



Young Researchers and the Problems of Polish Rural Areas

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EVOLUTION OF THE SOCIAL ROLES OF RURAL WOMEN IN POLAND: FACILITATING AND CONSTRAINING FACTORS

Introduction

The term “role” borrowed from the field of drama, is the key term of various theoretical perspectives. Although it may refer to the macro level of sociological analysis, its most common use is that of micro level. For a long time, women did not have much influence on how to perform a role assigned to them. The scenarios of the role were not flexible, the rules were set by outside authorities, and the way the roles were performed was a matter of social control. In many studies on the social situation of women, the main focus is put on gender inequality and inferior status of women, visible in almost every culture. According to Giddens (2004), in almost every society the male social roles are considered more valuable than the female ones, and the awards for good performance are also higher. It turns out that those inequalities are a consequence of the fact that the responsibility for the housework and raising the children rests almost exclusively with women. Female social roles are considered by the members of the society to be different from the male ones, and women are exposed to a more severe social control regarding the way they perform their roles. The patterns of social roles change with time, depending also on the value system currently in force, the age when the women happen to live, dominating religion, political system and particular local conditions (cf. Kotlarska-Michalska 2011). Evolution of social roles is a slow, lengthy process, which sometimes can be accelerated by some events, resulting in changes of social order. There were many such changes in 20th century Poland, and there were many economic, social, and cultural factors affecting the social position and status of the women. In this context, I will focus mainly on the changes regarding family, professional, and social roles of the rural women.

In 1918, Poland regained independence after 123-year period of Partitions. On establishing the Polish country anew, it was decided that, in the legal system

of the new state, the rights of women have to be equal to those of men¹. However, despite the fact that it was a time of equal rights, the opportunities provided by the society were not necessarily so equal. The differences in this area were particularly visible in rural communities, being quite a big part of Polish society: even in 1931, 23 million of people, that is 70% of the whole population of the Second Polish Republic, were living in villages (among them 11,860,000 women) (cf. Mędrzecki 2000). Another important event which accelerated the evolution of female roles was the Second World War with all the political consequences of Poland becoming one of the countries under the political influence of USSR.

The 60s provided another breakthrough, starting the process of profound social changes in the western countries. In sociology, those changes were described with the use of various terms: “post-industrial society” (Bell 1994), “information age” (Toffler 1998), “late modernity” (Giddens 2004), or “postmodernity” (Bauman, 2000). The changes took place in many different fields simultaneously – technological, social, economic and cultural. The most important processes that are indicated to take place at the time, are individualization, emancipation, liberalization and social differentiation, phenomena that have not lead to peace and self-realisation of the individual, but resulted in chaos, unpredictability and growing uncertainty (cf. Kudlińska 2011). The above processes were delayed in Poland, hence the time of acceleration began with the transformation of 1989. The last 25 years was for a Poland a time of profound social, economic and cultural changes. Those events have also had a great impact in the changes in defining and performing social roles by the rural women.

The main goal of this chapter is to show the changes of the roles performed by the rural women living in Poland. An attempt will also be made to answer the question about the factors facilitating and constraining the undertaking of new tasks and changing the way the traditional social roles are performed. Analysis of the changes of female roles will be performed on the basis of literature, personal documents (women’s diaries and memoirs, acquired as a result of various competitions organized in Poland to gather such materials since the Interwar period), as well as results of various, recent and past, research projects on the activity of the women in different areas of life. The analysis of the changes of roles performed by rural women in Poland makes it possible to observe the changes that have taken place in the village communities. Women, being a half of the residents

¹ In Poland, women gained voting rights after regaining the independence in 1918, i.e. on the 28th of November 1918, by the Decree of Józef Piłsudski, the Provisional Chief of State. According to the Decree of the Chief of State regarding law governing the elections to the Legislative Sejm (lower chamber of Parliament in Poland), “Every citizen of Poland, regardless of the sex, has the right to vote in the Sejm elections” and “All citizens that have the right to be elected, can be elected to the Sejm, regardless of sex”; this decision remained in force according to the March Constitution of Poland of 1921.

of rural areas², are an important element of the rural communities, and their opportunities, regarding making their own decisions about the kind of performed roles and the way they are performed, are growing. The aspirations, endeavours and values of the women have a real influence on the direction of the development of rural areas in Poland.

