

**THE REFORMED WOMAN FROM THE LATE 19TH
CENTURY TILL THE 1930'S – THE EFFECT OF
THE HOME MISSION MOVEMENT ON THE
WOMEN'S ECCLESIASTIC ACTIVITIES**

Theses of doctoral dissertation

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I. The choice of theme, the background of the study, the research documents

Women's role in Church was not debated earlier in Hungarian specialized literature about women's history – it especially lacks analysis from a denominational aspect. In this dissertation, I tried to approach the problem from different points of view: how the women's emancipation movement – this really important program and social course in the 19-20th century – took place and developed in the very specific environment of the Reformed Church; how the case of women's emancipation was shaped between the boundaries of this old, ideologically well defined institution, bound with so many filaments to the changes of social life showed a very distinct and explicit opinion about the role of men and women in society. My research unravels the approach of the Church to different issues concerning the topics and debates about women's rights and positions, topics, which in that time were largely discussed and frequently regularized. My main questions are: what can we discover about the process of women's emancipation within the Church – a process, which was sometimes synchronized with the social changes of the time, and sometimes not, and which was motivated by the spiritual regeneration movements and especially by the home mission. What can we say about the women's possibilities to prevail within the Church or about their motivations that influenced their choices to fulfill ambitions in religious life? So, near the introduction in the women's history and gender history of the time, I explored and presented also the ecclesiastical history of the 19-20th century.

We can find a vast non-Hungarian bibliography about the relations between women and Protestantism and from the beginning of the '80-s gender researches and feminist theology affected disquisitions in the theme. The conventional biographies present only “Meritorious Women”, but from these years we can also find analysis about the effects of institutionalized religion and spiritual changes on the women's position in the Church, on the relationship between man and woman, on the judgments about women, and on the ecclesiastical woman-work. Historians, who construe the reformatory power and aspects of the Protestantism, debate often the relations between Church and modernism, between women's emancipation and feminism.

In Hungarian women's history we can hardly find books about women who were close to ecclesiastical institutions. The history of Reformed Church contains only biographies and texts referring to the development of institutes and associations. Biographies written by Sándor Szilágyi about Zsuzsanna Lorántffy and by János Bodrogi about Zsuzsanna Károlyi at the end of the 19th century have given the final form of the later writings. Biographies from the beginning of 20th century have shown women as icons and moral ideals. For example, Transylvanian episcope Béla Kenessy wrote two books in this theme (both imitations of German works) *Women's figure in the Bible* and *Women's Characteristics*. These texts reveal women as examples of virtue and models of ethic, *Women's Characteristics* presents stories about women who have an important role in the development of Protestantism.

There are only a few debates available to us about women who worked for ecclesiastical institutions: Richard Bodoki wrote about the welfare work between the two world wars; Gyula Forgács in his book entitled *Home Mission and Cura Pastoralis* and Jenő Sebestyén in *The Mentality of Reformed Women* analyze the role and importance of women in the Church. In present days, we can find also some biographies and histories of associations like the work of Eleonóra Erzsébet Géra, which gives an overview about the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Association and about the Filadelfia Welfare Work Association.

Time boundaries in this dissertation are synchronized with the important phases of the women's emancipation movement. The beginning of my quest is the 1890th: this is the date when the very first group of women latches on to home mission movement and participates noticeably in ecclesiastical public appearance. The period between the two world wars represents the end of my investigation, because the control, integration and regulation of women's work and activities inside the Church became stronger, and because in this time the form and frame of the

possibilities and opportunities which determined the women's position in the social space of the Church, unequivocally get shaped. The process of centralization within the Reformed Church also consolidated the boundaries that stipulated women's appearance and achievements in ecclesiastical institutions.

My dissertation has three parts: in the first section, I explore and analyze the discourses about feminine existence, gender's functions and women's professions, which are revealed especially in religious, reformed press products. I debate how the problem of womankind is formulated in these texts representing the public opinion of the Church, which kind of arguments are built; I concentrated my examinations on women, who are mentioned in these discourses. Systematization and definition made possible to succeed in the transformation and evolution of the women's role and attitude as appears in the public opinion and in the mind of important ecclesiastical actors who had influence on the public opinion of the time. I compare the ecclesiastical discourse about emancipation with secular debates and disputations found in the press of the time and so I brought forward the importance of this process.

