CHAPTER 3

"Where Do You Think I Learned How to Style My Own Hair?" Gender and Everyday Lives of Women Activists in Poland's League of Women

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"Where do you think i learned how to style my own hair?" asked Marysia, a former Liga Kobiet (League of Women) member, during an interview that I conducted in Poland in 2000.[1] In this statement, she indicated her personal understanding of the league's importance as the officially recognized Communist-era women's organization in Poland's urban setting.[2] The organization, she maintained, benefited women in many ways, one of which was teaching them a variety of skills, including hairstyling. Marysia lives in a small town, Nowy Targ, in Poland's southern region. She is an average working-class woman who worked in a local shoe factory until retirement. In addition to participating in the women's organization for a few years, she also was active locally in the Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (Polish United Workers' Party [PUWP], i.e., Communist Party). Throughout our conversation, Marysia and her friend Danuta, whom I interviewed at the same time, referred to themselves as "*proste baby*" (simple women) or "*wygadane baby*" (chatty women).[3] These simple and chatty women, along with

others I interviewed, provided an important personal perspective on how the league functioned, particularly on the local everyday level.

The league brought women together to assist the state by promoting its policies through meetings and publications as well as to aid other women and families with their everyday needs through its social acts and programs.[4] Although the league undoubtedly was connected to the PUWP and often worked for the state's benefit, it also simultaneously provided something valuable to women in general and to its rank-and-file members in particular, many of whom were not affiliated with the party and often had little interest in politics. Social, rather than political, activism best characterizes the activities in which league members engaged on a day-to-day basis. As *działaczki społeczne* (social activists—a term that the league, party, and Poles in general used to describe league members), they offered services to women and families.[5] In this chapter, I examine some of the programs and actions through which the league tried to help women and show how the organization functioned on the ground.

As scholars of gender and Communism, it is crucial to continue moving diligently beyond a cold war–paradigm that presented Communist-era history by using binary categories to describe and evaluate the Soviet bloc in opposition to the democratic and capitalist West. Even for individuals and groups, such as the league, that were closely connected to Communist parties, it is imperative to explore the myriad ways in which they functioned on the ground in everyday life. Building on earlier studies of everyday life under Communism, I use the league as an example to show how previously rigidly demarcated lines—such as party authorities and the populace, capitalism and Communism, "Us" and "Them," and state and society—were blurred.[6] My project incorporates many questions that studies of mass women's organizations in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have raised, but it also moves beyond their research by including different questions about women's activism.[7] This chapter, more than numerous previous studies of such groups, delineates some of the ways in which the league assisted women and developed its own forms of activism, rather than strictly adhering to party agendas.

Founded in 1945, the league was Poland's official centralized mass women's organization.[8] Created by left-leaning women's activists immediately following World War II, it eventually developed into Poland's main women's organization once Communist leaders officially solidified their power in Poland by 1948. Similar women's groups functioned throughout Eastern Europe. Like all legal organizations, the league was associated with the party and typically followed party guidelines. The organization served multiple purposes that, to some degree, varied over time.

In general, its goals centered on political and ideological education, stressing women's involvement in politics and employment, as well as on assistance of women in combining their multiple responsibilities as mothers, housewives, workers, and social activists. In theory, and in its initial years, the league represented all women. Chapters functioned in residential areas among housewives and in workplaces among employed women. The league was reorganized a number of times during its history. The group repeatedly shifted from functioning both in workplaces for employed women and residential areas for housewives to allowing chapters only in residential areas for all women. The league also acted as an umbrella organization for other state-affiliated women's groups, including the Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich (Circles of Rural Housewives) and women's cooperatives.[9] League membership supposedly reached two million by the early 1950s.[10] Members consisted of *bezpartyjne* (non-party) and PUWP members, with a few women from other political parties. Central and provincial administration leaders were, in most cases, PUWP members. Prior to league presidential elections in the central and provincial administrations, party officials had to accept the nominations. During the Communist period, most of the league's central administration presidents were PUWP members. Provincial administrations functioned within each province, oversaw regional activities, and reported to the central administration.

Most scholars have portrayed Eastern European Communist-era women's organizations quite negatively, arguing that these groups did little or even nothing for women; some even argue that they harmed women's rights by promoting women as a homogenous group, thereby ignoring significant differences among them.[11] In part, these negative perceptions are accurate; these groups were affiliated with Communist parties, largely followed party directives, and promoted Communist ideology. These assessments focus predominantly, and in some cases solely, on what these groups failed to do for women as a result of their close ties to the party-states in which they functioned. It is crucial to move beyond this simplistic dichotomous view—as either good *or* bad for women, as complying with *or* resisting the party-state, or as serving women *or* the state. The organization undoubtedly served the party-state, yet, at the same time, it served women.[12] Within the party-state, the league carved out for itself a semiautonomous space, one that functioned for both the official state *and* women, albeit in different ways.

