

## Commercial training for women in Nemzeti Nőnevelés

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### Abstract

*The rarely examined educational institution of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the women's upper commercial school. During this period, it received countless criticism due to its curriculum. In spite of being a girls' school, the typical 'women's subjects' were not included in the timetable. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the views on this kind of school in the issues of the journal Nemzeti Nőnevelés (National Female Education) between the years of 1909 and 1919. We are interested in the person of the author in the different issues, his/her relationship towards the given type of school, and in what sort of opinion he/she had.*

**Keywords:** *upper commercial schools, Nemzeti Nőnevelés, history of education*

### Introduction

The theme of women in research on the history of education has been increasingly represented over the past decades. The present research also follows this tendency. Our objective is to provide a survey on the opinions about women's upper commercial training from the point of view of a specific journal Nemzeti Nőnevelés. The guidelines of the research include questions such as:

1. What image does the journal depict on women's commercial education?
2. Is the author named in the articles in question?
3. Is the text written by a male or a female author?
4. How is the author connected to commercial education?

First, we take women's higher education in business and commercials into consideration to be able to put the topic in context. Then we turn to the introduction of Nemzeti Nőnevelés and the overview of the chosen texts. Last but not least we put the articles into the female image of the period observed (1909-1919).

Researchers in the history of education are nowadays more interested in vocational education and training (history). Below, we refer to some of the authors without claiming completeness. István Dániel Sanda (2016) provides a comprehensive overview of the historical changes in vocational education from antiquity to the regime change, covering industrial, commercial and agricultural education. Gábor Patyi (2021) outlines the main milestones of primary, secondary and higher vocational education in the 18<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Béla Surányi deals with agricultural education in more detail in his book published in 2021. In addition to a thorough presentation, it helps researchers with a chronology and profiles of prominent figures. Katalin Vörös (2018) looks specifically at issues affecting women, such as the perception of industrial training and employment. Adrienn Nagy published the most detailed history of the development of commercial education in her dissertation (2014).

However, there are still many gaps in connection with upper commercial schools, especially for women. We do not really come across any research on the perception of the female school type. This paper aims to fill a small part of that gap.

## The women's upper commercial education – an overview

Hungary's first commercial college for boys was established in 1857 with under the name of Pesti Kereskedelmi Akadémia (Pest Commercial Academy) (Vincze, 1935). Girls could also gain professional (commercial) knowledge during the 19<sup>th</sup> century within institutionalised forms since there were courses available at that time as well. However, they got the opportunity to have secondary school education similar to boys' only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Pozsony (Bratislava) initiated the creation of a school for girls. After the approval of the petition, in 1909 a new type of institution was added to the palette of institutions and a new channel of mobility became available in the form of the women's upper commercial school.

It started its operation based on the policy of the boys' school issued in 1895 and kept on doing so in the future as well. It all meant that – that, as opposed to the requirements of the period, this type of school did not put enough emphasis on women's nature and on including subjects (such as needlework or household studies) that met the requirements of society into the curriculum. The curricula of the girls and boys were completely the same in theory, however in practice, in some cases, slight differences could be found, for instance, religious studies were taught in a higher number of classes for girls. Looking at the subjects taught to women, it is clearly seen that we cannot find classes such as needlework, baby- and childcare or household studies. The duration of education took 3 years in the 1910<sup>th</sup>, but later, thanks to some reforms, it increased to 4 years in 1919. Students completed their studies with a commercial school-leaving certificate, which, in a limited way, made them legible for studying further. Besides increasing the duration to 4 years, the former structure of the former education was also changed. The whole duration of the education was divided into two sections: the first two years were the so-called commercial section, where education was concentrating mainly on the uniqueness of domestic commercial life; the second two years were the section of economics, which put international relations in the centre of attention. Despite its name (upper), this type of school became secondary level only in 1938 (Nagy, 2014).