Social roles

Social role can be defined as a field of activity specified by the society, as a sequence of behaviours and acts performed by a person having a specific social status (Rybicki 1979: 462). Znaniecki defines social role as “the whole body of responsibilities, the fulfillment of which the social milieu expects from the individual because of the status of this individual” (Znaniecki 2001: 72). An individual is a member of many social groups at the same time, having many different social relations and performing different social roles (*ibidem*: 561). According to Merton, the basic feature of the social structure is the fact that there is not only one, but many social roles related with a particular social status. This structural phenomenon is called a “role set”, which is a set of “dependencies within roles assigned to the individual because of its social status” (Merton 2005: 142–143).

According to Szczepański, the main idea of social role is based on the assumption that every person has a particular position in different social groups and there are some behaviour patterns related with this position. The group expects its members, having specific positions, to act according to this pattern, which identifies proper behaviour. “Social role is a relatively fixed and coherent system of behaviours (actions), which are reactions to the behaviour of other people, formed in more or less clearly established pattern, expected by the group from its members” (Szczepański 1963: 76). Social role is not only a specific pattern describing the sequence of acts performed by an actor playing a role, but it includes also the very acts that form such a pattern. We can therefore assume the possibility of different interpretations of the same role, as well as the fact that the actor can change the role and make it more individual with his or her own individual preferences (Rybicki 1979: 463). The process of performing a role is influenced by a number of different factors: biogenic and psychogenic components of the individual; the personality pattern, specifying the set of ideal features which the individual performing particular role should have; definition of the role in a particular social group; the structure of the group, its cohesion,

² As indicated by the results of the Polish National Census of 2011, there are 15,332,000 people living in rural areas, i.e. 39.8% of the whole society. 50.25% of this group are women.

system of rewards and penalties which the group can impose on its members, as well as the extent to which the individual identifies him-/herself with the group (Szczepański 1963: 77).

When defining social role, Parsons refers to the social structure, based on a set of relatively fixed patterns of relationships between its particular components. What is the distinctive feature of social action is that the majority of social relations do not engage the actor totally, but engage only a part of his or her action – this particular part is called a “role”, which links the actor with the social structure (Parsons 1972: 306). Social roles define interests, norms and values, stimulating but at the same time also constricting the action of the individual.

The analysis of the social role includes two levels: structurally imposed orders of the role, understood as social provisions, demands referring to actions and behaviours of the individual, and personality role definition that denotes those role requirements which have been internalized by the individual. Structurally imposed orders are elements of the social structure, whereas the idea of personality role definition means that the role is a component of the personality of the individual performing this role. Structurally imposed orders consist of two substructures: the substructure of role facilitation which is a set of cultural factors making some specific role orders especially authorized by the structure of the group, and the role dilemmas related with those role orders which result in divergent interpretations due to imprecise formulation or because of their inconsistency with other orders of the role. The personality definition of the role includes two substructures as well – the idea of the role which is a set of those structurally imposed role orders which have been internalized by the individual, and the performance of the role which denotes behaviour of the individual that is determined or conditioned by the idea of the role or by structurally imposed orders of the role (Szmacka 2000: 323).

One of important elements of processes and behaviours related with performing the social role is the ability of an individual to gain autonomy against structures defining such roles and controlling the way they are performed. The level of the actor’s autonomy is considered to be increasing with the complexity of the set of roles performed by the individuals. What seems to be especially interesting is the observation of the changes in the way the roles are defined in periods of rapid changes, and this is exactly what is occurring in rural areas of Poland: we can observe women go beyond their family roles assigned by the tradition and take action in new areas. Moreover, even traditional family roles are performed in a new way, often never seen before and not always accepted.

Multitude of roles performed, membership of a social actor in many different social groups or performing many roles within one group, may result in conflicts caused by different means of evaluating the way the role is performed by different people, based on different reference systems, or by the fact that some roles performed at the same time by the actor clash with each other or even are contradictory to each other. A role conflict occurs when the individual is incapable of performing

at the same time all the roles related with his or her social status or with the multitude of different positions. A real role conflict is a situation when the individual has to take action which is evaluated or regulated differently in different groups of which the individual is a member. In such a situation, the conflict is accompanied by differences among the systems of value and behavioural patterns accepted by these groups (Turowski 2001: 135). The changes in rural economy, social structure and value system of rural areas result in new definitions of traditional women roles and make the new women roles emerge. The women themselves are active participants of this process, often without institutional or social support, deprived of acceptance of friends and family members, which may bring about serious difficulties in coping with demands of different social roles at the same time.