Although I recognize the league's limitations, party connection, and adherence to party guidelines, I focus my attention here on the side of the league's activism that studies have typically overlooked. In this chapter, I analyze what the organization offered to women, and, in particular,

how women, like Marysia and Danuta, discussed their everyday league involvement. I base my analysis largely on oral histories that I conducted with fifteen members (past activists as well as those who were active at the time of my interviews) in 2000, more than one decade after the dismantling of Poland's Communist system. These interviews are a small sampling, rather than representative, of league membership. Most women I interviewed continued to have some affiliation with the organization following the collapse of Communism. The league still functions in the post-Communist era, although it is much smaller and has different goals. My interviews were not rigidly structured; they included some guided questions, but for the most part, I allowed interviewees to discuss their experiences and ideas quite openly. Through oral histories, I wanted to show the personal meanings that women attributed to their participation in the league, meanings that were difficult (and even impossible) to gather from written documents alone—directives, internal bulletins, conference proceedings, etc., which tend to be formulaic. Oral histories, of course, have their share of problems for historians. Memories can be fragile—the interviewee's past and present, as well as the interviewer, questions asked, relationship between the interviewee and interviewer, and so on, undoubtedly affect memories. At the same time, these interviews provide a different and more personal perspective about activism than written sources. Official league and party archival sources are useful on many levels, but used alone they are inadequate to gain an understanding of members' everyday participation. By including a variety of voices and sources, the league comes across as much more than a homogenous party-affiliated group that underscored Communist ideology.

A central, and probably the most visible, component of league activism was the Komitet do spraw Gospodarstwa Domowego (Committee for Home Economics Affairs [KGD]).[13] Formed in 1957 in an effort to assist women in alleviating their multiple responsibilities, the committee was and continues to be the most well-known program that the league developed.[14] I balance my oral histories with two internal league publications, *Nasza praca* (Our Work) and *Gospodarstwo domowe* (Home Economics).[15] Especially through this committee, the league served as not only an educational organization but also a social organization, providing women who attended meetings, lectures, and courses with a female social space.

In my study, I demonstrate that members discussed the organization's importance in a gendered manner.[16] To various degrees, depending on the period, ideas about proper womanhood combined "traditional" conceptions of women's roles with revolutionary Marxist ideas about women's emancipation. In other words, the league promoted women's

roles as mothers and housewives, taking care of home and family, but also incorporated into the mix women's roles as workers outside of the home, even in such masculinized areas of employment as heavy industry, and as social and political activists on local, provincial, and national levels. In the process, even within an organization that was supposed to promote revolutionary ideas about women's emancipation, their maternal and domestic roles emerged most clearly; the discourse used in both publications and oral histories pointed more vividly to conceptions of women as mothers and housewives.

Shift to "Practical Activism": Forming the Committee for Home Economics Affairs

Prior to and during the league's Second National Conference held in 1957, members underscored the need to assist women in their responsibilities as housewives, mothers, and workers (in other words, their so-called double burden) and called for a new focus on "practical activism," which centered on the women's rather than the party's needs in contrast to the preceding Stalinist period.[17] Rather than emphasize heavy industry and women's employment in "new occupations," dissemination of propaganda, and indoctrination, they called for "practical activism." Members determined that the organization needed to strengthen its activism especially on issues related to the household. "Relieving women from the hardest household tasks" is a "burning issue," a member writing for *Nasza praca* maintained. "We must start 'from the kitchen,' from home economics, since it especially oppresses working women, consumes her strength and energy, weakens and impoverishes women's lives, [and] restrains her cultural development."[18] To relieve this "burning issue" by starting "from the kitchen," members decided to form the national KGD. In 1958, under the committee's guidance, chapters also began to organize *ośrodki* and *poradnie gospodarstwa domowego* (home economics centers and clinics or information bureaus) throughout Poland, both on the provincial level and more locally.[19] Committee centers and clinics quickly became the most well-known and visible forms of league activism.

