



DOI: 10.18427/iri-2016-0096

The Status of Women in Reading Circles in the 1940-ies

Ilona SZÓRÓ

Hungarian Library Supply Ltd., Budapest, Hungary

In the first half of the 20th century, at the large agrarian territories, especially in smaller towns, villages, and on the ranch areas, in the Hungarian peasant society that had basically traditional structure and mentality, it was first of all the family that provided framework for women's life and activities. There were very rare opportunities for girls and women to appear individually and not within the family, to act publicly, to tell their individual opinions or undertake public functions. Men and women generally moved within separate spheres; different rules and social standards applied to them. Women's activities were usually connected to things directly affecting the family. The traditional approach, and working all day long on the ranch and in the household exacerbated education, further education, and undertaking public functions for women. The tight community arena of small villages and ranch areas, their poor cultural offer a priori provided little opportunity for public appearance, high standard entertainment, and individual appearance, independently from the family. In addition to family gatherings, going to the neighbours, working bee, and visiting state or church organised events, first of all local social associations provided opportunities for women to live a community life (Csalog, 1980:352-353; Jávör, 1998:155-157).

The associations of the agrarian society, first of all the reading circles offered a relatively broad scale of opportunities for community activities, participating in cultural programs, and general and economic education, as well as public appearances. In the associations, women could acquire knowledge and capabilities that enabled them to collect information on the society, to share their opinion publicly, to enforce their citizens' rights, and to cope with issues on their own in different areas of life. In the well-known milieu of associations, they could feel confident and being at home. In this way, they could undertake activities representing new challenges for them as compared to family chores much easier (Piróth, 1999:75-76; Olasz, 2011:144-146).

In the first half of the century, mostly men were the members of reading circles. Women regularly only participated at the organisation's programs as members of the family, "guests" or "sponsoring members". This limitation basically came from the patriarchal approach of the peasants' society, and from a dual attitude characterising the relationship between the sexes, that while women's position and role were appreciated

much more at home, at the farm and in private communication, there was men dominance in front of the public in accordance with traditional customs. In addition to traditional thinking, the fact that before World War II women were in a disadvantageous position even under law in enforcing citizens' rights (exercising the right to vote, learning, getting a job) played a role (Jávor, Molnár, Szabó & Sárkány, 2000:996).

In the case of most of the associations, the deed itself did not prohibit to enrol women. In practice, however, women and young people under the age of 24 generally got limited opportunities to participate. The lack of full membership deprived them from the right to vote and having a post. But they could interfere in the association's life, and activities. They could collaborate in the events, use the association's services and the library and participate at various cultural programs. Up to World War II, it was very rare that a woman was a full member. Women's and girls' social prestige was determined by their family circumstances and by the position the father or the husband took in the community. In this way, everybody regarded it natural that women mostly took part in the association's life as a member of the family. The few women who enrolled as individual members were widows who in a certain sense played the "role of a man", who had their own estates, and other role players of rural society having their respective income (teacher, shopkeeper, post-woman) (Beck, 1985:260-262).

One part of reading circles set up separate women groups in order to expand women's opportunities. They comprised part of the association, but had their own management and organised their own programs. The head of the women's group was regularly the wife of the association's president; so the dependent relationship had simultaneously organisational and personal character. Thanks to the separate group, however, women could also submit proposals and initiatives, express their opinions in connection with the community's affairs, and decide about their tasks. At the association's general meetings, however, even in this period, women did not have respective right to vote. For girls between the ages of 16-24, there was another opportunity. At several places, under the auspices of reading circles, youth groups were set up. The group had high independence, could elect its own management, and could compile its program freely. The reading circle supervised the youth group's activity through an appointed member of the management. At the same time, the youth president was also always invited to the reading circle's management meetings. In case of youth groups, coeducation was natural. Girls could become members under the same conditions as boys (Gregus, 1997:68-69; Beck, 1985:260-262).