When I analyze the contemporary literature about home mission, I conclude that along the importance of social actions the effect of the spiritual renewal movements, especially that of home mission, was also very important. So, I followed this path in my research trying to discover how the home mission shaped the interpretations about the role of women in Church and society, how this spiritual movement was the main power strengthening the women's role in ecclesiastical life, how it transformed their work in the Church. In this part of the dissertation, I aspire to draw a larger picture, which was very helpful in my following analyses and explanations.

In the second part of my work I present three groups of women: spouses of the ministers, deaconesses and women theologians. I discovered and examined different kind of documents referring to these three groups and used different methods in analyze but in each case the point was to discover, what sort of woman-representations was constructed between the frames of a small cluster, what possibilities of playing an important role were allowed in a specific group with specific dynamics. Reading and analyzing ecclesiastical literature and press was really helpful here and although these texts represent the opinion of different groups of people, we can discover crosstalk of unique voices sometimes and we can find – especially in the newspapers and magazines – stories told by women and representing womanly feelings and thoughts. Documents from archives and personal legacies – which were discovered when I reconstructed the history of Reformed Minister's Spouses Association and the history of the beginnings of women theologians' education – made possible for me to picture the individual problems, feelings and motivations.

In the third part of my dissertation – this contains four case studies about four women's life – I researched the personal aspects of different female role-options putting the person in the center of the analysis. I did not write biographies; moreover, validating some specific points of view, I narrowed the possibilities of reconstruction referred to these paths of life. The most important consideration was how women lived in the middle of the social and ecclesiastical transformations of that time, how the course of these transformations influenced and changed their lives, relationships, lifestyles, religious and womanly identity.

When I wrote the case studies, I realized, how incidental the documents are mostly because I hardly found, in ecclesiastical archives, individual historical records or private funds belonging to women, records, which contains letters, diaries, and which make possible to discover not only the chronological events of a life, but personal information about the writer's personality, thoughts and moral standards. The Ráday Archives keep fragments from the Olga Novák's and Póla Szász' personal records, but nothing else. So, I was constrained to discover other documents and records often hidden in private ownerships and this was a very difficult part of my work. But my persistence finally had results: I found the personal documents of Emma Dessewffy, Maria Magay and the missing records from the individual fund of Póla Szász. The

existence of this type of documents determined who was chosen to be the “heroine” of my dissertation; the marks of the past restricted the subject of the research.

II. The results of the examinations

Discovering and analyzing the discourse about women – found in the reformed press and in texts about home mission – we can draw a comprehensive picture about the opinions formulated about women’s role and work in the Church. The results of the research show that the ecclesiastical public opinion – between the boundaries formed by his own public place and unique viewpoints – in the issues of womankind and emancipation movement was moved and influenced by the same questions as the larger society: who a woman is, what can we say about relationship between a man and a woman, about women’s right to erudition, education and filling important professional positions. In the period between two world wars, the social problems were especially emphasized in public discourses and as a consequence the situation of those women who followed the modern ideas and renounced to the old, conventional attitudes was largely debated. The “new” reformed woman-ideal was represented by those women who gained strength in spirituality and religious feelings, who became strongly attached to the Reformed Church and who kept the virtue and moral rules of this Church – wherever they lived and whatever they worked.

The ecclesiastical discourse about gender, women’s rights and duties usually applied theological arguments in the speeches, the hierarchies or equalities between man and woman were interpreted in this context of biblical authority. And we can say the same things referring to the roles of women in Church or women’s employment in ecclesiastical institutes. In these questions the base of arguments was traditionally the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians where the apostle asserted that women have no right to speak in front of the community ordering them to "be silent" during the worship, namely the letter affirmed, women have no place and position in ecclesiastical public space.

