

## Polish women labour inspectors between the world wars: scrutinizing the workplace and mobilizing public opinion

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the history of women's activism within the state apparatus, focusing on women labour inspectors in interwar Poland. Part of the State Labour Inspectorate since its creation in 1919, women inspectors often combined their professional duties with a distinctly activist stance. Like their male colleagues, they ensured compliance with labour legislation by performing factory visits and collecting information on the conditions of workers' lives and labour. But they also led campaigns in the press, published books and brochures intended to mobilize public opinion around issues related to the labour of women and minors, and sought to build activist networks aimed at the improvement of women workers' conditions. They exposed particularly exploitative labour arrangements, such as the labour of underage apprentices, and conceptualized them as urgent social problems. These multiple engagements meant that women labour inspectors moved between different scales of action including direct intervention on the shop floor, research and publications aimed at a national audience, and transnational contacts with the International Labour Organization, which had been committed to improving women workers' conditions since its inception.

### KEYWORDS

Labour inspection; women's labour activism; Second Polish Republic; labour history

In her 1936 memoirs, former deputy labour inspector Maria Kirstowa offered a nuanced analysis of the subordinate position of women workers in the labour market. She argued that the "industrial labour of women is not correctly valued or respected by employers or by workers in general" (Kirstowa 1936b, 280). In terms of both pay and meaning, she argued, the labour of women was rendered inferior to that of men: women's participation in the labour force was considered temporary rather than permanent, their experiences were disregarded, and their opportunities for training and professional development were virtually non-existent.

Kirstowa supported her overarching argument by citing concrete examples from her work as a labour inspector in Warsaw between 1921 and 1928. She systematically studied the wages, skills, and productivity levels across different industries (armaments, food, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, paper, textiles, lightbulb production, among others) and

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found that women were commonly deprived of any possibility of either accessing higher-level positions or receiving wage increases regardless of their years of experience. Typically, she emphasized, the most qualified women were paid less than the least qualified men. Offering a counter-narrative to the general perception of women as weaker, unskilled, and less committed workers, Kirstowa highlighted rare examples from Warsaw factories in which men and women were paid the same wages and argued that employers had economic reasons to do so: because women and men performed work of equal value (Kirstowa 1936b, 282).

Stressing the underrepresentation of women in the organized labour movement, Maria Kirstowa openly criticized male workers and male-dominated trade unions as contributing to the unequal treatment of women in the labour market. She remarked that women were rarely eager to take part in labour organizing not only because of their socialization (*uspołecznienie*) but also because of their treatment by male trade unions members. In her own work, Kirstowa had encountered many cases where the collective and individual activism of women workers was undermined by their male colleagues and trade union representatives. In one case, women bobbin fillers (*szpularki*) at a textile factory went on strike because their demand for a wage increase was refused. Male weavers could not work without bobbin fillers, and the operations of the whole factory ground to a halt. However, when the factory management brought in strike-breakers to fill bobbins, the men resumed their work. This was just one example among several that Kirstowa evoked to denounce the lack of cross-gender solidarity (Kirstowa 1936b, 290).

Maria Kirstowa's career in the Labour Inspectorate ended in 1928, which, along with the polarization of the political climate in the second half of the 1930s, likely prompted her to write so openly, radically, and critically in her 1936 memoirs. Her experiences and expertise as a labour inspector directly informed her critiques. She was part of a small body of Polish women labour inspectors who, between 1919 and 1939, struggled to improve the working conditions of urban industrial women and underage workers. They did so on the shop floor, visiting factories and identifying cases of non-compliance with labour legislation. At the same time, as constant mediators between the state, workers, and employers, and as officials embodying and shaping state interventions in the workplace, women labour inspectors were generally far from being narrowly focused bureaucrats. Instead, many took a distinctly activist stance that led them far beyond their main professional focus on the industrial workplace. Indeed, building on their position as state employees, their knowledge of working conditions, and, in some cases, their previous histories of political activism, they managed to access diverse arenas in which policies regarding women workers were directly and indirectly shaped, including the local and national press, the state apparatus, and international organizations.

In this article, I approach interwar Polish labour inspection as a site of contact between social movements and the state.<sup>1</sup> Zooming in on the activities and writings of women in the Labour Inspectorate, I argue that they expanded their immediate duties as inspectors by taking up a broad range of labour-related activism at the local, national, and transnational levels. In their work, activism within the state apparatus intertwined with other activist practices that involved civil society associations, political parties, and the press. Specifically, I trace their efforts to conceptualize a set of distinct and pressing social problems caused by women's and children's involvement in industrial labour, to mobilize public opinion around them, and to build wider networks with the goal of partially

alleviating these problems. Women inspectors elaborated, shaped, adopted, and pursued a range of agendas aimed at the improvement of the labour and living conditions of women and minors – agendas they shared and negotiated with other actors: party activists, parliamentarians, trade unionists, and medical professionals.

Through inspectors' publications, the aggregated yearly reports of the Inspectorate, and other sources such as the memoirs quoted above, I engage with both the inspectors' concrete actions in the sphere of labour protection and the far-reaching critiques they voiced. The register of the inspectors' writings differed depending on the publication. In official state-sponsored publications, they were limited in terms of how radical their critiques could be and against whom they could be directed. Publications appearing in the local press, books, and brochures directed at the general public offered women labour inspectors greater opportunities to voice their profound gender-sensitive critiques of the Polish and global socio-economic order.