As mentioned above, each social position is related with some rights and responsibilities, which are however not specified or fixed once and for all. Moreover, different groups to which the individual belongs may have different expectations regarding the way in which the role should be performed. The changing circumstances influence changes in the content and form of performed social roles. This undoubtedly is the case of the division of social roles between genders: we can observe a kind of evolution or even revolution of female and male roles. Since the Second World War there have been significant changes in European societies, including also the roles related with gender. However, the second wave of feminism (Gardner 2006), which defined professional and gender roles anew, was not clearly visible in the post-war Poland. Of course, mass movement of women to the labour market has been reported in the roles and professions which had not been available for the women before, but it was a response to the needs of the state and not the will to support personal needs of women. However, after the system transformation, we have been witnessing an increased discussion of a new definition of gender roles. The features of the new social reality, to which Bauman (Bauman 2000) refers to as “liquid reality”, make it difficult to find fixed behaviour patterns, facilitating the performance of unambiguous and safe social roles. Uncertainty, relativism and individualism placing the self-realization and needs of the individual over the common good begins to reach even such traditional communities as the rural ones, changing their norms, expectations, aspirations and behaviour patterns.

According to Sztompka, a society diverse in terms of social status is the area of conflict between different positions (or rather, of conflict between social roles assigned to these positions) (2002: 118). Apart from the conflict between positions (role conflict), which is actually a conflict resulting from incompatibility of expectations related with different positions occupied by one individual at the same time, Sztompka brings our attention to the conflict between different elements of one social status. This type of conflict is based on inconsistencies of expectations of different interaction partners, and anyone who occupies a particular social position is prone to have a set of different interaction partners (2002: 132). In the postmodern world, the tension between the roles is constantly growing – indi-

viduals belong to an increasing number of social groups and their membership is limited by time, financial resources, and by the possibilities of balancing different responsibilities.

The level of identification with a group decreases with the number of groups of which the individual is a member. In the traditional society, the number of groups of which individuals could be members was limited. There were also internalized rules indicating which roles are crucial and which are less important, it was easier to find common norms regarding the proper way of understanding the provisions of the role and the proper way of performing it. In the traditional society, people were feeling safe and being embedded in a larger whole, to the extent which would be difficult to acquire in postmodern society, which on one hand appreciates diversity and individualism, but on the other hand leaves the individual with a multitude of different norms and opinions. Postmodern individual compares himself or herself to others, having a plenty of available choices, but deprived of certainty about which is the right one.

In the traditional societies it was easier for women to find stability and safety because social roles, clearly defined and performed in a proper way, made it possible to acquire and maintain particular social position. However, opportunities to fulfill individual needs, aspirations and life plans were limited; in some cases, it was even impossible to follow them without leaving the group. One change in today's society is that new roles emerge for us to be performed (women are more and more eager to take the roles involving political, social or professional activity). Another is that even the traditional roles are becoming ambiguous: new ways of performing them are emerging, and the way the same person is perceived by members of different social milieus can be completely different (e.g. different ways of performing traditional female roles – maternal, protective, etc.). The results of the research conducted in Poland make it possible to say that the current population of women living in Polish village is taking the chances created by new socio-economic conditions.

We know that the women living in rural areas have to a large extent taken their chances to improve the level of education and they are better educated than men, but it is not reflected by increased opportunities in the job market or any significant increase in the female presence in the public sphere, e.g. in politics. In the subsequent parts of the chapter, we will analyse the way the family, professional and social roles of women living in rural communities have been changing.

Family roles

In a traditional rural family, the process of performing a social role was based on clear and understandable criteria; the personal patterns of a woman (as a daughter, wife and mother) and a man (as a son, husband and father) were clearly defined.

The proper structure of the family was defined as clearly as the roles of man and woman, it was cohesive, and the identification of an individual with the family was complete (cf. Piłat-Borcuch 2013). In traditional rural communities, the roles of the women were clearly related with the sphere of the home, vicinity of the farm, and with family functions, related mostly with the roles of wife, mother and housewife.