Socialist ideology stressed in its early years the need to emancipate women from household burdens through collective social services, such as communal laundry and eating facilities, but communal services never gained much popularity in Poland.[20] By the 1930s, even within the Soviet Union, ideology based on collectivity and the withering away of the family was replaced with a strengthening of the family, marked partly by individual responsibility for household tasks.[21] In accordance with the widespread sentiment of Poles and a general

retreat from collectivity in Communism, the league likewise emphasized individual households in its programs. Cooking, sewing, and washing for individual families replaced alleviating burdens through communal services.[22] Women, rather than the state, were expected to provide these services for their families. Particularly after Stalinism, not only the league but also the state increasingly embraced traditional ideas about proper gender roles, including roles related to running a household. The league and state moved away from revolutionary ideas of socialist feminism in the early years to a focus on traditional women's and men's roles.

Although throughout the organization's history some members advocated for equality between the sexes, especially stressing greater workplace opportunities and advancement for women, home economics programs were highly gendered. Occasionally, some members depicted the necessity for all family members to participate in household chores in theory, but the committee's activities in practice centered on women's domestic role. Girls and women were to be the main recipients of these initiatives, and only women were sought to become instructors. Men were allowed to attend sessions, but few did. Young girls, claimed numerous members, needed to be taught domesticity to prepare them for their roles as mothers and wives.[23] These programs addressed the need to lessen women's household responsibilities through new techniques of keeping house and technological innovations, but not through changing (or even questioning) women's and men's domestic roles. Home economics programs helped to solidify traditional images of women as housewives (even if they worked outside the home) and men as breadwinners, images that had been prominent prior to the onset of Communism in Poland.[24] Women who took courses and attended lectures and demonstrations learned or expanded their domestic skills.

In theory, the committee attempted to alleviate women's burdens, yet it sometimes advocated, possibly inadvertently, an increase in their responsibilities. Published guides instructed women to make better, more complex, and healthier meals; sew and repair their children's clothing; keep their homes cleaner and more aesthetically pleasing; and take care of themselves by wearing makeup and styling their hair.[25] Instructions on how to clean their homes, for example, encouraged women to air out all bed linens daily; make beds; put away all clothing, shoes, and other items; dust around windows, doors, stoves, and heaters; vacuum rugs and furniture; and wash the floors (sweeping with a broom was inadequate).[26] In some instances, then, the initial goal of lessening women's burdens may have actually failed. The committee not only moved away from communal conceptions of domesticity,

but also created greater expectations for what women could and should accomplish within individual households.

Not Just "Large Pots": The Committee Serving Women

In what ways, then, did women benefit from these home economics sessions? As Bożena stated, "The authorities at that time ridiculed our home economics centers a bit. They said 'and what are they [women] occupying themselves with there—*garami* [large pots]?'" But Bożena asserted that "women deemed this to be very important to them."[27] She strongly believed that the organization's work was significant and necessary; dealing with domesticity (with "large pots") was not as trivial a matter as "the authorities" had claimed. Urszula saw these courses as the league's most important form of activism. She claimed that since "not every family was … prepared to give this (information) to their children," these programs became especially crucial.[28] Former league president Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka stated that the committee's work was "splendid" and improved living standards.[29] In addition to applying the skills they learned at lectures and demonstrations in their roles of mothers, daughters, and housewives, women could also apply these skills to generate a potential income.[30] These courses helped prepare young girls for their anticipated domestic role and provided women who were already running households with additional training and broader information.

The league ran one- to two-hour lectures and demonstrations on topics that members in individual chapters wanted about once per month in chapter offices or after work in workplaces.[31] Sessions related to health issues, such as how to conduct breast self-exams or use herbal health remedies, "pleased women very much," stated Kazimiera.[32] Danuta claimed that she "learned a lot of things … I to this day learned [*sic*] embroidery in this chapter,"[33] while Marysia said that the league taught "us, for example, different recipes, embroidery, sewing, helping one another, everything," and to style her own hair. For her, this knowledge was useful, and she continues to use the techniques that she learned as a young woman in the league.[34] Bożena stated that as a young woman she learned about "sensible nourishment."[35] Urszula maintained that women wanted to attend these courses because "they were able to gain something from them. … Women appreciated this very much." Even today, she stated, women come to the league office hoping that the organization still runs such courses.[36] These benefits seem trivial, but, for these women, courses were important sources of what they deemed valuable knowledge from which they continue to benefit.