Scholarship has investigated how the cross-class character of inspectors' activities impacted their work and the knowledge they produced about the working class. Jean Quataert, discussing the reports of Prussian labour inspectors at the end of the nineteenth century, highlighted that middle-class women labour inspector assistants tended to more openly support women workers' interests in conflicts between male and female workers than did their male colleagues, suggesting a degree of gender solidarity (Quataert 1983, 118). Analysing the Greek case in the 1910s to 1930s, Efi Avdela has emphasized that many aspects of workers' lives and their non-compliance with existing regulations remained unintelligible to middle-class inspectors despite their direct observation of working environments (Avdela 1997). Sylvie Schweitzer has approached the role of women in the French Inspectorate from a different angle, using it as a springboard for writing a gendered history of the French civil service (Schweitzer 2017). In this article, I analyse the case of interwar women labour inspectors in Poland to elucidate the potential for women's labour activism within the state apparatus, and to examine how with their activist agendas interpreted and transcended the letter of law, and how their repertoires of action collated with their official duties as inspectors.

## **The socio-economic context**

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the main industrial centres in partitioned Polish lands were geographically dispersed. They were located in the urban areas around Katowice and Poznań in the German partition, Cracow in Austrian-governed Galicia, and in and around Warsaw and Łódź—where women were particularly numerous in the textile, garment, and food processing industries—in the Congress Kingdom (the Russian partition). The most important challenges that arose in independent Poland following its re-establishment in 1918 were related to the economic, political, and social integration of the formerly partitioned lands (Davies 2005, 398; Porter-Szücs 2014, 105–125). In the domain of labour law and social welfare, this implied the creation of a uniform legal and institutional framework (Inglot 2008, 78–83). Throughout the 1920s, the Labour Inspectorate served as a tool of integration on the national level in terms of the implementation of labour legislation. Its efforts initially had a special focus on the lands of the former Russian partition, which lagged behind the former Prussian and Austrian territories in terms of workers' rights and

welfare provisions. In the Russian partition already in the 1880s, male imperial inspectors identified the labour conditions of women and children as particularly dire. Factory inspector Vladimir Sviatlovskii, who was responsible for the Warsaw factory district between 1886 and 1888, underlined the close connection between child labour and women's factory employment. According to him, up to 80 percent of all child workers (according to the standards of the time, this meant workers under fifteen) in the Warsaw factory district were employed in textile enterprises (Sviatlovskii 1889, 17, 20). He dedicated substantial portions of his report to condemn the extreme insalubrity of factories and the proliferation of occupational and infectious diseases among women and children (Sviatlovskii 1889, 9–26). This initial preoccupation with child labour was in no way unique: when the factory inspection was first created in Great Britain in 1833, it focused on the implementation of child labour regulations (Blelloch 1938; Kirby 2003). Similarly, child labour was an early target of inspectors' interventions in Prussia (Karl 1993).

In addition to the heritage of partition, the transnational dimension, which in the domain of labour took shape most clearly in cooperation with the International Labour Organization, also left a mark on Polish labour policies in the interwar period. The ILO saw efficiently functioning national labour inspectorates as important tools of labour regulation and enforcement, and it encouraged their development from the very beginning, enshrining these hopes in its original 1919 constitution (International Labour Office 1923). The same document stipulated the necessity of women's participation in inspectorates, which reflected the ILO's efforts to define women as a special category of workers requiring sex-specific labour protections (for more on these efforts, see Zimmermann 2018). Polish officials, including women inspectors, not only took part in the ILO conferences but also closely collaborated with the International Labour Office through regular correspondence. Natali Stegmann has argued that consistent engagement with the emergent internationalism of the post-World War One era offered newly established Central European states opportunities to challenge their imperial institutional and legal heritage and legitimize their state-building efforts (Stegmann 2020a; Stegmann 2020b, 15).

### **Women within the inspectorate**

Between 1919 and 1928, the activities of the Labour Inspectorate of the Second Polish Republic were regulated, on the one hand, by the laws of the former partitions, and, on the other, by the new republic's legislation. Organisationally, the Inspectorate was part of the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance (in 1933 renamed the Ministry of Social Assistance), and the Chief Labour Inspector reported directly to the minister. The purview of inspectors, according to the 1919 provisional law, was extremely vast (Dekret 1919). Their main task was the implementation of labour legislation, which they performed by visiting and inspecting enterprises and ensuring employers' and workers' adherence to legal norms and compliance with the instructions of the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance. Their jurisdiction extended to all workers, although their interventions in the domain of agricultural labour remained extremely limited until the end of the 1930s. They could fine enterprise owners and, in the case of particularly severe abuses or persistent non-compliance, launch court cases and serve as prosecutors. They were also responsible

for collecting statistics and information regarding the labour and living conditions of workers, also with the view of further developing labour law, that is, identifying areas of industrial life in need of updated regulations. In the case of women labour inspectors, this final point resulted in a multi-year research program aimed at identifying and combatting the most urgent issues related to the wage labour of women and children.

According to the 1919 provisional decree, both men and women holding a degree from an institution of higher education (university) could become inspectors. The 1927 law on the Labour Inspectorate, which overruled both the provisional decree and the older regulations of the former partitions, also changed the requirements to join the staff of the Inspectorate (*Rozporządzenie ... o inspekcji pracy* 1927a). It stipulated that either a lower-level technical education or relevant professional experience were sufficient in combination with one year of experience within the Inspectorate and a successful qualification from a special committee within the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance.

