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A CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF FEMALE RESIDENTS OF RURAL FARMING AREAS IN POLAND

Abstract. The article is a contribution to the discussion on the perception of the roles of contemporary rural women, including heterogeneous images of their personal potential and social commitment. In a special way, it refers to the changes that took place in the period after the transformation of the Polish economy and entry into the European Union. For the achievement of that objective, a pilot survey was performed with the use of a proprietary diagnostic questionnaire. Today's rural women were found to efficiently modify their social and economic roles and to skillfully combine tradition and innovation. The study also revealed that the lack of involvement in social functions does not automatically mean the lack of contribution to the local community. Although women spend most of their spare time with their families, it does not contradict being open to innovation, searching for information, pursuing one's interests and staying socially active.

Keywords: rural areas, woman, socio-economic profile, social capital of rural areas

INTRODUCTION

In Poland, the economic transformation has been affecting all aspects of life since 1989. The changes concern the political, economical, social and cultural dimension. The transformation has had a particularly strong impact on rural areas which, in accordance with the Union's concept for the development of remote areas, fulfill new important functions (environmental, residential, recreational and socio-cultural) in addition to their traditional agricultural function. A large contribution to the development of the above functions was made by women who – encouraged by the initial impetus given by professional activation programs – quickly learned to tap into

their own potential. The favorable external conditions redefined the value of their intellectual capital, experience and skills (Krzyżanowska, 2014; Sawicka, 2005). Meanwhile, the traditional concept of activation of rural women due to external factors has evolved towards women's internal motivation to support the work–family balance and to be an active participant in the civic and political life of their communities (Krzyszowski, 2008).

However, the women's approach to (and efforts to keep pace with) the changing reality and their readiness to seize emerging opportunities are often the consequence of varying social, economic, family and social conditions affecting their lives (Tryfan, 2003). Following the transformation, these conditions, together with

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the evolution of the women's roles, positions and expectations in the rural community, became the subject of scientific research. However, according to Michalska (2013), the relevant studies are highly specialized and continue to address a narrow scope of specific social events, and therefore fail to provide a full picture of changes. It is worth emphasizing, that studies on related topics are conducted in various parts of the world, and the conclusions drawn almost unanimously indicate that initiatives and programs that support and empower women contribute to the empowering of individual families and entire communities (Dekens and Voora, 2014; *The State of Food...*, 2011; *Women...*, 2017).

The objective of this paper is to broaden the profile of today's rural women with data from the Wielkopolska region, taking into consideration the mixed picture of their personal potential and local community engagement. Particular attention was paid to the women's social functions and the way they pursue their non-business interests. Their activity in both dimensions plays an important role in shaping not only the attitudes of women themselves but also the reality of living and working in rural areas.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

For the achievement of the above objective, a pilot survey was performed with the use of a proprietary diagnostic questionnaire. In line with the assumptions of this method, the interviewees are anonymous. The organization of the survey is not complicated and does not involve considerable costs. The survey was developed to cover the following aspects: age, education, employment forms, and ways of using the Internet as a communication tool, allowing for the exchange of thoughts, views, gaining knowledge, etc. However, the essential part was focused on the forms of professional and non-business activity, including the types of leisure activities. The respondents were asked to answer a total of 30 multiple choice questions. The survey was carried out from September to December 2017 with randomly selected female residents of 5 rural farming areas, including the previously collectivized areas (2) of the Czarnków-Trzcianka district. The selection of the sample was purposeful and was associated with earlier studies on the activities of women from this region. Once collected, the source materials were subject to a statistical analysis in Statistica 13.1. The results were presented in narrative form, in tables and graphically.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESPONDENTS

The survey covered 80 women from various age brackets. Women aged 55–64 (21%), 35–44 (20%) and 25–34 (20%) represented the largest group of respondents. Only 6% of the interviewees were aged up to 24 (Fig. 1).