Communist women ideally were not supposed to be concerned with cosmetics, hairstyling, and fashion, although in reality, women across the region ignored such ideology. The new Communist woman was supposed to repudiate frivolous and "superficial, 'bourgeois' inventions" and instead focus her energy on a strong work ethic. In place of individual and personal tastes, women were supposed to be "robust women who didn't look much different from a man." But, in fact, women longed for cosmetics and often used whatever they could find on the market to make themselves beautiful.[37] Through league courses, women learned about personal aesthetics—how to use makeup, what cosmetics and products were best, how to style their hair, and what clothing was fashionable. By holding these lectures, the organization encouraged individualism and consumption. These courses served not only women's needs as mothers and wives but also their personal needs as women. The organization moved beyond state-promoted ideals of the devoted worker and dutiful mother by embracing personal aesthetics.

Teaching Women Resourcefulness: The Economic Crisis in the 1980s

The committee placed demonstrations related to nourishment and food at the center of its initiatives. Families, committee leaders maintained, did not eat healthily, and women needed to be taught how to prepare well-balanced meals with adequate nutrients and vitamins. Lectures and demonstrations on food, typically followed by a tasting, presented such topics as including more fruits and vegetables in meals, ensuring that families incorporated foods with sufficient vitamins in their diets, and preparing meals for parties. Limiting meat intake was especially important. We had "to persuade women," stated Bożena, "that our popular *bigos* [a type of meaty stew] and pork chop should disappear from the table" and that women should "introduce more vegetables, more dairy products" in meals.[38] Her statement and the committee's continued emphasis on decreasing meat intake could be interpreted as a political move, related to ongoing price increases on foodstuffs, including meats, and meat shortages. On numerous occasions, Poles protested price hikes on food, especially meat. By urging less meat consumption, the league possibly deliberately glossed over the real economic problem of meat shortages in a country where these products were intensely popular. Yet league instructors promoted not only a decrease in meat but also other healthy eating habits—eating a well-balanced diet, incorporating fruits and vegetables, decreasing fat intake, and so on, good eating habits that continue to be advocated today. Bożena stated that the nourishment the

league had been promoting since the late 1950s had become fashionable in the 1990s.[39] "Then, we were somewhat laughed at for this," she claimed, "but as I have said, this was a serious problem. This was truly important education for women."[40] The league's information on nourishment, starting as early as the 1950s, promoted healthy eating habits and was not necessarily solely tied to political and propagandistic action.

In the early 1980s, with the onset of martial law, limited availability of food and other necessities, and introduction of ration cards, league publications directly acknowledged the economic crisis at hand and demonstrated ways in which the organization could assist women in meeting their everyday needs.[41] Many members explicitly complained about food shortages, long lines, and price hikes, as well as lack of available health and hygiene products.[42] In 1983, the committee, along with the central administration, organized a national academic seminar dealing with the economic crisis as it related to the household. This particular seminar is indicative of the importance that the organization placed on this crisis.[43]

Since women traditionally had been in charge of shopping for food and household necessities, they felt the brunt of the crisis as consumers. The organization, according to Urszula, "changed depending on needs … during times of crisis. It is well known that when a crisis occurs women … feel this the most, because their families are threatened." As mothers, she suggested, women felt a special obligation to ensure that their families' needs were met.[44] Standing in long lines, searching for food and other goods, and making do with what was available largely fell onto their shoulders.[45] Urszula continued, "The situation became more anxious." To help remedy the crisis, "we had to have more of that self-composure, we had to meet more often, we had to talk more with these women, we had to talk about these problems."[46] The league attempted to assist women during this critical period using its already established programs and tactics—talking to women, organizing meetings, and especially utilizing its home economics centers.

The committee's primary focus in the 1980s was on changing how women ran households, and not on how the state should transform the economy to assist women. League initiatives stressed women's resourcefulness.[47] For example, committee leaders guided women on how to repair clothing, make slippers out of scraps of fabric or old clothing, and save energy.[48] Rather than buy new clothes (which were not always easy to find), the league encouraged women to make do with what they already had. On the one hand, the committee promoted resourcefulness as a way to assist the state by urging women to overlook the economic crisis and not focus on what was unavailable. Yet, on the other hand, the

committee also persistently discussed the crisis openly in its publications, showing that members were uneasy about the situation. Promotion of resourcefulness points to a deeper, more complex concern over women's specific position within that crisis.