## The journal *Nemzeti Nőnevelés*

The journal *Nemzeti Nőnevelés* was a monthly periodical operating from 1880 to 1919. Annually, readers could take the latest issue in hands ten times on average. The journal was the "journal of national girls' schools and women's education institutes" (A Pallas nagy lexikona, 1896, p. 97). The teaching staff of Sugáruti Állami Tanítónő-képző Intézet of Budapest was in charge of editing and publishing. The content of the articles aimed at those interested in women's education, as well as the male and female teachers of girls' schools. Looking through the content of the issues, it can be seen that the writers dealt with several general and women's issues such as women's schools, life in the association, jobs for women, introduction of famous people and religious morality education. Besides domestic events, they reported on foreign news, language learning and suggestions concerning methodology. Among the authors of the articles, females were also present in quite a high number comparing it to the general media of the given period. As a result, female perspective was represented regarding both the topics and the content.

During the research, we used a historical approach based on primary sources, we chose the method of document analysis. The fact that the journal is available in the database Digitália<sup>1</sup> operated by the Library and Knowledge Centre of the University of Pécs made the research work easier. Since the platform provides a search function, choosing related articles has become much simpler with the help of keywords. While searching, we used the keywords „felső kereskedelmi” (upper commercial) and „felsőkereskedelmi”. The reason for this is the fact that we can meet both types of spelling in the period observed. Following this, we worked only with the types of spelling which discuss female education and which articulate opinion on it. Applying these parameters we could narrow down our search to five related pieces of writing.

## Authors and the related articles

In the present research, the issues got looked through from the opening of the first women’s commercial school (1909) to the termination of the journal *Nemzeti Nőnevelés* (1919). We found five different publications in the period observed which can be relevant concerning our examination. In four out of five cases the author’s name was given, and not given in one. All four articles with a name were by female authors. In the followings, we briefly introduce first the writers, then we deal with the texts regarding women’s commercial schools one by one.

Ilona Sebestyén Stetina, teacher of Erzsébet Nőiskola, between 1890 and 1915 was the editor of *Nemzeti Nőnevelés*. She was also the author of several books besides editing and teaching. During her outstanding public activity, she took part in the work of the Association *Mária Dorotha* (Mók, 1925).

The second author, Mita Relkovic, was the teacher of Peterdy-utcai Községi Polgári Leányiskola of the 7<sup>th</sup> district. In some of her works she wrote about the development of girls’ civic education and she was also concerned with the updating of women’s education.

Following her higher educational studies, the doctor of humanities Mária Schmidt was working as a Hungarian and History teacher at the girls’ grammar school established by the Országos Nőképző Egyesület (National Women’s Training Association) (Gráberné, 2017).

The fourth author (Zulawsky Elemérné) Janka Dörfler. She worked as a teacher at a women’s commercial school in Budapest. She actively took part in public life, was the member of the Magyar Paedagógiai Társaság (Hungarian Pedagogical Association), the vice-president of the Országos Kézimunka Tanítói Vizsgálóbizottság (National Examination Board for Arts and Crafts Teachers) (Zulawsky, 1929).

From the short introduction, it is clearly seen that all four authors were strongly connected to female education, they had first-hand experience regarding the current situation the strengths and weaknesses of the system, and the opportunities for girls. On the other hand, none of them were involved in commercial education.

We focus on the related articles in chronological order. First, we can highlight one from 1909, dealing with the opening of the first women’s commercial school. The unknown author welcomed the opening of the institution with great pleasure and it expressed appreciation to the town of Pozsony. According to him/her, “it is impossible not to welcome those who established the first women’s upper commercial school, the city of Pozsony and the Chamber of Industry of Pozsony... The establishment of a women’s school is another of Pozsony’s great achievements” (*Nemzeti Nőnevelés*, 1909, p. 421). Right in the first year, despite the tuition fee of 200 crowns, 39 students applied to the institution, which faithfully reflects its popularity. Furthermore, the author cited

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<sup>1</sup> <https://digitalia.lib.pte.hu/>

from the speeches of the school opening. Manó Beke said the new school is an epoch-making work and a useful institute. Moreover, he said, “anyone who puts weapons in the hands of women in this country, who gives them an existence, is doing a humane act” (Nemzeti Nőnevelés, 1909, p. 422). He further referred to Béla Schack who also expressed his pleasure, and expected the development of commercial life from the work of qualified women.