Even at a first look at the home mission’s documents we can observe how important this movement in the life of the Church was. In the beginning of the 19th century West-European protestant Churches – especially that from England and Germany –already recognized not just the importance of converting the pagans to Christianity but also the relevance of inner missionary work. This was considered a very important instrument against laicization in society and also was important as a response to the social problems of the time – problems, which were considered consequences of capitalism. But home mission’s role was not just to solve some social and existential problems; at the same time, the fact itself was very important that this movement allocated a new content to women’s designation in society. Evoking the traditions and heritage of Reformation home mission strongly emphasized equality between man and woman – equality being a capital instruction of Jesus himself –, accentuated that the two genders must complete each other; this is the way how both man and woman can fulfill one’s callings in life, society and Church. To be “God’s servant” was considered the “fourth” of women’ duties and with this affirmation the obligation of women to mediate Jesus’ teaching was founded. The positive characteristics of womankind – derived especially from maternity – were utilized not just in society but also within the Church: as a consequence, women were able to show up as active participants in ecclesiastical life, in welfare work, in evangelization. When the frames and boundaries of women’s ecclesiastical work were redefined, in the publicity of Church was formed a new model of alternative public space where – thanks to the multiple presentations, press articles and books – women’s voices were heard and women’s problems were discussed.

Encouragement of women’s work was not just a specific aspect of home mission – also the movement was not a uniform phenomenon, it had different roots and origins and was differentiated in many groups and wings, collaborated with various theological orientations and

was influenced by them –, in every reformatory endeavor of the Church women’s participation was very important. Between the two world wars, female presence in ecclesiastical publicity became general and accepted. Representatives of the official Church – independent from the theological orientation they followed – was able to recognize that women’s work must be unified and heightened in efficiency within the boundaries of the Church. From 1933, women’s missionary work was integrated in the official ecclesiastical structures.

Referring to the first generation of women who participated in the home mission movement I can make the following general statements: this “pioneer” generation – women who were members of the Zsuzsanna Lorántffy Association and began their activities in this society – gain important roles because of the social status, wealth and influence of their families and achieve ruler positions through prestige. Even if their work was not a magisterial one and these women did not receive any payment, we can find some clues about the comprehension that this was a way of self-realization a possibility to profess a vocation having a stable financial existence, a wealthy and supportive family of course. This deeply influenced their lifestyle and radically modified the moral codes and ethical standards followed before. The second generation’s ecclesiastical work was shaped by the expectations of the families or by the example and precedent of the first generation; the choices made were not motivated by personal reasons but were rather a result of socialization. Later, some of these women became professional ecclesiastical workers.

In the second part of my dissertation, I studied the groups of women standing out by their ecclesiastical work, status and education. The most important question here was: what kind of female models and roles these groups have offered.

Especially between the two world wars the traditional functions of a minister’s spouse were deeply transformed by new expectations. These challenges brought to surface the problems linked to the status of a pastor’s wife. As mothers they were expected to accomplish all the duties and responsibilities of a middle-class woman and also were expected to be a perfect model of Christian woman, to be an example and to lead the women’s community. The good working order of a pastor’s wife was not just a requirement for her evaluation but her husband’s status and position was influenced by this. Her spiritual life was not a personal matter but the source of a series of duties and accountabilities; the Church expected her to organize and lead the home mission movement. In general, she was very deliberate in her behavior and conducts and also was extremely self-aware when being in touch with the members of the congregation. Girls who later became spouses of ministers were prepared to fulfill the traditional role of women in family and were educated – at home or in the school – in this spirit of conventions. Later, becoming wives, they realized that this new role is more complex, the broader and the closer entourage require a more compound behavior and attitude. Being aware by these problems and difficulties the National Association of Reformed Ministers’ Wives was founded to bound women confronting similar difficulties and situations and to help them forming a strong community gathered together by the same identity and intense solidarity. The Association focused the women’s and the Church’s attention and interest on the problems of their special situation and took the responsibility to help pastor’s widows – the most defenseless stratum of an ecclesiastical society. To organize women in a community was comprehended as an instrument of protecting women’s rights and interests and building solidarity between them so, this “apart organizing activity” was not accepted sometimes, especially in the beginning. With time, these voices became quieter partly because the members of the association did not question the minister’s competencies and they did not discuss the hierarchy between a pastor and his wife.