Throughout the entire interwar period, it was legally possible for the ministry to appoint assistants to inspectors recruited from workers themselves, but the first such assistants were hired in Łódź only at the end of 1935 (Gadomski 1935). Women, on the other hand, were continuously present within the Inspectorate since its inception, typically employed as deputy inspectors. The position of deputy inspector was not gendered *per se*, and it was held both by men and women. In 1926, there were one hundred men inspectors and seven women—five in Warsaw and two in Łódź (*Inspekcja Pracy* 1927, vi – xv). Despite the official legal equality of men and women, achieving the status of a full-on inspector was extremely rare for women in the Inspectorate. Between 1919 and 1921, before her election to the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish Parliament), socialist Zofia Praussowa (1878–1945) was responsible for overseeing two districts in Warsaw (Kirstowa 1936b, 225). Between 1927 and 1931, Halina Krahelska (1886 or 1892–1945), the first head of the Women’s Inspectorate, also reported directly to the Chief Labour Inspector. She was succeeded by Janina Miedzińska (1891–1976), who continued to occupy this position when the Second World War broke out. In 1936, Emilia Frelkowa served as an acting inspector and was the superior of two deputy inspectors, a woman and a man (*Inspekcja Pracy* 1937, 73–74). Apart from these four women, I was unable to find other such cases of women in the top ranks of the Labour Inspectorate.

Biographical data on most women labour inspectors is scarce. Krahelska and Praussowa serve as two crucial exceptions in this respect: the first was a well-known writer and political activist, and the second built a prominent political career. Both had a long history of underground socialist militancy in the Russian partition (Krahelska 1934a; Próchnik 1948; Müller-Butz 2019, 210–250). Young Janina Miedzińska took part in a Marxist educational circle in Lwów (today Lviv) and was connected to local socialist networks (Semil 1937, 357). In other words, these women shared left-wing convictions and a background in political activism that predated their employment in the Polish state apparatus, both of which shaped their approach to labour inspection.

As discussed above, women labour inspectors implemented national legislation that was strongly aligned with contemporaneous international labour standards. At the same time, throughout the entire period discussed here, they were involved in various ILO initiatives as active participants, both as officials and as independent experts on the labour of women. Already in 1919, Zofia Praussowa took part in the first International

Labour Conference as an adviser to the Polish delegation (League of Nations 1920, 9). After her departure from the Inspectorate in 1931, Halina Krahelska, whose transnational engagements I discuss in greater detail elsewhere, remained an active member of the ILO's Correspondence Committee on Women's Work between 1932 and 1936 (Popova, n. d.). Janina Miedzińska was among the four members of the Polish delegation to the Regional Conference of Labour Inspectors organized by the ILO in Vienna in May 1937 (Gadomski 1937), which also suggests that the Polish Inspectorate sought to highlight women's participation in the inspection at this transnational forum. Although here I explicitly focus on the inspectors' domestic agendas, it is necessary to acknowledge their continuous orientation towards transnational networks.

The labour of women and children was regulated by the law adopted on 2 July 1924. Its implementation faced considerable obstacles, and three years later, in 1927, a dedicated section for women workers was created within the Inspectorate. Although this section did not have an official name, throughout the article I refer to it as "the Women's Inspectorate" to distinguish it both from the Inspectorate at large and those women deputy inspectors in regional branches who did not explicitly specialize in women workers' affairs. In 1933, there were six women inspectors specializing in the issues of working women and children, and among the twenty-five "general" deputy inspectors, there were an additional five women (out of 102 staff members overall) (Inspekcja Pracy 1934, 209–219). In 1936, nine out of fifteen women employed as deputy inspectors were part of this section (Inspekcja Pracy 1937, 6).

The 1924 law regulated the work of minors between fifteen and eighteen years old. It prohibited unpaid labour and banned the labour of children under fifteen; it also limited the number of minors employed at an enterprise, banned their night work, and prescribed regular medical examinations to ensure the health of underage workers. In the domain of women's labour, the law called for the creation of separate washrooms and toilets at all enterprises employing more than five women and the installation of daytime nurseries for infants at factories employing more than one hundred women. It also expanded maternity protections for pregnant women from eight to twelve weeks and prohibited the termination of pregnant women (Ustawa 1924).

Selecting which facets of the 1924 law were to be implemented first was one of the Women's Inspectorate's initial tasks. Based on two guiding principles – the importance of a given issue for society overall, and the relative ease with which it could be implemented – the provision of childcare for women employed at factories was identified as the highest priority (Leśniewska 1929). As will become clear later on, the efforts of women labour inspectors generally followed a maternalistic logic, focusing as they did on improving the conditions of babies (and, consequently, their working mothers) and underage workers.