Social changes and the broad democratisation process that followed World War II had immense impact on the agrarian society, too. As compared to the former situation, women's economic and public role, mobility, social and cultural activity significantly improved. The new laws granted equal rights to them in each field of life, however, in practice, the old approach was being replaced only slowly and controversially. Under the modified conditions, the number of women full members slowly

increased in the reading circles. The members of the elder generation rarely used this opportunity; former habits and the traditional approach were natural for them. However, younger age groups already considered full membership much more important. The ratio of women in reading circles fluctuated only around 20% even at the end of 1940-ies. It demonstrated quite well that there was a change and the role of women got expanded that girls and women more and more frequently were elected to the associations' management. No woman was elected to be a reading circle president, but women got the post of vice-president or any other managerial post (notary, librarian) already at several associations (Huszka, 1986:239; Stifnerné Szenti, 2000:37).

Within the framework of the agrarian associations, there was a relatively broad scale offered to women for undertaking social functions. Reading circles had a considerable range of social activities. They often joined the local or country-wide donation collecting charity events. During the war, they prepared packages for the soldiers on the front and supported war-widows, orphans, and disabled. After the war, they played an important role in receiving soldiers returning from captivity and supplying them with food and clothes. As their possibilities allowed, they got involved in programs supporting poor children, and families with several children. A lot of associations sponsored nearby schools, foster-homes, orphanages, village public kitchens or other social institutions with donations, benefits in kind or by offering work to them. Women played a decisive role in organising it, in preparing and managing charity events, and fulfilling the tasks related to caring about the poor and elderly people, and school patronage (Stifnerné Szenti, 2000:40).

From the point of view of educating the inhabitants of agrarian territories, the associations' libraries had a very significant role, because they home-delivered culture to rural people who were busy with agricultural work the whole day. Through raising demand for books and reading, preserving reading skills, and forming the readers' taste, the associations fundamentally contributed to the process that made the agrarian society's educational habits more open and the standard of general and professional education improve. In smaller villages or ranch areas, it often happened that reading circles had the largest (sometimes the single) library. Without the associations, the inhabitants of the large agrarian territories, especially the immovable women would get into a cultural vacuum position (Jóbbáné Szabó, 1999:469).

Most of the books were generally borrowed during the winter months, when there was less work on the ranch and around the house and there remained some time for reading. In this field, men had a more favourable situation, as in the evenings, when they had finished work on the ranch; they could take the books in their hands. The tasks of women, finishing with the children and the household practically ended, when everybody had gone to sleep. There were some types of books that were mainly read by men. These types included publications related to history, public life topics, and farming or books dealing with technology, and technical questions. Women more often read romantic novels from the era's popular

writers, publications concerning household activities, and children's books, fairy tales thanks to their children. There was no sharp border, however; people on the ranches and in the villages, when they had time, read all kinds of books regardless of their age and sex (Fülöp, 1989:244-247).

Reading circles had a serious function in the fields of popularising information and adult education. In small rural towns and villages, they were the most essential bases of enhancing general and economic knowledge. In the first half of the 20th century, women were in a disadvantageous position from the point of view of further education. Since girls were generally not intended to get a respective money earning job, as their work was continuously need on the ranch, and in the household, after gaining a basic level education, they were rarely enrolled to higher school. For most women, the most easily attainable form of expanding knowledge was to enrol to locally organised general or professional courses. Associations offered a lot of opportunities for gathering information and studying, which were always in harmony with the interests and demands of the members and the people living in the vicinity. Information popularising presentations were frequently connected to some other events of the association. It means, the members of the family, both women, and girls could also participate on them in a relatively high number. The presentations were generally not about theoretical questions, but rather about practical topics and gave useful knowledge (Gyáni - Kövér, 2006:318-319; Juhász, 1991:48-50).

