose between 1920 and 1922.³⁴

On the economic front, they promoted entrepreneurship and own production, advocating a reduction in the imports of foreign goods (one of the important initiatives of the organisation was the campaign 'swój do swego po swoje' (roughly 'get your own [goods] from your own [folks]') aimed at encouraging the purchase of Polish products).³⁵ In connection with the economic crisis, the Supreme Council of the NOK called on women in 1925 to save money, buy Polish products and contribute to victims of unemployment. NOK members opened various types of business establishments, such as credit and insurance funds, social job centres, workshops for women, sewing rooms, quilt-making facilities, toy factories, shops, and stalls (they organised market stall sales of postcards and devotional items).³⁶

With regard to its social, welfare and cultural activities, the NOK ran public institutions, such as crèches and pre-schools (13 in 1929), orphanages (the first one in 1923; 21 in 1929), dormitories, mother and child care "*stations*", day care centres (in 1929 the NOK ran about 55 day care centres in the country), tea-rooms, and holiday trips.³⁷ The members of the organisation worked in shelters and orphanages and took care of single mothers and the unemployed, setting up cheap kitchens and launched local and nationwide actions to alleviate malnutrition among children (the "*bread to hungry children*" campaign). They were involved in charity work, such as helping the homeless and collecting clothes. Material aid for the poorest people involved buying clothes and providing financial aid for single women to buy food, firewood for the winter or to pay the rent. They organised help with housekeeping and childcare. They were involved in combating alcoholism, prostitution and human trafficking.³⁸

In terms of education and upbringing, they carried out "*civic awareness*" and "*educational*" work in the national Catholic spirit.³⁹ They did this by means

³⁴ Chojnowski, A. (2000). *Aktywność kobiet w życiu politycznym...*, p. 43; Also: Maj, E. (2016). *Wzorce aktywności kobiet w Narodowej Demokracji (1893–1939)...*, p. 167; Skibiński, P. (2018). *Polska 1918...*, p. 446.

³⁵ Mysiakowska-Muszyńska, J. (2015). 'W imię Boga i Ojczyzny!' *Działalność społeczno-polityczna Narodowej Organizacji Kobiet...*, p. 44.

³⁶ Dufurat, J. (2011). *Narodowa Organizacja Kobiet i Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet...*, p. 580.

³⁷ Mysiakowska-Muszyńska, J. (2015). 'W imię Boga i Ojczyzny!' *Działalność społeczno-polityczna Narodowej Organizacji Kobiet...*, p. 42.

³⁸ Chojnowski, A. (2000). *Aktywność kobiet w życiu politycznym...*, p. 43.

³⁹ Łozowska-Marcinkowska, K. (2010). *Sprawy niewieście. Problematyka czasopism kobiecych Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, p. 38.

of traditional forms, such as courses, lectures and talks on current social, political and religious topics as well as on Polish history.

In addition, the activists organised discussion evenings, meetings, commemorative meetings, Christmas wafer sharing events, rallies and street fundraising, as well as lectures popularising knowledge on such topics as entrepreneurship, hygiene and labour law among a wide range of women. The activists organised reading rooms and mobile libraries to promote reading.⁴⁰ They ran practical courses for women, e.g. in cooking, sewing and embroidery.

The activities of the organisation in a local scale were divided into individual sections and branches. An excellent example is the thriving branch of the NOK in Lodz with a large membership. It had numerous sections dealing with broadly defined assistance to the needy. Among other things, The Lecture Sections organised talks and meetings to educate and raise awareness among women on matters of hygiene, religion, health, history and politics. The section "*Let us Save the Children*" was tasked with rescuing abandoned infants and caring for children up to the age of three. Furthermore, the section provided mothers with food and clothing sewn by NOK members, fish oil for children, free tickets to public bath for women and their families; it also paid for baptisms and organised "*Christmas for children*" events. Similar activities were carried out by the "*Mothers Section*" providing material assistance to women in the form of rent subsidies, and also provided access to nursing care. An important section was made up of home guardians. Members of this section took care of ladies in need of help and searched for jobs and lodgings for them, and also provided them with material and spiritual support.⁴¹

Conclusion

The NOK was a Catholic organisation that firmly embraced Christian morality and was devoted to building private and public space in accordance with the teaching of the Catholic Church and in line with love for Poland. It set itself the goal of serving God and the Nation. It promoted the model of traditional education for females and the family. Thanks to this, it enjoyed great popularity in the society of the Second Republic.

In the restored independent state, women wanted to be ladies, loving and resourceful wives, caring and responsible mothers, and guardians of the family, home and state, defenders of national and Christian values... and in the vast majority they actually were.

However, the conservative views of the members of the NOK on women's upbringing, their roles as wives and mothers, and the family model are currently

⁴⁰ Mysiakowska-Muszyńska, J. (2015). 'W imię Boga i Ojczyzny!' Działalność społeczno-polityczna Narodowej Organizacji Kobiet..., pp. 42–43.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 42–43; Also: *Dziesięciolecie Pracy Narodowej Organizacji Kobiet w Łodzi*.

highly debatable and increasingly less serve as the foundation for social and educational practices regarding women and family life.

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