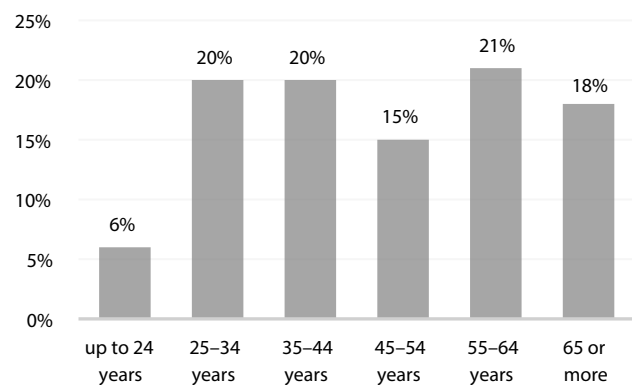


Fig. 1. Age of the respondents
Source: own elaboration.

The respondents had different education levels. The largest group were women with basic vocational education (29%) whereas junior secondary education was the least popular answer (2%) (Fig. 2).

The vast majority (92%) of women were residents of farming rural areas. Others resided in cities with

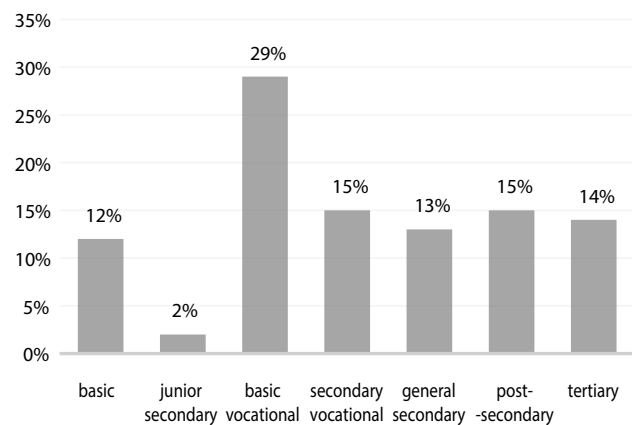


Fig. 2. Education level of the respondents
Source: own elaboration.

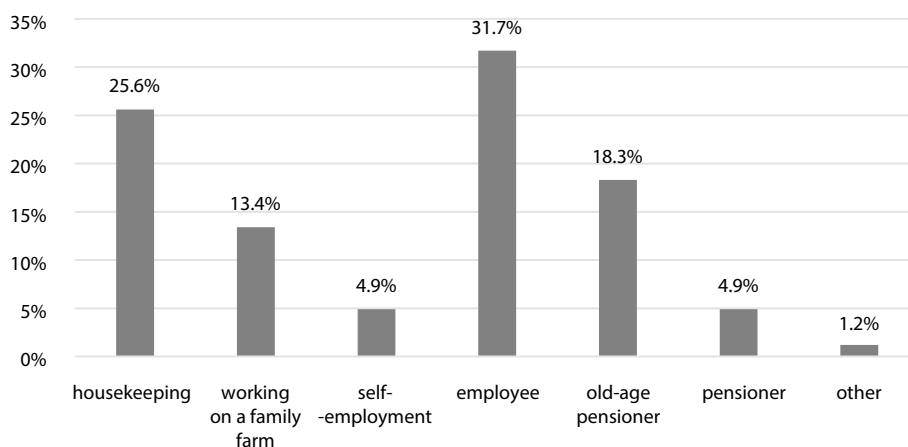


Fig. 3. The respondents' professional status
Source: own elaboration.

a population over 25,000 (4%), in non-farming rural areas or previously collectivized areas (3%), and in cities with a population of up to 5,000 (1 person). Note that urban dwellers were young women originating from (and strongly identifying with) rural communities. When filling the survey questionnaire, all interviewees were in rural areas. Another important thing is that most (87.3%) interviewees declared to have “always” lived in rural areas. As regards the other group (12.7%), they have resided in rural areas for 20 years, on average, including two women who have resided in rural areas for 2 years, and two more women who have resided in rural areas for 46 and 53 years, respectively.