From among generic courses, there was high demand for 30-60-lesson courses that basically served for repeating primary school materials, but in a different form, adapted to the way how adult students think. The course generally took 2 evenings a week during the winter months, from 6-7 p.m. till 9-10 p.m. At that time already, women could generally also leave behind their activities around the house, so participation became possible for them, too. Although a majority of men was typical for the students here, too, this was the course type where women took part in relatively the highest ratio, approx. 40%. The 150-160-lesson generic courses aimed at extending the knowledge gained in primary school, as well as preparing for further education or accepting the post of some kind of local leader. This course type required 4 evening for 2-3 months during the winter, what took away considerable time from implementing the tasks at the ranch and in the family. Here the ratio of women remained under 30%. Participants mostly belonged to the younger generation. Middle aged women keeping a family and a household were less likely to be able to use so much time for studying, while accomplishing such a course did not change their daily tasks and social evaluation too much (Lippainé Fekete, 1986:70; Szinkovich, 1969:11).

The students of the 30-60-lesson professional courses that expanded the knowledge on an economic sector and provided modern farming and operation management materials and skills were mostly men having their own ranches. Women also enrolled to courses dealing with the topics of vegetable and fruit production, poultry growing or dairy production, although much less than men. The most significant form of training

organised by the reading circles was the "Silver Spike" Farmer Training. The 150-160-lesson courses were held based on a centrally issued curriculum. Even the corresponding course books were provided by the educational authorities. For new farmers or the ones who prepared to modernise their farm, the three-month, winter economy course, the Silver Spike Farmer Training supplied the required complex knowledge. The training covered every field of production and estate acquisition, so that students get appropriate and enough professional basics in order to start farming on their own. Despite the majority of men, the ratio of women on these courses gradually increased and by the end of 1940-ies, it reached 30-35%. The government acknowledged accomplishing this course as primary level economic qualification. Acquiring the title of "Silver Spike Farmer" was considered to represent a considerable prestige both for men and women in the rural agrarian society (Lippainé Fekete, 1986:70; Baboss, 1948:333-334).

Women participation on the 2-3-month home craft courses introduced by the associations was relatively high. The participants could directly apply the practical skills they acquired there in order to extend their income generating opportunities. Both the government and the local authorities supported these types of courses. They provided the tools and raw materials used on the courses. Mainly men enrolled to wood carving, basket-maker, broom-maker courses, while women chose mostly weaver, embroiderer or lace-worker courses. In addition to craft courses, so called house wife schools were introduced at a lot of places especially for women, where there was focus not only on the materials of tailoring, household management, cooking, vegetable and fruit conservation, but also on child nurturing (Beck, 1985:253-255).

At small villages and in the area of ranches, for the local population the reading circles represented the most important opportunity for community education and high level entertainment. Thanks to the associations, even people living in the agrarian territories could relatively regularly take part at theatrical performances, show evenings, folk music and folk dance performances. There was a vivid amateur art activity going on in the associations. Most of the reading circles held relatively regularly theatrical performances. At a lot of places, choirs, dance groups, and bands were established. Creating such a production mobilised not only the members of the association, but also the family members. At the performances, women and girls could also play roles. Those who did not take part in the production, made their contribution to the management of the events by organisation, and creating the technical conditions. The scenery, the costumes, and the accessories were prepared by joint work (Simándi, 1947:750; Ambrus, 2005:108).

The amateur artistic activities had great significance in extending the personal and community skills of the participants of the events, as well as in developing their creativity, focusing attention, problem solving thinking, and readiness for co-operation. The experiences gained through the performances, regardless of the various standards of productions, strengthened the demand for culture, and helped to acquire civil culture of

behaviour. All this had considerable impact on other areas of life, the economic activity, and from the point of view of citizens' activity. This cultural activity had serious community forming effect. The associations' events played an important role in uniting and mobilising the population. Joint action, taking sacrifices, success experienced jointly strengthened social relationships, and the community's identity. The important function of cultural events was indicated by the fact that the associations regularly organised show evenings even during the years of war, under economic difficulties, authority restrictions, and military conscriptions (Bárdos, 2001:90-91).