Even now, the research indicates that family is the most important area in the life of the Poles (Boguszewski 2013). The above is also visible in the declarations of the female residents of the village, who believe that it is the family that the other areas of life have to be subordinate to. The women say that, among the values that govern their life, the most important are those related with family, including the good of the family, its integrity, maintenance of the loved ones, as well as the emotional ties binding the members of the family³. Despite the fact, that the birth rate is slowly growing, there is still a serious population decline in Poland. For dozens of years we used to believe that Polish rural family is a large one, with many children. However, important changes have taken place there, as described by Jaguś (2002) or Podogrodzka (2011, 2012). Although the birth rate is still growing in the rural areas, the differences between the village and the town in that respect, that used to be profound, are now rather small. The above is indicated by the results of 2013 research, when the birth rate in Poland equalled 9.6‰ (96 births per every 10,000 people), whereas at the beginning of the 90s it was over 140 (and in 1983 – almost 200). The birth rate in the village equalled 10.2‰ in the village and 9.2‰ in the town⁴. The difference between the fertility rate of rural women and fertility rate of the total population of Polish women declined: in 1990, the rate was higher c. 30% higher in case of the former, whereas in 2012 it was only c. 10% higher. As it was in the case of the birth rate, also the total fertility rate decreased in 1990–2003 (from 1,99 to 1,22 among the whole population of Polish women and from 2,68 to 1,42 among rural women). Later, since 2008, the rate indicated an upward tendency (up to 1,31 and 1,53, respectively), and since 2012 the rate decreased again, to 1.30 in the whole population and 1,43 in the village⁵. The rate is now among the lowest both in the European Union and in the whole world⁶. Hence, the number of birth in Poland is not high enough to

³ Cf., among others, *Sytuacja kobiet w rolnictwie i na obszarach wiejskich* report, a scholarly publication issued on the order of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, consortium including: Konsorcjum Badawcze FOCUS GROUP Albert Terelak and Centrum Rozwoju Społeczno-Gospodarczego Sp. z o.o., 2012.

⁴ *Podstawowe dane demograficzne o dzieciach w Polsce*, GUS Departament Badań Demograficznych i Rynku Pracy, notice for a press conference on 30 May 2014.

⁵ *Raport o stanie wsi. Polska wieś 2014*, FDPA 2014.

⁶ Source: Eurostat, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsdde220&plugin=0> Within the European Union, as in 2011, the two countries with fertility rates lower than Poland were Hungary (1.23) and Romania (1.25).

sustain population levels⁷. We can assume that currently some processes of cultural change take place in the rural areas, which result in the decreasing difference between the village and the town with regard to parenthood planning.

The role of the mother in traditional peasant communities was always subordinate to the interests of household and family. Memories regarding pregnancy and the period of early motherhood were compiled in the form of the memoirs of rural women, edited by Gałaj (1985). According to the relations of the women, the fact that a woman was pregnant did not waive the usual housework obligations. This kind of tasks was considered feminine (Szpak 2013) and men did not undertake to perform any of them, therefore the woman could not count on the support of the man. As the sources indicate, help and support regarding babysitting was sometimes provided by the maternal grandmother of the child. However, it was difficult to count on any help or support from the in-laws, including mother-in-law and sister-in-law, both at the time of childbirth and during several days following the event. Hence the appreciation of healthcare provided in the Interwar period. Staying in hospital made for the women an occasion to rest and escape from the usual hard labour in the household, providing the feeling of safety. The maternity ward was considered not only a quite comfortable place, but also a place where both village and town women have an opportunity to meet and exchange cultural patterns between the two groups. The memoirs edited by Gałaj express the loneliness of the mother, during the period of pregnancy, when giving birth and taking care of the new-born child.

We could have expected that the modernization of the methods of production in agriculture would result in the diminished importance of physical strength, which in turn would allow for the liberation of women from the roles imposed by the mere biological differences. However, the changes resulting from mechanisation of agriculture and labour-saving innovations involved mostly the ones that made it easier for men to perform their social roles and the process of change in the field of female roles was rather slow. Modernisation, electrification of the village and technological innovations – all of this should have resulted in some new solutions making the life of rural women easier, however it was not always the case. The implementation of innovations in the village household coincided with the more and more widespread phenomenon of part-time farming of men, whose wives had to take over some of the duties involved in working on the farm. Making life easier in one area of life resulted in new responsibilities. Apart from the obligations regarding running the household and taking care of the whole family, women began performing new tasks and roles, what resulted in a serious overload of work (Tryfan 1968; Wawrychowska-Wierciochowa 1961; Turowski

⁷ Which would be the case when the fertility rate equals between 2.1 and 2.15 (i.e. average 210–215 per 100 women in the age between 15 and 49 years old).