About $\frac{1}{3}$ of respondents indicated the status “employed” and professionally active (31.7%). Some women declared their professional status to be “housekeeping” (25.6%), “old-age pensioner” (18.3%) or “working on a family farm” (13.4%). Only 4.9% of rural dwellers were self-employed; others declared to be pensioners (4.9%). The interviewees included one university student, one unemployed person and one woman caring for a sick child. All of the above activities fall into the “other” category (Fig. 3).

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Because of the evolution of rural areas, even defining the “rural woman” becomes quite challenging. As the migration between urban and rural areas is a bi-directional process, some women become rural residents because

they decided so, even if born elsewhere. The picture of a rural woman, presented in the literature as a farmer of a farmer's wife, has seemed incomplete for a long time now (Michalska, 2015). As revealed by the literature review, female rural residents were burdened by long-held stereotypes of subordination, humility and misconceived loyalty to family, especially to husbands (but also to parents). Usually, their social activity was nothing more than customary membership of the farmer's wives' association or agricultural association (Michalska, 2015; Wrzochalska, 2015; Zajda, 2011). Economic and social changes taking place in the Polish economy since 1989, as well as those related to EU accession have contributed to many changes in the attitudes of rural women. Today's rural women increasingly often go beyond their traditional family roles and are more willing to face professional, educational and social challenges. They become active and enterprising, seek knowledge and are often better educated than men (Sytuacja kobiet..., 2012; Women's economic..., 2012; Wrzochalska, 2015). This is one of the reasons why women, with their exceptional capacity to adapt to changing social and economic conditions, are an interesting subject of study on the rural areas' potential and social capital. This research is a part of the discussion referred to in this paper, and points the need for a further in-depth analysis of the situation of rural women.

The conducted research also included self-assessment of the wealth of rural women. By choosing the answers proposed in the questionnaire, the respondents

declared that while they usually had enough money, they could not afford extra expenses (48.75%). However, 30% of the interviewees believed to have enough funds to afford extra expenses or investments. There was an equal share (8.75%) of women who believed they needed to avoid many expenses in order to address their most urgent needs and of those considering themselves to be rich. Only 3.75% of respondents admitted not to have enough money to address their most pressing needs. On the one hand, the distribution of answers suggests an improvement in the financial situation of rural women. But on the other hand, it means that the rural population continues to experience intense poverty or to be at risk of poverty, as confirmed by other research (Górniak, 2015; Kalinowski, 2015; Kozera-Kowalska and Kalinowski, 2017).

Another interesting thing is the distribution of the women's education and financial situation revealed by the survey. While the respondents' general financial situation is relatively good (as much as 87.5% believe not to have any problems in addressing their most urgent needs), their wealth is not clearly related to their education. The group of 7 women declaring to be wealthy does not include anyone with a university degree. Women who claim to have enough funds to afford extra expenses or investments also have different education backgrounds. Meanwhile, in the group of respondents who picked the answer "I cannot afford extra expenses",

the share of women with basic vocational qualifications (12 persons) is comparable to that of women with post-secondary or tertiary education (11 persons). The interviewees included three women who found themselves in difficult circumstances; two of them had basic vocational qualifications and one had basic schooling (Table 1).

The results of the research indicate a low interest of women in performing social functions. The Farmer's Wives' Association (FWA) remains the most popular organization among the surveyed women (13 persons). Social activity, defined as initiating measures for the benefit of the rural community, was declared by 6 respondents. This could suggest a shortage of local leaders to stimulate further transformation of rural areas. Those socially active held the positions of mayor, councilor and FWA president. The remaining part of the respondents included one association member and one women active in the Local Action Group (LAG). It should be emphasized, however, that these activities were displayed only by individuals.