In the middle of the 20th century, cinema was the most favourable form of spending free time and entertainment. The cultural offer expanding through moving pictures and the weekly newsreel especially meant a lot for the inhabitants of small towns and villages. It was more intensely felt by women who basically lived in an immovable way, who - in contrast with more mobile men - often did not leave their town or village. Since it would have been difficult and time consuming for a lot of people to go to town/city cinemas, agrarian associations made efforts to organise local film screening for the population living in villages and ranch areas. More well off reading circles and farmer societies bought a projector device and screened films borrowed from the towns/cities on the week-ends. Others hired the travelling movie theatre that moved around in the country to hold 1-2 screening per month in the seat of the association (Nagy, 1975:399-400).

Preserving and nurturing local traditions had an important role in the life of associations operating in small rural towns and villages. This partly meant the vivid maintenance of objective culture, partly of folkways. Bigger circle events, balls, gala dinners were linked to special days of the year. In addition to the Carnival, Easter, and Pentecost, harvest and vintage celebrations were included in the annual program of almost all the reading circles. However, the local community's own traditions, the town's or village's or the association's historical anniversaries, commemoration on the people who died in the war, and the specific customs characteristic of the region got at least the same big emphasis. In maintaining the tradition inherited from generation to generation, women who highly contributed to the preservation of community customs by educating small children, by passing on the culture of dressing, eating and behaving got an important role (Gregus, 1997:68-69; Beck, 1985:248).

Reading circles generally held 8-10 bigger events, commemorations, gala dinners, and balls a year. At the events, women mainly appeared in the traditional role of a housewife characteristic of family life. It was typical even in the associations' life and on their programs that they followed the traditional peasant approach: while men generally dealt with more dominant, attractive tasks (organisation, control, speech), women rather did the background work (preparation of the events, receiving the quests, offering the dishes). These activities - done otherwise at home, too, - got much greater significance on such events. The associations' evaluation in the eyes of the invited guests, village or county leaders, the

representatives of the economic and cultural institutions, and the inhabitants of the vicinity was highly influenced by this women work, too. The news about a successful event, an attention grabbing program, warm hospitality, and good atmosphere spread widely, and considerably enhanced the reading circle's prestige (Márkus, 1996:169; Piróth, 1999:80-81).

The associations' programs expanded the horizon of making friends and mating that would otherwise be narrowed to the scope of friends and neighbours. The events provided good opportunity for making new contacts to young people living in a more closed, rural, ranch environment. During the programs, young people not only entertained themselves, but also learnt a kind of civil etiquette, and civilised behaviour. In order to ensure this, several reading circles organised folk dance or ballroom dance courses, where participants could get to know not only the basics of the dances, but also acquired certain politeness forms, and the accepted norms of social communication. At a lot of places only young people who had already taken part at such dance courses were accepted warmly at balls organised by the associations (Csalog, 1980:353; Kovalcsik, 2003:585-594).

Until the middle of the 20th century, for women belonging to an agrarian society, there were only few opportunities for social activities, undertaking community functions, and speaking in front of wider audience. First of all, local non-governmental organisations provided chances to appear and/or speak independently out of the scope of the family and the circle of friends. Initially, women even in the reading circles had limited opportunities. However, by the 1940-ies, women joined the associations in higher and higher numbers and in more and more important scope of authority. As a result, their interest and proficiency related to the community's affairs and social functions expanded, their system of contacts became wider, and their personal and community competencies improved. For women and girls, the activity performed in the association helped them to prepare for independent farm/ranch management or get a job, to find their way in a broader social medium, and to enforce their personal interests and efforts.