1964). However, there were some changes in the model of family: the traditional authoritarian model was still visible, but the number of families organized according to such principles was definitely lower than it used to. The division of power in the families began to change. The status of wife and children in worker-peasant families started upgrading. According to research, despite the fact that the official status of mother and wife remained still within the borders set up by tradition and culture, her real position was higher – it was the result of her being in charge of economic and financial resources, which in turn provided her with a significant share in the system of power within the family. According to Nowak, women regarded those responsibilities as a mere burden because it was difficult for them to meet the demands of modernity (Nowak 2003).

Culture norms are another set of factors influencing the readiness of the women to take on maternity roles. According to those norms, women are supposed to perform a significant part of work involved in running a household, including both housework and babysitting. As research results show, the resistance of women against those conditions is growing. According to *O roli kobiet w rodzinie* [*The Role of Women in Family*] report compiled by CBOS⁸, although the majority of the examined women declared that the family model based on equality and partnership⁹ is the most preferable, the model existing in their own families is rather a traditional one¹⁰.

Rural women in the labour market

In the interwar period, the topic of rural women was presented, if at all, as a problem, as a factor dilatory to the changes of the village due to deficiencies in women's education, their attachment to the old behaviour patterns, influencing the men in a negative way (Chomicki 1938). Researchers and activists were advocating the introduction of programs aimed especially at women living in rural areas, so that they would be able to participate more fully in the social life. In the interwar period, the emphasis was put also on the search for female stereotypes which fulfilled the goals considered by the authors at the time to be the key ones.

⁸ *O roli kobiet w rodzinie*, CBOS, March 2013, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_030_13.pdf [date of access 12.01.2015].

⁹ Model based on equality and partnership – a model of family, in case of which the husband (male partner) and the wife (female partner) spend more or less the same amount of time on professional career and both of them equally take care of the household and children.

¹⁰ Traditional model – a model of family, in case of which only the husband (or male partner) works for money, earning an amount sufficient to satisfy the needs of the family, while the wife (female partner) takes care of running the household, raising children etc.

Such ideal women would be bringing the children up in the patriotic spirit, undertaking actions for the benefit of the society and improving their households. Women of this kind were presented as role models for other women. As we can see, the activity pattern of these women go hand in hand with the traditional female role models: those of good mothers, housewives and local female activists. One of important problems, mentioned by researchers at the time, was the issue of unpaid women's work for their families and households, life-long and very hard. According to the results of research projects of that time, the estimated time of female work in the household was about 500 hours longer than in the case of men (Curzytek 1935), and female work was often considered to be less important, unappreciated and despised. It was observed that rural women strived strongly for migration (see e.g. Duda-Dziewierz 1938), with destinations in towns or foreign countries. It was a pursuit for upward social mobility; however, women were rarely successful, because of the lack of workplaces available for them (as a result of fixed social structure and deficiencies of Polish economy).

In Communist countries, the rights and privileges of women were a result of the Marxist ideology. Equality between men and women was expected to be a result of defeating capitalism and it was not considered to be a possible effect of the activity of women emancipation movements, which, according to the ideologists at the time, were only drawing women away from changing the world in a more reasonable way. The Constitution of PRL (Polish People's Republic) of 1952 declared all the citizens equal, regardless of gender. War damages, losses in male population in the whole Europe, fast industrialization resulting in women beginning to work in manufacturing industry, forced states to let women enter the labour market and adjust the law to the changing reality. The post-war industrialization process in Poland, engaging men in jobs outside their farms, was the reason of the feminization of the farming profession. Another result of such processes was the fact that a new professional category emerged – “blue collar farmer” (chłoporobotnik) (Błąd 2011). For the pre-war peasant women and female factory workers, PRL was actually a real chance of improving social and professional status. New legislative solutions improved the access of women to the welfare services, education, and the facilities fulfilling most basic needs (e.g. hospitals and maternal care). Unfortunately, equality set up in the provisions of law was not accompanied by changes in social norms. Men were not encouraged to take care of their children so that they could help women with the housework. Performing female tasks in traditional village communities was considered to be humiliating (Szpak 2013).

