

Małgorzata Dajnowicz

University of Białystok

Institute of History and Political Sciences

Uniwersytecki Square 1, Białystok 15-420, Poland

E-mail: malgorzadajnowicz@gmail.com

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POLISH WRITERS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON WOMEN'S PUBLIC ACTIVITY: A CASE STUDY OF JÓZEFA KISIELNICKA AND ELIZA ORZESZKOWA

Józefa Kisielnicka (1865–1941) created a new model of a woman in the society, a woman that is actively involved in the public life and concentrates on the charity work and educational needs of the people in their close environment. Her attitude towards women's involvement in the public life was greatly appreciated by both men and women, especially among the gentry class. In her literary works (published, e.g., in "Warsaw Courier" and "Daily Courier"), she depicted women's everyday life. The general image of her characters was very negative.

Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910) can be described as a great activist in initiating and developing the idea of gender issues, both in her written works and everyday life duties. Her political views, social involvement, and literary achievements were widely recognized among women representing liberal political views. Her numerous works (for example, "A Few Words about Women") related to the place of the women in the society and the issues of gender equality. Eliza Orzeszkowa considered the cultural and social conditions, which influenced the possibilities of women in their pursuit of equality.

The two women writers Józefa Kisielnicka and Eliza Orzeszkowa set a new pattern of initiating and shaping the public involvement of women in the northeastern province of Poland.

KEY WORDS: Polish writers, women's public life, gender equality, northeastern province of Poland.

The two mentioned writers, Józefa Kisielnicka and Eliza Orzeszkowa, were connected with the northeastern part of Poland, which at the turn of the 19th century constituted the northeastern part of the Kingdom of Poland, and, as such, was politically under the dominance of the tsarist Russia. The northeastern part of the Polish territories can be characterized as a province of rough civilizational backwardness, stretching between the Warsaw and Vilnius districts, but excluded from the civic impact of these metropolises. It was a truly multi-

cultural region where people of different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds lived and cooperated. The most numerous ethnic minority were Jews, who inhabited mainly towns and accounted up to 50% of the urban population. Other minorities included Russians, who generally occupied clerical positions and were responsible for fulfilling legislative acts, and Lithuanians, who inhabited mostly the rural areas alongside the Polish-Lithuanian border. The peripheral location of the province and its civilizational backwardness were the crucial

factors initiating and shaping the pattern of the public activity of women as well as influencing the scope and the forms of the possible public activity among women.

Józefa Kisielnicka and Eliza Orzeszkowa, due to their authority, written works, and involvement in public life, had a great influence in shaping the pattern of the public activity of the women inhabiting those territories. The only acceptable pattern of women's public involvement was to be held within the frame of the general role model of a woman in the society. One of the most important factors in spreading and accepting the gender issues was the activity of the political parties dominating in a specific area and their attitude towards social and gender issues. In the northeastern territories of Poland, the most acclaimed political parties were those with national – Catholic programmes; thus, imposing the traditional model of the women in society. It combined household chores and raising children with supporting the husband in all the spheres of his professional and social life and, if the work was to be done, the only acceptable sphere for women was charity work. The liberal political parties and their programmes gained a lot of support in the bigger towns and cities. The liberal parties served as a leader in discussion on women's rights and gender equality and, far more than the national – Catholic wing, they supported women in their aspirations and involvement in the public initiatives.

From the end of the 19th century, women started to develop different forms of public activity and implement them in the frames of public life. Until that time, the spheres of women's dominance were the local church and state-run charity associations, but women were becoming involved in educational and national issues. This pattern of devel-

oping public awareness and involvement was observed by the members of the gentry inhabiting the rural areas as well as the representatives of the intelligentsia residing in the urban areas. It is worth emphasizing that at the turn of the 19th century the public awareness and involvement concerned only a small percentage of women, namely women's elites. A vast majority of women was preoccupied with running household chores and raising children. Public activity was mostly seen as an additional form of social engagement.