The deaconesses’ figure was understood by the ecclesiastical public opinion as an anti-woman; they represented a model of comportment and world view which was considered to be far from the mainstream ideology of the Reformed Church. In a Church where ministers were not obliged to live in celibate, where both men and women were expected to fulfill their lives and

vocation in family, the existence and conduct of an independent and single woman was not appreciated. The arguments were not formulated only from a perspective referring to the family life's values but also those women who highlighted the importance of independence and liberty disagreed with the patriarchal dependence of the deaconesses; above all, they criticized the ecclesiastical institute of deaconess' where the obedience to the superior was expected. The model of deaconesses' was neither attractive from the point of view of the traditional women's vocation nor from the perspective of those women who lived an independent and self-realized life. Those who defended the institution of deaconesses and recognized the importance of it argued that this is the only organization which can offer a full life for a single Christian woman. A deaconesses' quarter is like a home, like a family where women can live in a community lead by a man and the situation is similar to marriage; also these women's duties require the very same abilities needed in the family life. In conclusion, to be a deaconess meant to have a vocation, a work recognized by the society, a stable existence. It meant the possibility to rise and become appreciated but not free.

To study at the theological faculty women were accepted first in Budapest and Kolozsvár in 1917 (in Debrecen, Pápa and Sáropatak they were only accepted from 1920). The regulation of women's theological studies lasted until the '30th when it became obvious that a degree in theology entitled a woman to teach religion and work in home mission only. Between 1917 and 1940 a total of 112 women enrolled at one of the five universities with theological profile and 74 of them graduated successfully. Such a qualification made possible marriage: one could become a minister's wife or could teach religion in the school and have an independent existence. Dilemmas about the women's theological studies demonstrate that the major question was where the limits of the women's participation in ecclesiastical life are, what is their role and status in the Church: should they preach or should they not. It is not questionable that nobody wanted a women leading an ecclesiastical community, it was not desired that women gain important institutional status and power in the Church. Women were considered incapable doing a minister's duties but their theological formation was strongly required. Finally, all these problems and symptoms lead to the recognition that women's ecclesiastical role must be reconsidered. Women's rights to education, knowledge and teaching were accepted but possibilities to be active in ecclesiastical public space were limited and the first reformed woman-minister was consecrated in Hungary only in 1981. Even women themselves accepted these limitations affirming that they do not want to serve as pastors.

In the third part of my dissertation I reconstructed four women's course of life: my questions were how my heroines were changed by joining a new spiritual movement, by learning new forms of pious actions, how they responded to the challenges resulting from the active participation in ecclesiastical life and Church's public sphere. The selection of my heroines was problematic because I searched female figures representing a larger group of society, figures that can be considered typical. Finally, I chose four women, who contrast strikingly with each other but all of them experienced the same social pressure and the same ecclesiastical normalization. All of them were changed by personal decisions in the frames of the same "eligible worlds" so, we can draw a picture of those circumstances where the decisions and resolutions were made.

It was also problematic to find out why these women were special, why they exceeded their contemporaries, and how can we discover whether these women have really and deeply influenced the society, the milieu where they lived and worked. For them or for their entourage it was important to record the events of their lives, the families where they born cultivated the tradition of recording major events and remembering the ancestors, keeping their memory in the family's recollection. This attitude consolidated the self-confidence and the consciousness of their importance but women have frequently fallen out from the memory of the Church, just a few exceptions, mostly emblematical figures – like Aladárné Szilassy, Lászlóné Ravasz, Klára

Tüdös, Maria Molnár – were considered worthy to be present in the ecclesiastical collective consciousness; so, we can not affirm too much about these women's influence and impact.