New division of duties, forced by the conditions under which the family operates, made the labour market positions of women and men living in the village more equal, however it did not result in any significant change of the division of the burden of household duties. In Poland, the division of the above still is not equal with regard to sex, especially in the village, and in the majority of cases the

women are responsible for performing those duties (Titkow, Duch-Krzysztozek, Budrowska 2007). According to research, there is a high workload imposed on rural women with regard to household duties including taking care of the family members and running the households (Auleytner 2007: 114). The process of changes in this field, involving the creation of new family, household, and family-professional relations in village families, is a slow, lengthy and difficult one. It seems that, at least for the time being, the changes involve mainly increasing range of female responsibilities, without really relieving the burden of duties the women used to perform or dividing the babysitting and housework duties between the men and the women. Actually, the accessibility of some spheres of life increases and new possibilities open up for women, however sometimes a huge burden of those duties makes it difficult for them to take those chances as easily as men. As a result, women are less active than men on the labour market. In 2009, professional activity rate (share of professionally active and unemployed in the population of more than 15 years old) of the rural women equalled 46.4%, whereas the same rate for men equalled 64.4%; employment rate (share of employed people in the population of more than 15 years old) of the rural women equalled 42.2%, and the same rate for men equalled 59.8%; the unemployment rate (share of the unemployed in the population of people professionally active) of the women equalled 9.1% and in case of men 7.2%. In worse situation found themselves landless women, who do not possess a farm – the professional activity rate in this group equals 37.8% and the employment rate 32.9% (*Obszary wiejskie w Polsce* 2011).

Professional activity of women involves the necessity of combining professional and family roles, and the possibility of accomplishing this task successfully depends mainly on structural and cultural factors (Kotowska 2009). Structural factors include institutional solutions, facilitating employment of women (e.g. the way the institutional care is organised or employment policy involving solutions such as flexible working time, possibility of part-time work or family benefits). Cultural factors include the way the male and female social roles are perceived, how men and women are perceived as employers and family members, how the representatives of both sexes participate in taking care of the children, elderly people or how the household duties are distributed. Due to the fact that the functions related with taking care are ascribed to women, they are considered to be responsible for this kind of duties in the family, and their usefulness as employers is assessed from the perspective of their family duties rather than on the basis of their competence, experience or other individual features.

The incompatibility of the institutional solutions with the employment of women creates so-called structural conflict, and the attitude towards male and female social roles, especially with regard to the relation between career and family, results in the escalation of so-called cultural conflict (Kotowska 2009). In Poland, especially in the village, we can observe two kinds of conflict. Structural conflict is a result of the lack of proper structural solutions that could help

women in taking on new possible activities outside home: lack of infrastructure including nurseries, kindergartens or day care centres for elderly people, result in a situation where this kind of duties related with taking care need to be performed within the family. What is more, the expectations of the members of society that those duties will be performed by women result in the escalation of the cultural conflict. Another problem is the fact that the rural labour market is incompatible with increasing education level of village woman, who have no possibility of finding in the village a job that would be suitable with their education. The obstacles related with poor road and rail infrastructure (bus and train connections are being cancelled) make it difficult to search for a job outside the closest vicinity of one's residence.

Women social roles

The person responsible for representing the family in the public sphere used to be the man, acting on behalf of the rest of the members. The role of the women was limited to the tasks related with home and family. Civic involvement of rural women increased in the Interwar period. Under circumstances of the Polish state enjoying newly acquired independence, women living in rural areas were considered to be responsible not only for maintaining proper hygiene and nourishment standards in rural households, but also for the socialization of future generations of the residents of rural areas in the patriotic spirit. In the Second Republic of Poland, women from rural areas, together with all Polish women, obtained both active and passive voting rights. There was many actors who wanted to influence rural women: among them were members of national movement, peasant and Sanation activists, as well as representatives of the Catholic Church (Józefowicz 2011, as cited in Matysiak 2014b). Matysiak (Matysiak 2014b) notes, that young women were involved in village youth organizations, running cultural and self-education projects. Moreover, many educational initiatives were addressed to women living in rural areas, among others special schools for rural girls (Mędrzecki 1992, as cited in Matysiak 2014b). The main structures activating adult women living in the villages were Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich associations (Rural Women Association, KGW), in which women were acquiring a plenty of practical skills related with running a household, and were developing the cooperative movement in villages (Mędrzecki 2000, as cited in Matysiak 2014b). First rural women took the positions of sołtys [the elected head of a rural "gmina"] or councillors and became members of local governments. However, the total share of the women in local authorities was still symbolic because local government activity was still perceived to be a masculine sphere (Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa 1961, as cited in Matysiak 2014b).