## **Practical limitations**

Both the 1919 provisional law and the 1928 decree on labour inspection generated an image of labour inspectors as powerful figures with expansive authority. In practice, however, they confronted numerous challenges that limited the impact of their efforts. Colleagues from the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance and other observers criticized the Labour Inspectorate as inadequate given the scope of its duties (Modliński 1932,

116; Ryngmanowa 1935). Despite the fact that inspectors were independent from local authorities, which enabled them to enjoy substantial autonomy, their interventions remained limited due to serious financial constraints, the Inspectorate's small number of personnel, and an extremely wide array of tasks they were required to perform. A particularly time-consuming task was the mediation of individual and collective labour conflicts, a function also performed by labour inspectors in the Russian partition. For instance, in the early years of Halina Krahelska's career at the Warsaw Labour Inspectorate (1919–1921), she exclusively moderated disputes and did not perform a single factory visit (Krahelska 1936a, 103). This part of their workload was gradually alleviated after 1928, when a law introducing labour courts was implemented (Rozporządzenie 1928).

Throughout the second half of the 1920s and the 1930s, the number of inspectors and deputy inspectors – taken together – held relatively steady at around one hundred, reaching 116 in 1936; but the number of enterprises they had to visit continuously grew during the same period. Dr. Melania Bornstein-Łychowska, a researcher for the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance, estimated that the number of enterprises each inspector would need to visit per year grew from roughly thirty-five in 1919 to more than 180 in 1927 (Bornstein-Łychowska 1928, 70). This situation became even more acute in the 1930s due to the 1930–1935 economic crisis, which led to the break-up of larger enterprises (Jończyk 1961, 15–26). Insufficient funds for factory visits, especially when it came to enterprises outside of the main cities, was a related problem. The lack of travel funds was so severe that some inspectors in the provinces spent their entire quarterly budget on one field trip (Krahelska 1928a, 375). This state of affairs led inspectors to prioritize larger urban enterprises because visits to these sites formally allowed them to regulate the labour conditions of more workers.

Throughout the whole period discussed here, women inspectors were consistently present only in Warsaw and Łódź, which impacted the Women's Inspectorate's realm of action. It remained highly focused on the labour conditions of women industrial workers, ignoring the two largest groups of female labourers, namely agricultural and domestic workers. In 1931, there were 415,000 women in Poland employed as domestic workers, and 515,000 worked in agriculture; only 325,000 women total were employed in all branches of industry (Jończyk 1961, 16).

These practical limitations, I argue, partially shaped women inspectors' activist stance. Faced with the daunting task of improving the condition of working women and minors and possessing only limited resources to pursue it, they turned to research and publishing as a way to communicate to the general public the exploitative and dangerous conditions in which these workers laboured. They saw themselves not merely as executors of the state's will but as political actors: with their publications, they sought to win in the court of public opinion and thereby influence political decisions.

### **Childcare as a cause**

The Women's Inspectorate identified the organization of day care for the infant children of mothers employed in factories as the most pressing issue to tackle. High infant mortality rates among the children of factory-employed mothers stood at the centre of social reform and medical circles in Poland and internationally already by the late nineteenth century. This issue was particularly dire in the textile

manufacturing centres of the Russian partition. In 1904, a group of Polish doctors organized the association *Kropla mleka* ("A drop of milk"), which distributed sterilized milk to infants in the industrial towns of Congress Poland, most notably in Łódź (Labbé 2018). In the decades that followed, staggering infant mortality rates continued to attract the attention of medical professionals and social reformers alike.

In a brochure published in 1927, Dr. Zofia (Zofja) Garlicka, a former factory doctor and activist affiliated with *Kropla mleka*, argued that the problem of infant mortality remained acute. She suggested two possible solutions: ensuring the care of the mother by securing her income or providing childcare at the factory. The latter, she argued, was more realistic. Nurseries could both adequately care for infants while their mothers were at work and encourage mothers to breastfeed longer, as the 1924 law granted two thirty-minute breaks to working mothers still breastfeeding (Garlicka 1927, 11). Garlicka directly relied on the information collected by women labour inspectors and supported their efforts to create on-site childcare facilities.

A Polish innovation, establishment of day care facilities at factories employing more than one hundred women was prescribed by the 1924 law on the labour of women and minors (Ustawa 1924, art. 15, p. 2). The implementation of this particular point, however, was immediately postponed because of a large-scale lobbying and press campaign initiated by factory owners who claimed that the installation of nurseries was financially unfeasible. In an attempt to undermine workers' support, employers spread rumours that a share of their wages would be deducted in order to create such facilities even though the cost was supposed to be covered by industrialists themselves (Leśniewska 1929). In 1926, this provision was postponed for a second time, and it was not until 1927 that the situation began to change. In March that year, a decree of the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance again stated that the creation of nurseries was obligatory. The Women's Inspectorate was charged with the implementation of this measure, which it continued to do until 1939. Between 1927 and 1929, Halina Krahelska and Maria (Marja) Leśniewska spearheaded the promotion of nurseries among workers through general publications and the workers' press, and through public lectures held at companies, trade unions, workers' clubs, and on the radio (Leśniewska 1929, 73). They also lobbied state-owned enterprises to instal nurseries. This démarche proved successful, and state companies established fifteen of the first twenty-one nurseries. The State Tobacco Monopoly, which at the time employed 8,853 women, was the first to establish creches, followed by the State Alcohol and Matches Monopolies (Leśniewska 1931, 24; Apercü 1929, 7). To document these initial successes, Leśniewska wrote a book that was released as an official publication of the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance (Leśniewska 1931). Large portions of it were translated into French (76–108) and English (111–120), demonstrating a clear orientation towards the international social reform community. The volume explicitly referred to the 1919 ILO Maternity Protection Convention and described the efforts to create nurseries as an important and innovative expansion of the Convention – despite the fact that Poland had not ratified it.