Józefa Kisielnicka (1865–1941) worked as a teacher for wealthy families of the Polish gentry from her early years. She depicted women's everyday life in her literary works. The general image of her characters was very negative. The women were portrayed as petty creatures having interest merely in social entertainment and without any serious or valuable aspirations. She relied on French novelists and women writers in her writing. Józefa Kisielnicka treated writing as a type of intellectual entertainment in her free time. Her writing debut was in 1888, which was issued in *Warsaw Courier* (*Kurier Warszawski*). She had several works published including: *Over the Ocean* (1891), *Nina* (1903), and *Irony of Life* (1904). Her works evoked a wide interest in her times. They were very popular and inspiring for the local unknown rural female writers. The key to her popularity was a good writing technique and the knowledge of current trends among the readers of the period. The female heroines of Kisielnicka's novels affirmed their femininity. Her works were classified between the positivist and modernist concepts of the period. She was a writer of popular novels. This genre was very popular among the women deriving from the provincial rural elites, from which

she herself descended. Józefa Kisielnicka played a role in the promotion of fashion for 'confession prose'. She wrote a stylized intimate diary. After 15 years, she stopped writing and rarely published in *The Polish Press* (i.e., in *The Polish Day*) (Krukowska 2010: 14–15, 227–229).

Kisielnicka's novel *Pages from the Life of Women* is a memoir of an aristocrat Nina who is staying in Egypt. The novel presents Nina's experiences concerning her home life and the model of female education. Nina lives among aristocrats; she is surrounded with lavishness, and her leisure time is spent on the entertainment. However, her life is decided upon by others. She remains subordinate and submissive to the surrounding people. Her conduct derives from her upbringing and education (Kisielnicka 1890: 31–33). Kisielnicka's popularity is strengthened by *Nebula* (1894), in which the heroine is a young woman who matures to the role of a mother and a wife only after her child is born. The heroine is a tragic character who tries to base her marital relationships on honesty and partnership. She tells her husband about her internal quandaries and her love from the time before her marriage. She is, however, rejected by her husband and soon dies. Kisielnicka's *Nina* also depicts a tragic model of a woman. It is a novel-diary, in which the protagonist puts her thoughts, feelings, and desires in writing (Borkowska et al. 2000: 78–78). Kisielnicka's works gave emphasis to the subordinate role of a woman and her traditional place in the society. Her novels attempted to create a psychological portrait of a woman.

She was dedicated to the countryside, and she represented female members of the Polish gentry both in her written works and in social activity. Józefa Kisielnicka is considered to be a representative of the

Polish gentry elite. She was also actively involved in running the household, bringing up her children, and taking care of her estate near the town of Lomza (Polish Biographical Dictionary 1966–1967: 499–500). She serves as a role model for the perfect wife, mother, landlady, and, at the same time, a local social leader and the initiator of the local public life. The books describing her life and achievements present the range of her involvement in public initiatives and her devotion to the area where she came from in a very detailed way:

...she works on developing literacy in the region organizing libraries in villages, she supports and supervises the two instructors, the graduates of the teachers faculty in Żyrdów, she is the founder of many schools across the Kurpie Region and thanks to her work and devotion, a house for young artists in Korzeniste was opened (Lasocka 1967: 44–45).

It should also be noted that Józefa Kisielnicka popularized her social views, including her outlook on the place of women in society, in *Kurier Warszawski*. Moreover, the newspaper printed her acknowledged novel *Pages From the Life of Women*, which had won the newspaper's award (Lasocka 1967: 43).

From the above mentioned description of exemplary activities of Kisielnicka, one can learn about the essential public activities typical of landladies living in the northeastern province of Poland. The activities were accepted as well as financially supported by the landowners, husbands, and guardians of these women. As Zofia Jabłońska accurately points out in her description of the families, a much greater individualism of activities can be observed among the women belonging to the intelligentsia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Obviously, these

activities became more or less popular with the society depending on the attachment to tradition as well as on the principles and customs linked with the responsibilities of the women in a given family. Notably, the majority of the intelligentsia came from the gentry, which resulted in the adoption of the behavioural patterns of the landowners in urban families. Thereby, the women from the intelligentsia as well as landladies showed a particular stability in the attachment to the family responsibilities, rules of running the household, and raising children (Lasocka 1967: 56–68).