I chose Póla Szász – probably the most important figure of the home mission movement, Olga Novák – the first woman theologian and Emma Dessewffy – who was emblematic in the patronage work because of the significance of their activities. All these women were members of the Zsuzsanna Lorántffy Association and worked in the home mission movement but later their ways diverged. Emma Dessewffy – in the active period of her life – was very close to the spirituality represented by the Association even if she was not a member anymore; Póla Szász joined the Bethania Association, which cultivated a more austere form of charity; after graduating in theology, Olga Novák became a professional and worked in ecclesiastical institutions being close to the traditional Calvinism.

It was very hard to find the figure of those women, pastor's wife's, who can represent the social group they belonged to; I was confronted with the absence of relevant documents. Finally I chose Maria Magay, partly because in her adult life she was a minister's spouse and partly because I had the possibility to study the continuity of roles taken up within the family. She was Póla Szász' daughter-in-law but followed a converse model of attitude.

Four different destinies, four different social origins and social positions, four different educations, different conversions but we can discover more similarities and parallelism. All four of them took a deliberate decision joining a spiritual movement in a very well defined community (or dissociating themselves from that): they assumed to work for the home mission movement and this was a very difficult task. Reading the private and personal documents we can discover they confronted a lot of doubts; sometimes, these women were constrained to make very difficult decisions, went through a crisis or fought hard battles with themselves or with their social environment. These women were socialized to follow a traditional model in their behavior and attitude but as adults they did not meet the requirements and thus experienced crisis. They were conscious about their abilities and talents and about the importance of self-realization, they were also conscious about the social usefulness of the work they did but often formulated doubts about their situation. For these women was important to express themselves – even if we can observe the difference in how they represented themselves, in how self-confident and talented they were. They felt the significance to share their thoughts, opinions in a larger public space so, all of them published regularly.

Póla Szász (1863–1947), daughter of episcopo Károly Szász was educated in a bourgeoisie spirit. She was prepared for a role of a middle-class woman – this was the expectation of her family and social ambience, too. Her education and school studies prepared her to be an accomplished, cultivated young lady, a woman of fashion but also capable to manage a household, to be a good wife and an excellent mother.

So, Póla Szász married, gave birth to her children and tried to be as everybody required her to be. But she was talented and a special personality and she could be more than a spouse and mother; she could have a different destiny or career – she herself was conscious of this and represented herself as a gifted woman. But she never tried to realize herself in a laic world, she never wanted to become successful there and she chose to work and succeed in the home mission movement. First, she was a member of Zsuzsanna Lorántffy Association and later joined the Bethánia Association – for Póla Szász this was the way of developing her abilities. She was extremely active working in many areas and needed to be independent having a large space for action. In fact, doing an ecclesiastical work protected her: nobody questioned her enthusiasm and devotion, nobody could say she is selfish and neglect her family because some efforts of self-realization. In personal life she experienced a slow emancipation participating in this alternative ecclesiastical publicity where she was successful, where women were accepted and where she could fulfill her dreams and ambitions. This happened in her life when her children were already grown up, when she was rich and had lots of time so, her activities did not cross her normal duties

within the family. Thanks to her father and husband her social status and prestige was stable and very well grounded and her public appearances, sometimes excessive behavior was not considered improper for a middle-class woman. Even she considered these boundaries necessary and important and always tried to act and think without crossing the lines.

Emma Dessewffy (1858-1936) daughter of Dénes Dessewffy – who emigrated in Switzerland after the revolution – and Adèle Jourdan – descendant of a Huguenot bourgeois family from Genève – was born in Genève. Her religious identity was shaped by the early year's education at her birth place. She experienced the revival movement in Switzerland and later joined the home mission movement where her spiritual sentiments deepened. In her late years, she converted to Catholicism.

Her piety and social sensibility drive her to activities considered useful and beneficial for people and for society. She defined as her vocation to amend morality, to discipline and to lead people to the recognition of how important is to be a good member of the community – concepts coming from her bourgeois education and religious conviction. She was convinced that her commitment to social work is a duty before God and before her country.