Conversely, the creation of nurseries at privately owned factories remained challenging. Large textile entrepreneurs proved particularly resistant. Well-informed about the required conditions for the nurseries, they used the size of their enterprises as an argument to claim the financial impossibility of constructing childcare



facilities: some of the larger factories, such as “Scheibler and Grohmann,” employed thousands of women, which meant there would be hundreds of infants in need of care. Because prevailing hygienic and sanitary standards limited the number of children in one nursery to between seventy and one hundred children, factory owners claimed that the establishment of several on-site nurseries was unaffordable (Krahelska 1928b, 179).

The Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance rejected these excuses, expanding the possible forms child care facilities could take. Stationery day nurseries remained the prerogative of large state enterprises, but inspectors were willing to consider alternative care facilities in compliance with the law. One of the early adopters of the policy of diversification was the State Alcohol Monopoly, which offered home-based nursing assistance to mothers in their employ (Krahelska 1928c, 299).

By 1931, there were 101 care facilities in Poland offering childcare services to around 25 percent of women legally entitled to it. The onset of an economic crisis that resulted in mass lay-offs of women workers, however, also halted the development of these facilities for several years; only in 1936 did their overall number surpass that of 1931 (Pawelska 1939, 166–167). The textile industry continued to be exceptionally deficient in terms of providing childcare to working mothers: in 1936, there were 37,690 women workers in Łódź alone who were entitled to this support, but only 1,118 children were actually in some form of day care. Only two stationery nurseries were created in Łódź; the rest of children were cared for in alternative facilities (Inspekcja Pracy 1937, 13). These facilities were not provided by employers; instead, associations like *Kropla mleka* in Łódź or the Society for Infant Care (*Towarzystwo Opieki nad Niemowlętami*) in Warsaw ran them, and labour inspectors ensured that their care met the prescribed standards (Pawelska 1939, 168). This intensified collaboration between the Women’s Inspectorate and independent associations was ostensibly an attempt to mitigate the effects of the prolonged economic crisis: these care stations first opened in 1935 (Miedzińska 1935a).

Providing childcare also hinged on the availability of qualified care workers. The education of nurses for the factory day nurseries and care stations, a task at the intersection of maternity protection and professional training, could not be realized with only the limited resources of the Women’s Inspectorate. In Warsaw, at two of the first nurseries to be established, the Inspectorate set up two facilities for the practical training of new personnel to be employed across the country. Experienced nurses oversaw the work and professional training of new recruits, which closely followed the guidelines set out by the Inspectorate. According to Leśniewska, by 1929, around forty women had successfully completed this program (Leśniewska 1929, 74). However, by 1 January 1929, the number of nurseries and care stations reached sixty-five, and the need for new personnel could barely be met by the graduates of the Inspectorate’s training program alone (Leśniewska 1931, Table C). A parallel three-month program was established by Dr Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka, a physician, women’s rights activist, and the deputy president of the Central Women’s Section of the Polish Socialist Party (*Centralny Wydział Kobiety PPS*). Like Halina Krahelska, Budzińska-Tylicka was a member of the Political Club of Progressive Women (*Klub Polityczny Kobiet Postępowych*), a prominent political alliance of well-to-do women fighting for women’s rights (Dufurat 2013, 106). The first group to attend the program included twenty-six women who had travelled from various regions of the country to pursue their training in Warsaw. These women worked in orphanages, hospitals, and

other childcare institutions and were instructed on matters of infant health and wellbeing (Budzińska-Tylicka 1927). It is unclear where the funding for these two programs came from and what their budget was, but their structure suggests they were extremely limited in terms of finances: both programs were short and designed in a way that combined training with work and, thus, minimized the resources needed to operate the program.

Between 1935 and 1939, the number of various types of care facilities and infants in care tripled – from 81 to 244 facilities, and from 3,900 to 10,227 children. But the number of factory nurseries hovered slightly above thirty throughout the 1930s (Pawelska 1939, 166). Most of these nurseries belonged to state-owned enterprises and were established during the initial push for maternity protections between 1927 and 1929. Despite the financial crisis and private entrepreneurs' reluctance to invest in permanent infant day care, a growing number of children entered care facilities thanks to the ministry's inclusive interpretation of the law, women labour inspectors' persistent focus on the issue, and the Inspectorate's cooperation with other activists and public associations.

### Ensuring the fair employment of minors

Along with overseeing and promoting the creation of childcare facilities for the infant children of working mothers, women labour inspectors implemented the second central tenet of the 1924 law, the regulation of the labour of minors. Despite the fact that the labour of children under fifteen years old was prohibited with the adoption of the 1921 (March) Constitution and then again by the implementation of the 1924 law, at the end of 1920s, there still were some 2,500 children between the ages of nine and fourteen employed, typically at small enterprises as attested to by the records of the health insurance fund (*kasy chorych*) (Kirstowa 1928). Enforcing the ban on child labour, although an important target of the inspectors' interventions, was overshadowed by a host of problems related to the employment of young people *above* fifteen. According to the decree on industrial law, workers between fifteen and eighteen years old could be employed either with a regular work contract or a special apprenticeship contract (Rozporządzenie ... o prawie przemysłowem 1927b, art. 111–125). This law legalized earlier "apprenticeship" arrangements but did little to standardize vocational training and ensure the labour rights of apprentices. Janina Miedzińska, the Inspectorate's leading expert on the labour of minors, criticized the law mercilessly: "the Polish decree departs significantly from the fundamental essence of modern industrial life [and] introduces the harmful appearance of learning a trade on the premises of a workplace and thus obscures the actual relationship of the employer to the employee, to the detriment of the latter" (Miedzińska 1931, 128).