Certainly, many obstacles in the initiation and implementation of the tasks related to women's public life originated from their domestic responsibilities. This was especially true for the women representing landowning communities. The memoirs of Józefa Kisielnicka often report on the variety of women's everyday activities in a rural environment:

I got up at half past seven ... Before I went downstairs, I received a few unpleasant news items. Meanwhile, we ate breakfast preceded by a common prayer ... I plan the errands for Lomza, mainly to the drug store. Both of my dear ones leave, and I continue running to and fro doing my things... So the pantry ... then dairy. After that, the inspection of milk ... I distribute butter, milk and cream in the kitchen. Then the instruction of the keeper, and a round with the governor to the foremen of builders... Then the consultation over the nursery and off to the garden to talk over a few matters with the gardener. Next, writing down the household accounts and their comparison. Lunch, then letters, correspondence connected with business dealings (Józefa Kisielnicka 1890: 6).

The influence of the family and local environment of Kisielnicka, in which she

spent her life, should be emphasized and seen as the factor shaping her own views on the role of the women. The majority of northeastern provincial landladies expressed conservative views on the place of the women in the society and their participation in the public life sphere. As a representative of the landowning female elite, she was perfectly aware of the wide public involvement of the women in the Polish lands and certainly of the public activity of women in the other European countries. From the role model, popularized by Józefa Kisielnicka, emerges an image of the women that are conscious of their rights, but also of the women whose views on women's participation in the public life were consistent with the views presented by their husbands. Namely, one can perceive Kazimierz Kisielnicki as an example to be followed by other landowners residing in the northeastern provinces in terms of successful running of the estate as well as a model of a political activist of the national-Catholic ideology. Some activity, limited mainly to initiating charitable or educational operations and not directly related to politics, was allowed. Apart from that, the husbands and guardians accepted women's activity in the field of writing, but only in the case when the writing did not relate to the political issues or broadly defined the struggle for equal rights for women or feminist concerns in any way (Dajnowicz 2009: 125–138).

Józefa Kisielnicka was one of the most active landladies in terms of the involvement of women in the public life in the northeastern provinces. Undoubtedly, her interest in the so-called women's issue was arisen by the writings of the recognized novelist Narcyza Żmichowska. Żmichowska was a children's teacher, a governess in

the house of the Kisielnicy in the years 1841–1843. According to many reports, Narcyza Żmichowska felt the atmosphere of devotion to patriotic values as well as the positive attitude to the literature reading in the house of the Kisielnickis (Narcyza Żmichowska, Julia Baranowska 1961: 154). Józefa Kisielnicka followed the footsteps of Narcyza Żmichowska and later addressed one of the prominent capital newspapers in order to cooperate and have her works published (Goik 2010: 264).

It was in the period after the January Uprising (1863–1864), when the social and charitable initiatives began to be organized by women from the elite, thanks to the greater legislation possibilities of initiating Polish social life. A significant activity in terms of more common public initiatives from the women and their public appearances in the fight for equal rights can be observed in the Polish territories in the period after 1905. Then, and to a much greater extent than in the late nineteenth century, the Polish newspapers, including the ones with women's contribution, were established as well as a variety of community organizations exclusively for women were set up. It was associated with the introduction of more liberal legislation concerning the development of the social life in the Russian partition after 1905.

Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910) married Piotr Orzeszko at a young age. She was devoted to social work from the first years of their marriage. She was in charge of rural schools and also travelled to Warsaw on several occasions where she became interested in the problems of the Jewish assimilation in the Polish community. After the January Uprising, Orzeszkowa became engaged in helping the insurgents. Her marriage to Piotr Orzeszko was miserable. In 1869,

after many years of effort on Eliza's part, the annulment was granted. Eliza Orzeszkowa was a known Polish writer whose works were translated into many foreign languages. She devoted a lot of space to the descriptions of the family, social groups, and female issues. In her early writings, such as, *Last Love* (1868), *In the Province* (1870), *In a Cage* (1870), *Wacława's Diary* (1871), or *Martha* (1873), she presented her attitude towards love. She recommended a practical approach to marriage. She encouraged women to self-improvement and rational perception of social processes in these works.