In her article from 1910, Ilona Sebestyénne Stetina compared female careers in a Hungarian-German relation. Doing so, she emphasized that our practical schools were ahead of the German vocational institutions in many respects. At the same time, the opportunity for female employment was better in German territories, also their allowance was more favourable than in our country. She disagreed with the fact that, in a particular way, here “women are not employed in women’s upper commercial schools”, but “they are placed in the classes of male teachers as supervisors” (Sebestyénne, 1910, p. 63). Being a women’s school, employing female workforce in a higher number was for consideration since for the time being, it is only true in the case of foreign language teaching.

In the third case, Mita Relkoviç wrote about the reforms of the girls’ schools but also deals with the issue of commercial education. She criticised female courses and did not predict a bright future for them saying, “women’s upper commercial schools greatly surpassed the work of the courses” (Relkoviç, 1913, p. 214).

In the same year (1913) Janka Dörfler published a congressional report with the title *Nemzetközi Közgazdasági Tanfolyam Budapest* (International Economics Course Budapest). Basically, she wrote an extract of the speeches made on the commercial education, female employment and allowance. In her report she cited, among many others, the presentation of Jolán Gerhardtné Zigány, who spoke about the identical education of boys and girls. From her point of view “the upper commercial schools of boys and girls should be completely equal in their organisation and impact. The training in both boys’ and girls’ schools can only be equivalent in terms of content and goals.” (Dörfler, 1913, p. 288). And if the education and this way the available jobs are the same, so should the allowance be the same. “Equal training, equal work and equal pay: these should be the direction of transformation” (Dörfler, 1913, p. 289).

The fifth and the last text is by Mária Schmidt. Based on the example of women’s upper commercial school of Veszprém, she wrote that the aim of education is not only to train professionals “but also women with a general education who, as women, are in step with the economic direction of the times” (Schmidt, 1918, p. 251).

We have divided the five above-mentioned articles into two groups based on their content and their opinion on women’s commercial education. One of them expresses a negative criticism whereas the other one conveys a positive attitude towards this type of education. Ilona Sebestyénne Stetina is the only one who approaches the commercial education in a negative way. She misses female teachers from these institutions. We need to agree with this criticism since not only the female students should provide the typical feature of the school but so should the teaching staff.

The other four articles concentrate rather on the positive characteristics. When the school in Pozsony was opened, plenty of approving and constructive opinions were given. With this “epoch-making work”, improvement was expected regarding both commercial life and the opportunities for girls for making a living. Not to mention the fact that by making secondary vocational education available for girls, they acknowledged their need to be able to make their own money as well. On other platforms (*Magyar Pedagógia*, *Kereskedelmi Szakoktatás*) the identical commercial education of men and women received lots of criticism. Developing an educational structure suitable for women’s nature was an argument frequently repeated. This established the need for differentiating

the education of the sexes. However, following the modern female image of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the journal *Nemzeti Nőnevelés*, the requirement of being (mentally) equal emerged in the triangle of equal education, equal work and equal allowance. The journal is in favour of women's chance to take jobs and to be able to hold the same positions as men and disapproves the monopolisation of different positions. A prerequisite for this is to provide them a proper education.

## Summary

On the pages above we have volunteered to look through the issues of the journal *Nemzeti Nőnevelés* between 1909 and 1919 and to examine publications dealing with the upper commercial education of women. In our research, we tried to find out what the authors thought about this education, what the gender ratio was and whether the author's name was mentioned.

We have divided the related five articles into two groups: texts approaching the given education in a negative and in a positive way. One article belongs to the first group and the other four belong to the second one.

All in all, we can say the journal expresses a positive and supporting opinion about the new type of school for girls. At the same time, we have to take the type of journal and its dedication towards women's education into account as these factors determine the homogeneity of the opinions expressed.

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