An analysis was performed of the distribution of social involvement by age of the women surveyed. The conclusion is that while the group of FWA members included women of a different age (from 25 to 65 and more), women aged 25–34 prevailed in the group of non-members. All councilors and mayors covered by the survey are women aged 35–44. The FWA president was in the 45–54 age bracket. Those who declare not to

Table 1. The respondents' education vs. financial status

Education/Financial status	I am wealthy	I have enough money to afford extra expenses or investments	I usually have enough money but cannot afford extra expenses	I need to avoid many expenses in order to address my most urgent needs	I do not have enough money to address my most urgent needs	Total
Basic	0	1	6	2	1	10
Junior secondary	0	0	2	0	0	2
Basic vocational	1	6	12	2	2	23
Secondary vocational	3	5	3	1	0	12
General secondary	2	2	5	1	0	10
Post-secondary	1	5	5	1	0	12
Tertiary	0	5	6	0	0	11
Total	7	24	39	7	3	80

Source: own elaboration.

be active in the local community include women of all age brackets considered. However, the largest groups were young women aged 25–34 (11 persons) and those ending their professional activity, i.e. women aged 55–64 (13 persons). Because this group demonstrates a great variation in age, the activities offered to promote social integration and involvement in measures for the benefit of rural areas should take that fact, and the needs of women of different ages, into consideration. The offering should also be supported with appropriate tools of the government's social and employment policy.

The conclusion from the research on the Polish population's engagement in voluntary work is that the experience in voluntary work for the community depends on selected socio-demographic characteristics. "Volunteering potential and engagement in voluntary work," a 2016 report of the Center for Public Opinion Research, states that the higher the education level and the greater the religious involvement, the more likely a person is to get involved in solving the community problems on a voluntary, unpaid basis. Such activities are taken more often by people with the highest per capita income, respondents aged 45–54 and rural residents. However, the above results are not corroborated by the group of women surveyed which includes a small share of socially active people aged 45–54. Further in-depth research should address the reasons for this discrepancy, including by attempting to capture the specificity of activities taken by rural women of that age bracket. The research on civic activity in rural areas also revealed that while rural residents are very attached to their place of residence, it does not always translate into the sense of belonging to (and identifying with) the local community (Żak, 2013, p. 164–179). The above suggests that social initiatives taken to boost the activity of rural women playing the role of local leaders and organizers of social life are a highly important and highly topical issue. The success of such initiatives can be measured by the fact that rural women become more willing to engage in social activity and see it as a way to transform their towns. By developing networks of mutual support, they attend trainings, florist workshops, healthy lifestyle meetings or charity events they organize themselves. The activity of rural women also depends on support from local government representatives and on positive feedback from other residents of towns concerned (Sawicka and Skwara, 2015).

The analysis of activity forms and non-business interests, as resulting from this study, showed that in most cases women spend their spare time with their family (55 persons) or friends (46 persons). Also, the respondents are rather inactive in their spare time as they watch TV (28 persons), access the Internet (9 persons) and read (18 persons). In turn, active forms of leisure cited by the women include: gardening (20 persons), sports (14 persons), shopping (12 persons) or going to the cinema, museum of theatre (9 persons). By far the smallest group of respondents visit a hairdresser or beautician (6 persons) and make handicraft (3 persons) in their spare time. Only 5 persons sleep or choose a passive form of leisure in their spare time whereas 3 claimed not to have any spare time at all. On the one hand, this suggests a broader access to various forms of culture and leisure, but on the other it consistently informs that women have little spare time or are unable to manage it.