It was after the Second World War, when the changes taking place in the village were accompanied by the increasing possibilities of performing such roles in a different way and together with the political transformation, that new roles emerged: social, professional and other, available for women to various extent, depending on different rural milieus. The process of adopting new roles, involving participation in the public sphere, was a gradual one and it had its own distinct features depending on the set of political, economic and cultural factors of a specific historic period. In the times of PRL, the social and political activity of women living in rural areas was to be one of the “tools” of the modernization of villages, according to the vision of the authorities of that time. After the Polish October¹¹ (1956), associations of *Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich* became the main structures engaging rural women. In 1989, just before the political system transformation, there were over 35,000 KGW associations with over 1,000,000 female members (Marczakiewicz et al. 1992: 27, as cited in Matysiak 2014b). KGWs were a part of the structure of farming associations and (since 1966) a collective member of Polish Women League. KGWs performed many useful tasks for people living in rural areas, for example they organized care for children during time-consuming farming activities, courses of sewing, baking and cooking, promoted traditional handcraft and folk culture, and at the end of the PRL era also farm tourism and village entrepreneurship (Grzebisz-Nowicka 1998, as cited in Matysiak 2014b). The focus on the practical, “girlie” issues had been on one hand protecting KGWs against excessive politicization, but on the other hand, they failed to have any positive impact on strengthening the status of women as an interest group or breaking new ground for social roles of the women (Siemieńska 2005, as cited in Matysiak 2014b). There were also social organizations, like Rural Youth Union (*Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej*) where young girls were getting involved in, but the share of the women living in rural areas and performing local public functions was still low. For example, at the end of the 1960s, the percentage of women at *sołtys* positions was only 2.8%. The percentage of women among the councillors of rural National Councils and the heads of *gminas* was also low (Matysiak 2014a, 2014b).

Matysiak (2014b) underlines that the range of public roles considered to be proper for women living in the villages was relatively narrow, but the change of political, economic and institutional conditions caused by political system transformation process which begun in 1989, resulted in a diversification of the types of local structures within which rural women can perform public functions and engage in civic activities. One of the most popular organizations are still KGWs and they perform more innovative actions apart from rather traditional ones which used to be their key activities in the past, but the women living in a village often act also within structures related with school, Church and local parish. They also

¹¹ A change in the politics of Poland in the second half of 1956, connected with change of political leadership inside the communist party and liberalization of political system.

engage in the activities of organizations relatively new in the local milieu, such as local associations (e.g. those running so-called “small schools” [small non-public primary schools]), Odnowa Wsi associations (“Village Revival”) or Lokalne Grupy Działania (“Local Action Groups”), and sometimes even in traditionally masculine OSPs (“Volunteer Fire Department”).

The level of engagement of rural women in the area of social and civic activity is growing. However, the women’s share in making the decisions at the local government level is still very low. If women participate in any kind of social activity, they prefer rather informal ways, often involving acting for the benefit of local community. The reason for this may be related with the fact that in the majority of cases the seat of the organizations is located in towns and cities (48%), whereas in the rural gminas 30% of organization seats are located, and in urban-rural gminas there are 22% of seats (Herbst, Przewłocka 2011). Unfortunately, there is no data on the share of village women in non-government organizations – all we know is that, according to the recent report of Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor (Herbst, Przewłocka 2011), 60% of the total population of members of organizations of any kind are men, and there is average 58% of them in the authorities of the organizations. It is quite the opposite in case of volunteers and employers of the organizations, 60% of them being women.