Labour inspectors identified two interrelated problems: the over-exploitation of (under)paid minors and youngsters under the guise of "apprenticeships," and the lack of actual vocational training and adequate general education for labouring youth. Although the 1924 law banned the unpaid labour of minors, an "apprentice" status effectively provided a legal loophole that allowed employers to underpay youngsters—or not pay them at all. In some cases, apprentices were even forced to pay tuition fees. According to Halina Kraheńska, along with the lack of coherent regulations regarding apprenticeships, a high level of youth unemployment during the economic crisis exacerbated the situation (Kraheńska 1934).

The conflation of the unregulated labour of minors with the promise of education stood at the core of the very issue inspectors were fighting against. Intended as training programs for underage workers, apprenticeships were also common among the older youth. Up to 47 percent of workers between eighteen and twenty-one years old in Warsaw were classified as apprentices at the end of the 1920s; in Łódź, it was as high as 40 percent of workers in this age group (Jończyk 1961, 283). At the same time, the issue was heavily gendered: in the case of the printing industry, inspector Emilia Frelkowa stressed that apprentices were exclusively boys as girls had no opportunities to receive training and were indefinitely relegated to the lowest-paid menial jobs like cleaning or arranging fonts (Frelkowa 1929, 39). At the end of the 1920s, small numbers of girls laboured as apprentices in the garment industry, where they often worked extremely long hours for meagre wages (Kirstowa 1936a).

Employers frequently only had oral contracts with apprentices, which further facilitated abuses, allowing them to fire youngsters at will (despite the fact that an apprenticeship was typically intended to last four years), push them towards menial tasks instead of teaching various skills related to a trade, and alter or reduce their pay. Inspecting contracts fell within the immediate scope of the Women's Inspectorate, but the regularization of apprentices' status was a persistent challenge for the inspectors.

Ensuring the fair employment of minors also became grounds for cooperation between trade unions and the Labour Inspectorate, as discussed in the book by deputy labour inspector Emilia Frelkowa about the labour conditions of minors in the printing industry. This short volume was based on materials collected during two surveys conducted in cooperation with two trade unions. Paying attention to the distinct status of apprentices and the degree of worker-led labour organizing across the former partitions, the book painted a grim portrait of apprentices' working conditions at the end of the 1920s. Frelkowa described the existing system as an extremely exploitative arrangement that left young people inexperienced, underpaid, and exhausted, if not permanently disabled. Regardless of size and location, printing enterprises disproportionately relied on the underpaid—or altogether unpaid—labour of “apprentices.” Two-thirds of enterprises surveyed employed underage workers, and their proportion of the workforce ranged from 30 percent to 100 percent (Frelkowa 1929, 14). They often remained, Frelkowa lamented, underqualified “helpers” in perpetuity (Frelkowa 1929, 21). The survey revealed that 80.8 percent of all apprentices performed the same tasks during the entire duration of the apprenticeship, which made it impossible for them to acquire the skills necessary to advance in the printing trade. While 49.5 percent of apprentices who completed the survey had a qualified worker assigned to them as an instructor, another 42.5 percent did not (Frelkowa 1929, 24). In the book, trade union representatives and the labour inspectors unanimously identified the overexploitation of underpaid adolescent workers—along with growing mechanization—as the root cause of growing unemployment among adult printers. With this book, Frelkowa entered into discussions going on in the public sphere, that is, beyond her strictly professional circles, with the goal of exposing pervasive, systemic labour law violations in the printing industry.

To mobilize public opinion around the issue of apprenticeships, women labour inspectors used the discursive framework of the *Sanacja* regime, established by Jozef Piłsudski after the May 1926 coup. The *Sanacja* called for the “healing” of Polish political and social life through the “moral revival” of the Polish nation. This patriotic narrative shaped the

agendas of various social and political activists and movements, including activists in the women's movement (Plach 2014). Labour inspectors used *Sanacja* rhetoric to achieve their own goals: Emilia Frelkowa argued that the existing system of apprenticeships destroyed adolescents not only physically due to dangerous working conditions, but also morally, as young people failed to develop a proper work ethic and appropriate expectations of fair remuneration for honest work (Frelkowa 1929, 16). Halina Kraheńska continued to support the Women's Inspectorate's struggles well after she left the office in 1931. Although she explicitly distanced herself from Piłsudski and the *Sanacja* camp, she masterfully used similar discursive framing when she spoke about the labour of minors at the Congress of Moral Education held in Cracow in 1934. She argued that the wage labour of minors had to be adequately paid to instil good work ethics in youngsters (Kraheńska 1934). To achieve this, she argued, vocational training had to be closely supervised by the Labour Inspectorate.