Courses and lectures during the 1980s reflected the ongoing food crisis. For women, most of whom were responsible for purchasing and preparing food for their families, the lack of adequate foodstuffs became especially troubling.[49] Home economics sessions emphasized nutritional meals women could prepare and substitutions of products in meals based on availability. "During that period," Bożena said, "our market was not saturated as it is at this moment.… We had to show what to make from what we had, how they [women] could instill nourishment in the home so that it would be sensible and economical. Today we have yogurts, we have kefir, then we did not have these things."[50] Demonstrations, for instance, explained how to use oil, mayonnaise, kefir, or sour cream in recipes depending on what was available and how to use leftovers and stale bread in new meals.[51] With a shortage of potatoes and meat, staples of Poles' diets, the committee's journal provided recipes on how to include noodles and cereals into meals.[52] Instead of encouraging people to eat meat, instructors showed them how to use milk, cheese, and eggs to a greater degree as a source of protein.[53] League publications instructed women to raise their own animals on small plots of land if they had any land, plant vegetables in pots on balconies, and use seasonal fruits and vegetables.[54] When each person was allowed to buy only 2.5 kilograms of meat per month, "our home economics centers," stated Bożena, "immediately started to have demonstrations and courses on what you could make for one person and how to run that household and with what to supplement these products." Even though this seemed "trivial," she continued, "we had to show women where besides meat they could find natural protein.… This was our actual arduous, everyday ant-like work."[55] The league continued to stress women's domesticity and focused on how women needed to alter their ways of cooking, shopping, and running households. As an official women's organization supported by the party, the league predominantly addressed the crisis in a way in which it felt comfortable, using its already established programs, rather than directly opposing and confronting the state.

Relaxation and Escape: The League as a Social Organization

League meetings, lectures, courses, and spontaneous gatherings offered women, especially rank-and-file members, a female space for socializing,

spending free time, and discussing issues with other women away from work and family. The organization also gave members an outlet for volunteering and provided them with a sense of feeling needed and satisfied with their assistance. Since the league was the only urban Communist-era women's group, women who desired to participate in an organization assisting women did not have another outlet until the 1980s when other nonparty-affiliated women's organizations started to appear.[56]

League critics often have denounced it for being only a social organization where women came together to gossip, sip tea and coffee, and eat pastries.[57] Janina Skocka, a rural housewife, for instance, stated that "in the city [women's organization] there is more gossip and less work," while Wanda Bundy questioned whether an entire women's organization is needed for chitchat.[58] Eugenia Kempara condemned this general perception of the league as simply holding "social teas and boring meetings" for its members—"older, nice ladies," who had nothing better to do—a common assessment of the organization by many Poles.[59] People discussed the organization "with a wink, sometimes comically," stated a delegate at the eighth national conference.[60] At once, members celebrated it as a useful organization, while others laughed at it as just another forum for *baby* to get together and gossip. Indeed, the league chapter provided, or attendees supplied, tea, coffee, and pastries, a common form of hospitality among Poles whenever and wherever they came together.[61] Members transferred this familiar hospitality into individual chapter offices; they brought their more "private" form of entertaining into a "public" space.

Conversing, socializing, drinking tea and coffee, and eating should not be interpreted as solely negative, without any benefits. These women wanted and needed a place in which to socialize and relax, and league activities provided them that opportunity.[62] Courses were not only instructional and meetings were not only formal, but both also functioned as important social gatherings. For some less active members, socializing was the most important part of their participation. Some women wanted only "to meet for tea, good pastries, gossip a little, and leave."[63]

League events were a way for women to enjoy their free time among other women.[64] "It was relaxation (*odprężenie*) away from home, from young children, from everything, we did not have to think about anything.… Nothing concerned me," stated Danuta.[65] She believed that women needed to retreat from everyday worries and multiple responsibilities, even if they were able to do so only once or twice per month. For Irena, meetings were "an escape from the home," especially after giving birth to her first son. "Family responsibilities changed somewhat; we were no longer so free. And going to these women's organization's

meetings was, for me, my time."[66] Meetings served as an "escape," a source of freedom, from her new family responsibilities that centered on her infant. They provided her with time for herself in the company of other women, some of whom probably were in the same situation. One member indicated that this form of relaxation was essential for a hard-working and tired woman. A "woman wants to leave the house and relax in a somewhat different way than sitting in front of the television."[67] These gatherings, Elżbieta, the last league president of the Communist period, recalled, were "extremely important psychologically" for women. Women could "sit down, chat with someone, and be heard." This socializing was not without conflict, however. Arguments also erupted, she stated.[68]

Through these gatherings, the league created female spaces, away from husbands, sons, fathers, and male bosses and coworkers, in which women discussed a variety of issues woman-to-woman. "Something common links us," and "Women usually find a common language," Urszula declared.[69] Women may have felt more comfortable in these female gatherings to converse about personal problems, employment, issues of everyday life, and sometimes even politics.[70] An entry in a league chapter scrapbook, for example, stated: "Knitting and crocheting needles are flashing by in the hands of the students, and simultaneously one could hear loud conversation. One could find out about many interesting things."[71] It was not "gossiping," Helena claimed. "We talked about various topics, actual complaints if someone had them,… or how to solve certain problems."[72]

Leokadia Błochowa, housewife and president of a residential chapter in Pabianice, expressed her strong sentiments about what the organization meant to her.