Eliza Orzeszkowa was an outstanding writer of late 19th century realist literature aiming at the modernization of Polish spiritual life. In Orzeszkowa's novels, the positivist program appears in the descriptions of the family and social circles, particularly in such works as *Last Love*, *In the Province*, *Martha*. She advises the reader emotional self-restraint, sensibility, and practical attitude towards marriage in her writings. The writer refers to patriotism in the series of novels *From Various Circles* (1879–1882), and she describes the disappearing social bonds within society in *On the Nemen* (1888). Orzeszkowa presents the relationship of a peasant with an urban girl in her novel *Churl* (1888). She illustrates female morality in her novels *Two Poles* (1893) and *Australian* (1896). Orzeszkowa shows women as the heroines of Polish identity. Her outlook on emancipation is standardized with the epoch she lived in (Borkowska *et al.* 2000: 71–75). In her works, she emphasized that it was not the men who were the enemies of women, but the common belief, displayed by the women themselves too, in the dependence of women on men (Jankowski 1988: 133).

One of her best-known novels about emancipation, female education, and upbringing was the treatise *A Few Words about Women* (1873) in which she wrote:

Not from imaginary male tyranny; not from saint like and bringing happiness duties of everyday life; not from decency and simplicity, but from physical weakness, more imposed than taken from nature; from the lack of moral strength to live an independent and logical life; from the curse of eternal slavery and angelhood; from being dependent on livelihood, from constant closing them opportunities for serious and useful work, women are and should emancipate from (Orzeszkowa 1873: 8).

She clearly promoted the traditional emancipation movement in her writing. The issues concerning the role of the women in the society and their equality played an important role in Eliza Orzeszkowa's writings. She concentrated on the possibility of introducing the equality of women in the Polish and European reality as well as in the other countries all over the world. Eliza Orzeszkowa considered the cultural and social conditions, which influenced the possibilities of the women in their pursuit of equality. She also emphasized the importance of social circles in which women functioned and the role of men in their pursuits. Eliza Orzeszkowa was writing about the emancipation of women when the issues were widely discussed in various Polish and European social circles (Dajnowicz 2014: 21–23).

Eliza Orzeszkowa, in comparison to Józefa Kisielnicka, presented far more liberal views on issues connected with women, their position in society and involvement in public life. At the turn of the 19th century, she lived in Grodno, a bordering city of the north-eastern part of the

Polish province, and her literary activity and output drew a lot of attention from the liberal circles of the Polish intelligentsia inhabiting important towns and cities in this region. One of these towns was the town of Suwalki, located between Lomza (the town of the writer Józefa Kisielnicka) and the city of Vilnius, which was often compared to Warsaw. In Vilnius, social, cultural, and educational initiatives were launched and developed.

In recognition of Eliza Orzeszkowa's outstanding achievements, the intellectual circles of the Suwalki intelligentsia founded a committee to support the Institute of Eliza Orzeszkowa. Under her influence, many educated women, especially those representing liberal political views, became involved in the public and social initiatives and set up an organization called Women's Equality Association. The main aim of this organization was to enable and facilitate the women's public activity and their involvement in important social and political issues. Eliza Orzeszkowa was recognized as the main founder of this institution and was awarded with the title of "the leader on the way to gender equality" (Instytut Orzeszkowej 1906: 3).