The social roots of patronage work went deeply down to the charity actions so current amidst women belonging to that social class where Emma Dessewffy came from. With time, these actions were institutionalized and suffered professionalization, regulation. However, women like Emma Dessewffy participated and got involved (without becoming professional workers) first just in their spare-time but later this work became a vocation for them. Emma Dessewffy was one of the important figures of the time – when social welfare work was just organized and institutionalized – who helped in establishing poorhouses and in this activity used her foreign, especial Western-European experiences. Analyzing Emma's feminine identity the picture becomes much diversified. She never married but experienced a family life and practiced a traditional woman-role: after his brother Arisztid Dessewffy lost his wife, Emma moved into his home, kept his household and raised his three children. But always tried to keep her independence and protect the freedom, which enabled her to do social work.

Maria Magay (1898-1992) was born in Kunszentmiklós, her father was a judge of the Court of Appeal. When she was 18 she married Tamás Vargha, son of Póla Szász and lived in Kunszentmiklós till her husband's retirement. Analyzing her life we could debate two problems: how she managed to construct personal values in an entourage – Póla Szász' family and the Bethánia Association – where religious norms were categorical, how could she live following these values, how she deepened in spirituality without being totally subordinate to her entourage's expectation. She tried to fulfill herself as a “modern woman” and did not feel comfortable in a mother's and wife's role and searched the way of self-realization. Writing seemed to gratify her aspirations but she did not feel completely contented. These aspects of Maria Magay's life led us to the questions how she managed to identify herself with the role of a minister's spouse, role which suffered radical transformation between the two world wars because of the new social expectations and pressures. For her being a countryside pastor's wife seemed to be mostly a problem and she often felt the negative aspects of this status: the lack of a cultured and learned companionship, the loneliness and claustrophobia living in a world of one's own. She was a member of the Minister's Wives Association and frequently participated on their sessions. Maria gave birth to six children and next the maternal care and obligations she organized a sorority for young girls and one for adult women and kept a very representative household. We can say her situation and self-representation was shaped decisively by the belonging to an apart, prestigious and appreciated group with a very well defined social position and conduct – the pastor's wives.

Dilemmas which I formulated analyzing and comprehending Maria's life also were reflections to all the changes and transformations, which reshuffled women's existence, their social position, vocation and the way how the ecclesiastical opinion regarded them from the

beginning of the 20th century. My heroine was a second generation of those women, who radically changed women's position in the Church but also themselves were changed by new expectations, new moral and social values, and new habits – so she could follow the path of the previous generation but she also had to endure a new form of social pressure, confront new challenges, conflicts and struggles.

Olga Novák (1889-1961) was born in a merchant family and lived in Vörösmart. After a failed marriage at 24, she became the lieder of Lorántffy College and moved to Budapest. In 1917, she began studying theology at the Academy of Theology from Budapest. After graduating, she became a professional and an employee of ecclesiastical institutes and she managed to build a free and independent existence by living from her own salary. She was convinced that in the Church men's and women's work must be separated but both are important and have the same value and prestige. Olga was conscious of her talent and abilities and was convinced that she is able to do different kind of ecclesiastical activities. Also she often stressed the importance of her work and role in the Church and she expected to be appreciated as well. She testified often about her spiritual identity – she considered herself a maid of God – and tried to cultivate the role of a religious Calvinist woman especially in her work among young girls and women. But in her identity as a woman she suffered a break after the divorce as she never was able to fulfill her life as a wife and housekeeper of a family home. Olga's situation was complicated also because of her origins: her family did not have a complex social network, did not have relations and connections which could have been helpful in Olga's life; she had to build her relationships and affiliations by herself. She never accepted the situation of a single woman as normal although she lived like that and behaved as an assertive and independent woman.

These case studies show what kind of specific ways and possibilities of women's self-realization and independence the Church offered. We also can deduce that the Church always reflected on the social changes and trends related to the women's role in society but always remained between the frames of a religious and moral standard and traditional virtue. The Church was able to assure women different personal forms of emancipation and to guarantee them protection through a strong community.

III. The publications of the author in the subject

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