> In our apartment building women have become close friends thanks to the League of Women's chapter.… In the evenings a few of us often come together in some apartment. One reads out loud, and others sew or knit.… Or we talk about raising children. Sometimes one woman sincerely "points out" mistakes of another woman, explains them. We also talk about marital issues, we discuss them. This does a lot of good. Because after all in many families the situation is bad and it is hard for women who do not have warm-hearted smart advice. Sometimes we even have to say a few bitter words of truth to a woman, who is letting herself down, and her home is dirty, and her children are poorly raised, and later she cries that her husband stopped loving her. It is not at all always the man's fault that a marriage "is falling apart." The reverse also happens. In the chapter, we also share household experiences: how to cook something, how to plan a family budget most sensibly. Because as you know—there are homes

> where for the first course (they have) cake, and before the first course, dry potatoes. Besides this, we help each other with cultivating our community gardens, which most residences of the apartment building have.[73]

In another chapter within the same community, members took turns walking children to and from preschool and helped each other with daily grocery shopping.[74] Błochowa's words provide rich information about what the league meant to members. Coming together as women meant more than socializing; it was also a forum for discussing serious problems; providing advice (whether wanted or not) and assistance; and, most important, according to Błochowa, offering women close friendships. "I believe," she continued, "that it is precisely in this type of everyday friendships and cooperation that the significance of the league's chapters' work lies, and not only [formal] meetings."[75] For her, formal activism was less meaningful than these informal and often spontaneous female get-togethers. Błochowa's statement also clearly points to gendered notions of women's roles—it was up to women to maintain a stable home environment, keep a clean house, prepare food, maintain a family budget, and raise children. During their "womanly" chats, these women did not emphasize emancipatory roles but rather traditional conceptions of womanhood.

Other members likewise viewed these personal friendships as important. For Helena, the organization was "one big family," and the women of one chapter claimed that "the women who come feel like family here."[76] Members also gave women support in times of need; for example, when a neighbor or a friend was very poor or suddenly fell ill, league representatives went to her home, sometimes taking her to the doctor or hospital.[77] Numerous members expressed a sense of feeling needed and of satisfaction from helping others as meaningful benefits from their activism. Although most women expressed both the positive and negative aspects of living and functioning as an organization within a party-state, most also recalled their personal activism favorably. They remembered the organization "warmly," as "good and enjoyable," "energetic," and "sincere."[78] These members chose to participate in the league at least partly because of the personal benefits that they attributed to it.

Conclusion

Although the league as an official women's organization functioning during the Communist period was undoubtedly closely connected to the PUWP, it also provided something beneficial to the women who chose to take advantage of its programs and the women who chose to become

its members. The league did not formulate feminist ideas and did not strive to alter traditional gender roles, yet it provided women with valuable information that assisted them in their everyday lives. Home economics courses offered women useful information on traditionally female domestic responsibilities and personal aesthetics. The organization offered an avenue for socializing, allowing women to come together away from their husbands, bosses, and children, while taking courses, attending meetings, or participating in organized activities. And it provided members with personal satisfaction in helping others.

The league has a mixed history. While some critics have ridiculed it for dealing only with trivial domesticity ("large pots"), others have respected it for providing women with necessary household and employment skills. In certain cases, the league promoted programs that simultaneously aided women and strengthened the party-state—in other words, it served both women and the party-state. Examining these relationships points to the need to explore the gray area of the Communist period, rather than look at it in a dichotomous way. The KGD and the league more generally demonstrate that an organization functioning within and supported by a Communist party-state in many cases could and did establish itself as more than an entity manipulated by that system and could and did serve more than just the state's needs and desires. The typical negative perceptions of Communist-era women's organizations reflect only one component of these groups, overlooking the multiple roles that these groups played and the complicated relationships that they had with both the state and women. Looking beyond the league's official rhetoric and propaganda as well as its party affiliation, the league emerges as a complex and lively group of women.