Gabriele Petkevicaite-Bite and Social Work of Women in Lithuania at the End of 19th and the Beginning of the 20th Century

Despite the fact that there is a public perception that the activities of women should be viewed with some distrust and reservation, it should be noted that the women’s movement is actually by no means a new phenomenon in Lithuania. It has its own history, just like in other European countries and in North America. Lithuanian actors, for example, have played their own part in the suffragettes’ movement. In this context it is impossible to omit Gabriele Petkevicaite–Bite, who was one of the most outstanding leaders in Lithuania at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. At the end of the 19th century, Gabriele Petkevicaite–Bite established the first charity organization called “Ziburelis” which was set up to provide support for the Lithuanian-speaking youth. It also performed education activities oriented toward youth in general. Following the First World War Gabriele Petkevicaite–Bite continued to organize social support for young and poor girls. Feminism, Nationalism and social work were considered crucial for the contemporary Lithuanian society. Her own personal output, throughout her life, reflects her commitment to these three elements.

Gabriele Petkevicaite–Bite was born on March 18, 1861 in a family of a noble line. Her father was a doctor and erudite, which is why he attached special importance to the education of his daughter. In 1872 Gabriele was admitted to a higher school for girls in Latvia, the so-called Töcherschule Dorothea, which she finished in 1878. Subsequent to her return to Lithuania and having settled in her parents’ house in Joniškulis, a Lithuanian province, she took on the provision of social care to local village people, commenced by her father, by visiting and nursing poverty-stricken patients and arranging a free supply of medicines. She once said: “I took over from my father an ability to love, care and treat patients, and after illness – together rejoice the end of it”. Gabriele Petkevicaite was often the only hope of poor and ill country people. Soon Gabriel engaged in the National Movement of Lithuanians and gave the utmost attention to social support of women and youth.

Gabriele Petkevicaite was obviously one of those women who, during the period of time mentioned above, did not only express their views on women’s suffrage and speak about equal rights of men and women from all
walks of life in general, but also actively tried to structurally organize women. She encouraged them to get involved in the women’s movement of those days and organized the social work of women in Lithuania.

Eventually, after the first conference of women in Kaunas in 1907, Gabriele Petkevicaite initiated the creation of the first liberal women’s organization – ‘Union of Lithuanian Women’. The main goal of this organization was to support women’s fight for equal voting rights. She herself wrote in the first Lithuanian daily ‘Vilniaus žinios’ (The News of Vilnius): “…today, women of all nations understand that without equal voting rights for men and women the emancipation of women cannot be really or fully implemented. If women remain isolated from political and public life and are not allowed to decide for themselves, they will never be able to participate in decision-making processes for the common good of their motherland and of the whole human race”.

At this point Gabriele Petkevicaite reminded people that the ‘Union of Lithuanian Women’, whose executive committee at that time consisted of Sofija Čiurlionienė, Ona Pleirytė-Puidienė and herself, should recruit at least one and a half thousand members, as it was only on this condition that it would be admitted to the International Organization of the Fight for Women’s Rights.

The first Lithuanian charity organizations were illegal under Russian czarist rule, so creating such an organization at the end of the 19th century always involved taking a risk. One of them was called ‘Žiburelis’ (Little Fire), which was secretly established by Gabriele in 1893. Later, she wrote: “All alone, because I had no one to consult with, I started to raise money in order to give young people the opportunity to attend school”.

G. Petkevicaite worked alone for quite a long time without any assistants. Only after three years another woman – Jadvyga Juškyt, joined here. Then, both women dared to take another risky step forward and tried to gain support from the public by promoting the organization in the illegal Lithuanian press. Certainly, it was risky, but only in this way could one expect to get substantial financial support. These activities of Petkevicaite are best considered as the provision of social care to contemporary Lithuanian youth.

On the one hand, Žiburelis dealt with financial support for talented young people who strived for higher education and at the same time Petkevicaite organized meetings with ordinary countryside children, who were encouraged to gain at least an elementary education. This was very important educational work since many Lithuanian young people of those days were barely literate. As she wrote in her recollections, out of fifteen children she met, only one attended a primary school, nine children were able to read their prayer-book, five of them were barely able to read.

The association ‘Žiburelis’, strived to help young people who confronted their parents and refused to become priests, which in the traditional 19th century Lithuanian peasant family was perceived as the only respectable occupation that was always financially supported by parents.

In the meantime, ‘Žiburelis’ helped only those who did not yield to their parents’ will and wanted to become artists, writers or lawyers. The associa-