More generally, labour inspectors recommended a wide range of measures to improve the status of underage workers, especially apprentices, and ensure their education. Unsurprisingly, they typically advocated for stronger interventions by the state. In one early recommendation, Maria Kirstowa highlighted the dangers of teenagers' premature entry into the workforce and argued for the expansion of their educational opportunities. She proposed the creation of vocational schools for those who had successfully completed their compulsory education and argued that weaker students who initially failed to finish should be given the means and opportunity to prolong their education for another year (Kirstowa 1928). Janina Miedzińska argued that apprenticeships that took place in the workplace had to be abolished altogether, but she admitted that it was unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, she underscored, apprenticeship contracts had to become standardized and written to prevent abuses (Miedzińska 1931, 134). Nevertheless, in 1936, the official report of the Labour Inspectorate stated that improvements in this respect were minor, and the number of written contracts did not reflect the real number of apprentices (Inspekcja pracy 1937, 17).

These controversies and the limited achievements concerning the regularization of the labour of minors were reflected in the repeated legislative actions taken to confirm the prohibition of unpaid labour for workers between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. This ban was reaffirmed by the 1931 amendment to the 1924 law on the labour of women and children and the 1934 amendment to the decree on industrial law which specified that apprentices also had to be paid and which banned fees for apprenticeships (Ustawa 1931; Ustawa 1934b).

### **Beyond the 1924 law: silences and ambiguities**

In this final section, I discuss several initiatives introduced by labour inspectors that went beyond the tenets of the 1924 law as they allow me to home in on the specificities of inspectors' activism and its limits. The cases discussed below demonstrate that inspectors' publications were shaped by but also attempted to transcend the conventions of the time.

The official publications of the Women's Inspectorate, which were sponsored by the state, remained constrained by the nationalist agenda of leading political circles (Davies 2005, 298–303). While the category of class was frequently visible in their writings, the

category of ethnicity remained conspicuously absent. Jewish labourers were numerous yet marginalized in the labour market, and typically, they could find work only in the smallest workshops that rarely observed any labour norms (Garncarska-Kadary 1994, 241–242). Memoirs confirm that in Warsaw, inspectors routinely performed their duties at enterprises and workshops that employed significant numbers of Jewish workers (Kirstowa 1936b, 222). In official publications, however, the distinct problems faced by Jewish workers or workers from other minority groups were not mentioned. An example of this silence is Frelkowa's book, discussed above. This volume was the result of a collaborative effort between the Women's Inspectorate, which prepared questionnaires, and two trade unions, which distributed them, gathered responses, and provided comments on and explanations of the survey data. The two unions involved in this initiative were the Polish Trade Union of Printers and Related Professions (*Związek Zawodowy Drukarzy i Pokrewnych Zawodów*) and the Jewish Trade Union of Printing Workers (*Związek Zawodowy Robotników Drukarskich*). While in the text of the book both trade unions were mentioned and lauded for their efforts, only the Polish trade union was featured on the cover (Frelkowa 1929).

Ethnic discrimination was not the only matter on which women labour inspectors remained largely silent in their mainstream publications. The ministry's official journal *Labour and Social Assistance (Praca i Opieka Społeczna)* and other similar outlets focused heavily on successes and challenges related to the implementation of the 1924 law; it otherwise avoided taboo issues such as sexual violence against women workers. In her memoirs, Halina Krahelska stated that in 1930, pursuing a hypothesis that the number of cases of abuse and harassment of women workers had increased during the economic crisis, she attempted to collect information on the subject and sent requests to other women inspectors, but she mostly received cursory responses (Krahelska 1936b, 31–32). The only exception was Maria (Marja) Przedborska, an inspector from Łódź, who not only researched the scope and forms of workplace abuse but disseminated her results to the public. In 1932, Przedborska published eight anonymized testimonies of women workers abused at their workplace in a local newspaper (Przedborska 1932). The oldest of these women was thirty-nine, while the youngest was twenty. In these testimonies, the women reported being continuously harassed and eventually dismissed for "low morals" if or when they dared resist the abusers' sexual advances. In her introduction to the testimonies, Przedborska lamented that the economic crisis significantly limited workers' ability to resist or change jobs: with rampant unemployment, women workers feared countering harassment as this typically entailed their termination. She also added that as a deputy inspector for the labour of women and children, there was relatively little she could do to help these women take action against their abusers: once fired, these workers, with the support of Przedborska, were able to obtain the two-week pay to which they were legally entitled. She had no other means at her disposal to improve their situation, especially because many of them wanted her to remain discreet and not pursue any legal action. Drawing public attention to such abuses, thus, became a challenging but potentially powerful way of allowing women workers to speak openly about harassment and seek legal redress.

Although perceptive and transgressive in her explicit discussion of the gendered dimension of workplace sexual violence, Przedborska identified class oppression as its root cause. According to her, the unchecked power of executives, managers, and foremen

meant that women workers were under constant threat of abuse. She mentioned an instance of class solidarity, when the harassment of a woman worker by a superior provoked her male colleagues on the shop floor to strike. But Przedborska remained completely silent about another likely dimension of workplace violence: abuse perpetrated male workers against their female colleagues. In her seminal article on class and gender in the workplace, Diane Koenker has elucidated these problematic aspects of working-class culture in the early Soviet Union, but comparable research for other Central and Eastern European contexts remains necessary (Koenker 1995).

As mediators between the state, workers, and employers, labour inspectors had to craft their narratives and tailor their attempts to improve women workers' labour and living conditions carefully in order to prevent antagonizing one or all of these groups. The methods they used to deal with the tangle of issues related to workplace accidents, labour-related exhaustion, and occupational diseases helps us better understand the challenges and ambiguities they confronted. Combatting work accidents was one of the core tasks of all inspectors; narrowly defined, it implied ensuring both compliance with workplace security and hygiene standards and the adequate training of workers. The need to reduce the number of work accidents was uncontroversial, but the measures to achieve this goal, as well as employers' and workers' responses to them, differed: the removal of women workers from occupations deemed too arduous for them (as women) or attempts to significantly transform the workflow at factories could elicit outrage.