More and more women living in rural areas acquire positions in the local government. In the last local government term of office, women constituted c. 25% of gmina councillors and slightly over 35% of sołtyses in Poland (Matysiak 2014b). The representation of the women in every level of local authorities is low. The share of women equals 25.4% of councillors in rural gminas and 24.9% in urban-rural gminas (in case of urban gminas – 26.6%), and the smallest share of women can be found among the members of the District Council – 18.7%; 23.6% of the councillors of regional parliament of the province are women (unfortunately, we do not know, how many of them come from the rural areas) (*Sytuacja kobiet w rolnictwie* 2012). The women living in the village talk about barriers that make it difficult for them to take on some kind of social or political activity – the reason of this lack of participation that was indicated most often is the lack of time (over 70% of choices), which in turn is often a result of too much work and too many housework responsibilities. Other indicated problems included economic or cultural barriers, as well as those related with long distance from town, and stereotypes related with sex and gender discrimination. We should take into account the high level of social control in the village, which is often mentioned as one of the cultural barriers, as well as the stigmatisation of those actions and behaviour that are considered to be inconsistent with the social norms. In some milieus, the latter include women acting as politicians (Walczak-Duraj 2008). As we see, the above obstacles are more difficult to deal with for women than for men living in the village, which is one of the reasons of often emphasised (sometimes also criticised) low share of rural women participating in official and organised social activity.

Conclusions

We are currently witnessing rapid changes in the way female social roles are perceived. The phenomenon is especially visible in rural areas because the traditional divisions with regard of gender roles survived there much longer. As we see, rural women are more and more eager to reach for the new possibilities created by social and cultural changes.

Sometimes the opportunity to take the chances resulting from the changes taking place in Poland is limited both by external factors, related with traditional mind-set and by the features of a particular milieu. What is a problem of many rural areas is a structural exclusion involving, among other factors, poor technological infrastructure, including housing (sewer systems, gas-lines etc.), commuting (bad condition of roads, poorly managed and unprofitable public transport, and in some cases even a total lack of it) or no poor access to the Internet. Social infrastructure is also insufficient, as the access to healthcare, educational and cultural facilities is more difficult in the village than it is in town. Whereas poor technological infrastructure affects both men and women more or less equally, the lack of proper social infrastructure is a more serious problem for women because, according to the traditional social norms, it is their responsibility to perform duties involving babysitting or taking care of elderly, ill members of their families. Moreover, the income level of the rural household is lower than it is in the case of the urban one, so is the level of education, and the level of unemployment is also higher in the village – especially among rural women.

Traditional patterns of social roles and division of labour, still present in the rural community, tend to prepare women for the roles involving taking care and rising children, as well as for household chores performed in a farm setting rather than for performing independent professional roles or participating in activities of social or political sphere. We do not have enough research that would make it possible to find out whether the traditional idea of the social role of rural woman is changing in the rural community.

Usually, women are eager to take on activities of the new roles – especially when both the women and their social milieu consider the roles to be desirable and acceptable. One of the examples may be the raising level of education of rural women (they have taken part in an incredible educational boom, compensating in quite a short time the delays and shortcomings of the past – they are now even better educated than the men living in rural areas).

Unfortunately, the increasing level of education still does not result in any immediate improvement of the situation of women on the labour market. Female residents of the village still find it difficult to find a job matching their level of expertise. Moreover, the increasing variety of roles performed by the rural women is not accompanied in changes in the field of traditional roles. Although, accord-

ing to research, they claim they would like to have a new, more equal division of responsibilities, it is still their responsibility to run the house, take care of the members of the family and perform other duties set up by traditional female roles. There are more and more female residents of the village, whose ways become different from those of a traditional model. However, those different roles are still regarded as a mere adaptation to some peculiar, difficult circumstances rather than an equally suitable alternative model of new kind of activity. It will be impossible to overcome the above barriers without changing the attitude of people living in the village and improving the infrastructure and institutional environment which would help the rural women make their dreams and ambitions come true.

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The aim of this publication is to look at the problems of Polish rural areas from the perspective of the young generation of researchers, to show what problems they are interested in and what study methods and techniques they use to describe the phenomena occurring in Polish villages. The results of their studies were also presented to underscore the importance of these phenomena for the development of knowledge concerning the dynamic transformations in Polish rural areas. The Authors represent different fields of study (sociology, ethnography, economy and geography) from renowned academic centres such as University of Lodz, Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences (IRWiR PAN) in Warsaw, Life Science University of Poznan, Technical University in Warsaw, Institute of Urban Development in Krakow, and Maria Grzegorzewska University. What they have in common is interest in the problems of rural areas and their residents. They focus on the new model of rural development, very often identified with concepts such as multifunctional and sustainable development, on social innovation, the subject of transformations in rural residents' social roles, including rural women serving public roles, as well as on the strategies of coping with the reality used by residents of marginalized villages. The articles introduce the Readers to selected problems of development of Polish rural areas and help them to understand their complexity.



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ISBN 978-83-7969-842-4



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