References

- Ambrus, Vilmos (2005). Amatőr színjátszás Ipolyfödémesen. *Acta Ethnologica Danubiana*, (7), 95-117.
- Baboss, István (1948). Ezüst- és Aranykalászos tanfolyamok. *Új Szántás*, (6), 333-335.
- Bárdos, István (2001). *Az Esztergom-belvárosi Olvasókör és Gazdakör Egyesület története*. Esztergom: Esztergom Városi Gazdakör Egyesület.
- Beck, Zoltán (1985). Köri élet Orosháza külterületén. In Tóth, József (ed.), *Az orosházi tanyavilág átalakulása* (pp. 239-313). Orosháza: Orosháza Városi Tanács.
- Csalog, Zsolt (1980). Életforma és tudat a 20. századi magyar tanyavilágban. In Pölöskei, Ferenc, & Szabad, György (Eds.), *A magyar tanyarendszer múltja* (pp. 339-361). Budapest: Akadémiai.
- Fülöp, Géza (1989). *A könyv és könyvtári kultúra a kapitalizmus időszakában (1789-1919)*. II. kötet. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó.
- Gregus, Máté (1997). A Pusztakutasi Olvasó Egylet és Vásárhelykutas, mint tanyakörzetnek a története. In Bakk Takács, Sára (Ed.), *Hazulról haza. Székelyudvarhelyről - Székkutasra* (pp. 36-79). Székelyudvarhely: Inforpress.
- Gyáni, Gábor, & Kövér, György (2006). *Magyarország társadalomtörténete. A reformkortól a második világháborúig*. Budapest: Osiris.
- Huszka, Lajos (1986). A Szeged-Szatymazi Gazdakör története. *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve*, (1), 235-266.
- Jávor, Kata (1998). A nemi sztereotípiák továbbélése és a szocializációs modell alakulása a nemi szerepre nevelésben. In Paládi-Kovács, Attila (ed.), *Népi kultúra, népi társadalom*. XIX. kötet (pp. 155-173). Budapest: Akadémiai.
- Jávor, Kata, Molnár, Mária, Szabó, Piroska, & Sárkány, Mihály (2000). A falusi társadalom a szocializmus időszakában. In Paládi-Kovács, Attila (Ed.), *Magyar Néprajz. Társadalom*. VIII. kötet (pp. 977-1006). Budapest: Akadémiai.
- Jobbáné Szabó, Erzsébet (1999). Adalékok a szegedi és a Szeged környéki olvasókörökhöz. *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve. Studia Historica*, (2), 461-494.
- Juhász, Imre (1991). Olvasókör Hajdúszoboszlón (1892-1949). *Honismeret*, (6), 46-52.
- Kovalcsik, József (2003). *A kultúra csarnokai*. Budapest: EPL.
- Lippainé Fekete, Ilona (1986). A szabadművelődés Szegeden. *Szegedi Könyvtári Műhely*, (1-2), 57-72.
- Márkus, István (1996). *Polgárosodó parasztság*. Budapest: Dinasztia.
- Nagy, Gyula (1975). *Parasztélet a vásárhelyi pusztán*. Békéscsaba: Békés Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága.
- Olasz, Lajos (2011). Állampolgári ismeretek és készségek fejlesztése az agrártársadalom civil szervezeteiben (1945-1950). In Erdei, Gábor (Ed.), *Andragógia és közművelődés* (pp. 142-149). Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem.
- Piróth, István (1999). A nők szerepe a helyi társadalom önszerveződő folyamataiban. In Küllős, Imola (Ed.), *Hagyományos női szerepek* (pp. 75-86). Budapest: Magyar Néprajzi Társaság; Szociális és Családügyi Minisztérium.

- Simándi, Béla (1947). Tanyai olvasókörök. *Új Szántás*, (12), 750-751.
- Stifnérné Szenti, Csilla (2000). *A Sóshalmi Olvasókör története a jegyzőkönyvek tükrében 1885-1995*. Hódmezővásárhely: Norma Nyomda.
- Szinkovich, Márta (1968). A szabadművelődési korszak Baranyában. In Szinkovich, Márta (Ed.), *Baranyai helytörténetírás* (pp. 1-34). Pécs: Baranya Megyei Levéltár.