

German and Polish women in municipal social policy of Posen at the turn of the 20th century

Since the second half of the 19th century Prussian cities reorganised municipal help for those in need to improve it and reduce the growing expenditure. Those changes received the support from liberal social reformers who wanted to deal with the so-called social issue using prevention, education and academic methods. These actions are believed to be the second pillar of the German welfare state alongside insurance laws. Since workers had voting rights in Reichstag elections, their welfare became a political matter at the end of the 19th century. It was due to the fact that hard living conditions increased their support for social democrats, which in the eyes of the elites was a threat to the existing social and political order. Therefore facilitating social policy became a key topic of the public debate. Such a vital issue it was that in the 1890s social reformers decided to break the traditional gender order and to support the inclusion of bourgeois women in the structures of the municipal administration responsible for carrying out municipal welfare tasks. They were convinced that the roots of poverty lied at malfunctioning households and women were supposed to be more competent in finding the true causes of it. However, to fulfil new tasks women were required to have specialist pre-training in social work. Early courses in social work for women were then launched by female activists of German moderate bourgeois women's movement. At the turn of the 20th century social work became the core of their program of emancipation. Women - whom as it was believed the nature called to be mothers - were to take care of the family as well as the entire local residential community. They also should fulfil various social tasks equally with men. In those times social work professions were believed to be a natural area of professional activity for bourgeois women. Posen was one of only a few cities under Prussian partition that at the end of the 19th century allowed women to participate in local social policy including activities aimed at easing social differences among the residents from the lowest social classes and providing them with equal opportunities and insurance against loss of income.

The objective of this project is to analyse that form of women's activity in Posen as an area of activity of both Polish and German women and to address the question if social work became a field of cooperation or rather national rivalry. This research will therefore adopt a two-perspective approach. The first is to take a transnational, 'bird's eye' view to establish the circumstances of cooperation between municipal authorities and bourgeois women and to point out the factors that shaped the form and scope of engagement in the local welfare system. In the centre of this approach stands social work as both an emancipation project and the space for transnational and interfaith cooperation of women. The other perspective is to take a national, 'grassroots' approach. This involves studying Polish and German interpretations of social work as an activity appropriate for females, that is tasks traditionally perceived to be female ones, and its application in the conflict between Poland and Germany as a tool to either denationalise or strengthen the national spirit among poor Polish families. The policy of Germanisation of Polish population living under the Prussian partition tightened at the turn of the 20th century Therefore the research will also attempt to verify the hypothesis that Polish women initiated collaboration with German women to embrace their legacy in social policy and compete with them more effectively in municipal social policy.

The research as defined above will cover social policy of Posen at the turn of the 20th century, that is from the inclusion of women in 1890s up to the year 1914. This issue has so far attracted no attention among researchers and there is practically no mention of it in such sources as memoirs or opinion articles. However, it can be found in archival sources, also those covering German bourgeois women's movement. The project is therefore innovative. Its core significance lies in presenting local social policy as a form of limited civic participation, empowering Polish women and giving them a sense of agency in the public sphere, unknown to their countrywomen from the Kingdom of Poland and Galicia. The project also shows local social policy as an area of cooperation between Polish and German women and as such it opposes the thesis that a cooperation of this kind was impossible while Poles and Germans were involved in a national conflict.