Based on the information on the way they spend their time, the respondents were asked about their interests. "Gardening" was found to be the prevailing area of interest for rural women (30 persons). "Cooking and baking" was also popular (23 persons). Only 5 persons specified crocheting as their area of interest. "Reading books" was picked by 3 persons while 3 other opted for "automotive or traveling." The least popular areas of interest were "music" (2 persons), "sports" (1 person), "fashion" (1 person), "IT" (1 person) and "hiking" (1 person). Note that interests are an important part of lifestyle which, in turn, provides a direct marketing tool for customer identification and typology. The use of AIO (Activities, Interests, Opinions) and of the lifestyle criterion allows to capture the differences between various consumer groups. The differences determine the customers' market behavior, their response to marketing activities and their purchasing power and habits (Sowa, 2016, p. 134–137). According to Sowa (2016), lifestyle means consumption patterns of a social class or consumer group dependent on the preferred forms of spending time and money. In economic terms, this primarily means the ways of spending money and the types of goods and services purchased. Therefore, the rural women's areas of interest are an important area of research from the perspective of diagnosing their demand for specific goods and services, too.

To summarize this part of study, a reference needs to be made to a paper by Lipko (2013) on the rural population's lifestyle. The author believes the rural residents'

lifestyle has considerably changed, and rural living conditions themselves highly differ from one region to another. The offering of leisure activities and the possible ways of exploring the interests and passions are also diversified. Residents of rural areas located in the vicinity of urban agglomerations are usually provided with broader access to various forms of entertainment compared to those living in remote areas (Lipko, 2013).

Note that the ways of spending spare time may include self-learning, attending various trainings and workshops or even pursuing studies. The commitment to personal development and education may be considered as seeking a financial advantage and empowerment in order to improve one's professional, social and family life. Women covered by the survey were asked about their previous motivations and future preferences for training or upskilling options. For some of them, the direct incentive to attend previous trainings was the intent to enhance their knowledge (22 persons) and gain new qualifications and skills. Others (11 persons) could attend trainings only because they were delivered for free. The commitment to broaden their horizons and pursue their interests was a motivation to attend a training for 9 women; other 9 regarded the training session as a social event; and 6 persons were encouraged by relatives or friends to attend a training. When asked about training topics of potential interest to them, the respondents cited health, beauty, styling, cosmetics and cuisine (16 persons). Personal development (coping activities, communications, motivation) was important to 13 women. Ten persons declared interest in handicraft and applied arts. Another group of 10 respondents found it important to learn how to start their own business (including how to establish a business plan and access funds). Only 6 women would like to attend a training on the promotion of their region, while 2 would be interested in learning how to set up an organization (e.g. foundation, club, association). This result indicates that the respondents attach importance primarily to the rational aspect of self-education - they focus on themselves, on the individual benefits they can obtain, and they do not feel the need to engage in the life of the local community.

A shortage of spare time was a problem for rural women irrespective of the type of interests declared. As regards rural women, their spare time is often marginalized by their professional and caretaking activities; their objectives and priorities are largely related to the family life model which defines their roles, sets limits

on freedom and restricts the time spent on the pursuit of personal plans and needs (Radziewicz, 2012). Meanwhile, there is a noticeable tension between traditional roles of rural women and new trends for projecting the image of rural women that are independent, entrepreneurial and make well-informed choices regarding their personal development (Rorat et al., 2016).

The purpose of the next questions of the diagnostic sheet was to determine the online activity of the population surveyed. A vast majority of the respondents proved to be active Internet users. Even if they do not post any information themselves, they are eager to browse the Internet (28 person). 26 women browse and comment while other 26 browse and "like." Browsing posts and pictures was declared by 15 women; 10 respondents post pictures, mottos and words of wisdom.

Irrespective of the form of (and involvement in) online activities, note that being an Internet user considerably contributes to overcoming many barriers, including expanding ones' mindset to go beyond the local community. In addition to providing enhanced options for information retrieving and processing, Internet is the medium that drives the transformation of lifestyles, e.g. the ways of spending spare time, social and professional communication, nature of work, and attitudes towards values or social matters (Łodziana-Grabowska, 2016). Interestingly, when browsing the Internet, women covered by this study mostly look for information related to cuisine (38 persons) and gardening (31 persons). These are very universal issues that often form part of everyday life. However, considered in the context of social activity of rural women, they can be a starting point for establishing new relationships and an accidental exchange of opinions. The information obtained in this way can be shared with others at workshops, and stimulate participation in a variety of competitions, etc.