As the first head of the Women's Inspectorate, Halina Krahelska pushed for early intervention on these issues. Similar to the issue of on-site childcare facilities, she focused on state companies to ensure swift and concrete changes in women workers' labour conditions. She successfully argued for the need to introduce seated work for women in the various factories of the State Tobacco and Alcohol Monopolies as means to reduce exhaustion and prevent the long-term deleterious effects of prolonged standing on women's health (Krahelska 1932, 131–132).

In the years that followed, women inspectors sought to understand women workers' issues more holistically. A deputy labour inspector from Cracow named Irena Zimmerspitzówna proposed an expansive research program as she explicitly connected the prevalence of workplace accidents with the overwhelming amount of household labour and care work women performed in addition to their paid work. Declaring that inspectors' efforts in this domain were unsystematic and limited due to the lack of information, she argued there was a need to conduct surveys among women workers and research their lives beyond the factory gates – their marital status and number of children – in order to fully grasp the entangled issues of workplace accidents and physical and psychological exhaustion as a gendered phenomenon. According to Zimmerspitzówna, indiscriminate changes to an isolated aspect of the workplace, such as the introduction of a seated instead of standing physical position for a particular task, did not necessarily result in positive changes for women workers. Instead, inspectors could cooperate with workers to learn which changes were most urgent (Zimmerspitzówna 1932).

While Zimmerspitzówna's article primarily outlined a research agenda, Janina Miedzińska advocated for practical measures that went beyond the workplace. Rest and leisure, she argued, were important parts of the labouring lives of women workers, and the state needed to ensure that the free time of workers was spent in a manner that

benefitted them. As head of the Women's Inspectorate, she contributed to the development of a physical education program and coordinated holiday camps for women workers. The physical education program, which the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance organized in cooperation with the State Agency for Physical Education and Military Training (*Państwowy Urząd Wychowania Fizycznego i Przystosowania Wojskowego*), had two main modalities: in Warsaw, it generally implied ten-minute exercise sessions held in the workplace, while in Poznań and Cracow, district community centres were used to provide women workers with opportunities to exercise outside of working hours. Once again, state enterprises were the privileged terrain for the Inspectorate's initiatives; the State Alcohol Monopoly introduced ten-minute exercise breaks in all its factories (Miedzińska 1935).

Both Zimmerzpitzówna and Miedzińska carefully avoided criticizing the controversial rationalization of production as a possible reason for labour-related exhaustion. According to Zimmerzpitzówna, it was the task of inspectors to reduce workers' physical efforts without sacrificing their productivity. Similarly, to make the measures she championed more palatable to employers, Miedzińska, along with documenting the lowering of workers' blood pressure and other positive physical effects of exercise, stressed that reinvigorated workers were able maintain their productivity levels despite prolonged breaks for exercise.

## Conclusion

Writing after her departure from the Inspectorate, Halina Krahelska offered a radical vision of the future of labour inspection in Poland. To substantially improve the conditions of all women workers, she argued, it was necessary for trade unionists to become assistants to labour inspectors. She criticized the prevailing legislation on worker-assistants (*Rozporządzenie . . . o inspekcji pracy 1927a*) for putting them in an extremely subordinate position. Drawing on examples from Austria, Germany, and England, she proposed establishing a system of voluntary assistants which would allow trade union activists of both genders to cooperate with the Inspectorate as active citizens and not as bureaucrats; she also called for expanding the corps of women inspectors (Krahelska 1932, 122–125, 129–131). On another occasion, she insisted that a labour inspector's proactive stance during factory visits could be decisive for producing tangible improvements to workers' conditions in a given enterprise (Krahelska 1936a, 121).

While such an inspectorate—cross-class, balanced in terms of gender, and activist in its orientation—failed to materialize, I argue that women labour inspectors in interwar Poland took an activist stance when interpreting and implementing legislation regarding the labour of women and minors. The ambitious yet vague law of 2 July 1924 created a roadmap that guided their activities, both in terms of their practical interventions and research topics, until 1939. Their precise research questions and areas of concern were not limited to those expressly defined in the 1924 law, and they changed and expanded over fifteen years. Women labour inspectors were involved not only in the creation of material infrastructure for working women, such as childcare facilities and summer camps, but also endeavoured to educate the public on the problems women and minors faced as marginalized workers in the Polish economy. The arenas in which women inspectors were active extended far beyond the shop floor and the court room, the latter of which they used to

ensure enterprises' compliance with labour legislation. They sought to expand the inevitably limited impact of their interventions in the workplace by adhering to the strategy of using the press and other publications to expose particularly exploitative labour arrangements to gain the support of (transnational) labour rights and social welfare activists and the wider Polish public.

## Note

1. Although the terms "labour inspection," "labour inspectorate," and "factory inspection" are commonly used interchangeably to denote the agencies responsible for the implementation of labour legislation, throughout the text, for the sake of consistency, I refer to the agency as the Labour Inspectorate (*Inspekcja Pracy*), while "labour inspection" denotes the process itself.

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