The most dominant view concerning women's issues was that the traditional role of a woman in the society should be sustained. It was common not only among the gentry class, but also typical for many representatives of the intelligentsia class. In these circumstances, the progressive group of women in Suwalki found it necessary to popularize the idea of gender equality in the society. Anna Staniszevska, a member of the Suwalki intelligentsia class, was one of the women leaders who spread the idea of gender equality. She organized a series of lectures on gender issues for the whole

community of the town. Her political and social views were shaped under the influence of her husband, who popularized liberal ideas on women's issues, and Eliza Orzeszkowa. Anna Staniszevska organized and led a series of educational lectures titled "A Women's Issue", published in the Weekly Newspaper in Suwalki. In her lectures, she brought up such topics as the complexity and difficulties concerning women's financial situation, the new basis and aims in girls' upbringing, the need of taking university courses and obtaining a university degree by women, the importance of professional equality. She started the dispute on the issue of marriage, which was considered by many as the only possible way ensuring happiness, satisfaction, and sense of a woman's life. She referred to the method of upbringing girls in the Polish society in a very critical way, which:

...from a very early age imposes on girls obedience and subjection to moral and ethical rules of social codes, and inculcates the belief that a girl is of no value, unless she is found attractive by a man. Marriage was seen as the only alternative for women, and thus, according to Anna Staniszevska, deprived a woman of her personal desires, ambitions and values (*Kwestia kobieca* 1907: 4).

A very important issue raised by Anna Staniszevska was the issue of women's occupational discrimination. In the opinions presented by Anna Staniszevska and Eliza Orzeszkowa, there was a great convergence concerning the institution of marriage and the job equality. Therefore, one can draw a conclusion that Eliza Orzeszkowa's views and literary output had a great impact on shaping and developing the opinions of Anna Staniszevska. While writing about the situation of Polish women, Orzeszkowa stated that:

...the status of women in both family and society is low and unsatisfactory and ignores women's importance. A man has an unlimited power and control over a woman and holds the privileges of being her judge and master. By law, a woman is totally subject to and dependent on her husband (Orzeszkowa 1891–1903: 5–81).

According to Eliza Orzeszkowa, this situation was consistent with the existing model of a woman in the society, which imposed on women the role of a wife and a mother, while for men the area of dominance was the public and political sphere. In Orzeszkowa's opinion, the practical realization of the idea of gender equality could only be achieved by women's occupational activity and development, as it was the case in several European countries, e.g., Great Britain or Belgium. What connects the two women activists is that they both stressed the fact that education can bring more benefits than legal regulations in equalizing gender rights (Orzeszkowa 1891–1903: 81–107).

The female activists of the Suwalki intelligentsia also referred to and fought against the cases of legal discrimination against women. The example to follow was the view of Eliza Orzeszkowa who, in her written works, outlined numerous aspects of gender inequalities in many countries of Europe (Orzeszkowa 1891–1903: 96–106). A number of newspapers gave detailed examples of law infringement against women, and this would usually lead to the heated discussions forcing the need to introduce certain legal regulations (*Kwestia kobieca* 1907: 4). As it can be noticed, the press played a significant role. It was the public arena for discussing new legislative projects and legal solutions to overcome the

problems connected with gender inequalities (Ustawa o rozszerzeniu praw kobiet 1914: 5).

Women's aspirations to find a gender association in Suwalki did not gain wide acceptance. Even some members of the local intelligentsia did not support the idea. However, in 1908 in Suwalki, due to women's great work and involvement, the Association for Gender Equality was established. Anna Staniszevska became the leader of the Association, and the members recruited mostly from the intellectual circles of Suwalki. The main aim of this association was to stimulate and develop women's involvement not only in the field of charity or education, but mostly in the sphere of public life and occupational competence. A careful consideration was given to the political issues and women's active participation in politics (*Ze spraw stowarzyszeń* 1908: 8–9).

In 1908, in the local *Suwalki Weekly* journal, an article titled "Do Women Need Political Rights?" was published. The author, writing under the pseudonym of N.Z., claimed that the issue of women's involvement in public and, as a consequence, political life cannot be omitted in a wider public discourse. He predicted that the statute of women in Poland would be changing due to the many factors, not only local ones, but also as a result of social changes taking place in Europe and around the world. He also claimed that women deserve to be active members of politics because of their hard work and commitment to various important spheres of life (*Z. N* 1908: 3–5). It seems that the women activists in Suwalki, under the influence of Anna Staniszevska and thanks to the support of Eliza Orzeszkowa, had a chance to see the social and gender changes taking place in Western Europe (Orzeszkowa 1891–1903: 277–280).

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