Also, surveyed rural women rely on the Internet as a source of knowledge on healthy lifestyle (27 persons), interior design (26 persons) and weather (23 persons). Conversely, local news (including the schedule of events etc.) and international, national and regional news was searched for less often (20 and 14 answers, respectively). Also, 16 respondents declared to look for travel information (places of interest, monuments, tourism) online; 9 women found the Internet to be a valuable source of knowledge on how to access funds in support of entrepreneurship; 7 respondents looked for stories of other women as an inspiration for day-to-day life; 7 other

interviewees searched for legal and financial information or for information on traditions and customs. Online psychological advice was sought by the smallest group (3 women); this could be explained by various reasons. Members of relatively small communities (like rural ones) may be considerably influenced by stereotypes resulting in a misperception of the role of psychologists. Therefore, they may believe that only people suffering from mental or borderline personality disorders should seek psychological assistance. As a consequence, some women believe they would experience discrimination or even social rejection if they revealed their intent to use that kind of support. Another reason could be the image of the Polish Mother still engraved in the minds of many rural women. This term refers to a resourceful person who bravely faces the challenges of everyday life and does not rely on help from others. Thus, psychological advice does not match the picture of the unshakeable protector of the home.

SUMMARY

As the socio-economic realities of Polish rural areas change, so does the perception and fulfillment of women's social roles. However, this is a highly complex transformation which depends on many endogenous and exogenous factors. The objective of the pilot survey was to provide an updated profile of rural women while partially closing the cognitive gap. Both the results and the attempts to interpret them on the fly suggest there is a need to continue and broaden the relevant research. Although the respondents demonstrated low levels of social involvement, it does not mean they did not participate in local community activities. They were spending their spare time with family and friends, which is consistent with their traditional roles. However, they became more open to information from external sources, accessed with the use of traditional or electronic media. Traditionally interested in cooking, baking and gardening, they look for new options that require them to actively seek information on funds or technical solutions (even when it comes to simple decorative art such as crocheting, decoupage etc.). The pursuit of interests drives an increased demand for trainings, even if the attendees regard it as an opportunity to socialize rather than a way to enhance their knowledge.

The socio-economic profile of today's female residents of Polish rural areas, as revealed by this study,

seems heterogeneous. However, the survey provides a picture of an "average" woman who is increasingly more aware of her needs and of her importance to the family and local community. This demonstrates the positive side of rural transformation. However, it is regrettable that the youngest rural residents are the least active group among those surveyed.

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SPÓŁECZNO-EKONOMICZNY PROFIL MIESZKANEK WSI ROLNICZYCH W POLSCE – PRZYCZYNEK DO BADAŃ

Abstrakt. Artykuł stanowi przyczynek do dyskusji nad postrzeganiem ról współczesnych kobiet wiejskich, z uwzględnieniem niejednorodnych obrazów ich potencjału osobistego i zaangażowania społecznego. W sposób szczególny nawiązuje do zmian, jakie nastąpiły w okresie po transformacji polskiej gospodarki oraz wejściu do Unii Europejskiej. Dla realizacji celu przeprowadzono pilotażowe badania ankietowe z wykorzystaniem autorskiego kwestionariusza diagnostycznego. Stwierdzono, że współczesne mieszkanki wsi to kobiety sprawnie modyfikujące swoje role społeczne i ekonomiczne, a przy tym umiejętnie łączące tradycję z nowoczesnością. Z badań wynika ponadto, że brak zaangażowania w pełnienie funkcji społecznych nie jest jednoznaczny z brakiem działalności na rzecz społeczności lokalnej. Przeznaczanie czasu wolnego kobiet głównie na kontakt z rodziną nie wyklucza otwartości na nowości, poszukiwania informacji, rozwoju zainteresowań i kontaktów społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe: wieś, kobieta, profil społeczno-ekonomiczny, kapitał społeczny wsi