



Young Researchers and the Problems of Polish Rural Areas

editors Katarzyna Zajda, Sylwia Michalska



WYDAWNICTWO
UNIwersytetu
ŁÓDZKIEGO

Ilona Matysiak, PhD

Maria Grzegorzewska University

THE DETERMINANTS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE SUBCOMMUNAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN RURAL AREAS IN POLAND – THE CASE OF VILLAGE REPRESENTATIVE (SOŁTYS)

Introduction

The function of a village representative (sołtys) in Poland is as liaison between the residents of a rural subcommune (sołectwo) and the local authorities at the superior levels. In the last few decades the number of rural women serving as village representatives has increased significantly. In 1958, the percentage of female village representatives in Poland amounted only to 0.8%, whereas in 2013, this percentage reached 35.5%. The share of women among village representatives is higher than among the elected members of the legislative bodies at all levels of the local self-government (25% in 2010) or among mayors and city presidents (not exceeding 10% in 2010) (Niżyńska 2013: 44; *Monitoring list wyborczych...*). This increase provokes questions about the possible reasons of this process.

The aim of this article is to analyze the determinants, which are decisive for the growing share of women among the village representatives in Poland. According to the political elites recruitment theories, assuming of public functions is conditioned by factors associated directly with individuals themselves and by features of political roles and structures. On the one hand, we will thus examine the socio-demographic characteristics and motivations of female and male village representatives; on the other hand, we will analyze the social perception of the village representative function itself. The available public statistics indicate that the share of women among village representatives is visibly higher in some regions of Poland than in others. As a result, the analyses presented in the text will be partially focused on the impact of contextual factors.

This chapter is based on a qualitative empirical study that covered ten communes located in different regions of Poland. First, details about the function of the village representative and rural women's participation in the subcommunal self-government will be provided. The following section discusses the metho-

dology of the analysis. The subsequent parts of this article are devoted to the presentation of the empirical data. This chapter is a review of selected topics, discussed in detail also in other publications of the author¹.

Rural subcommunal self-government: the village representative

The institution of the village representative (*sołtys*) has a long and well-established tradition in Poland. It is rooted in the processes of settlement under German law in the Medieval Age. In the following periods, the obligations of village representatives and the nature of their role kept changing depending on political and economic conditions.

According to the legal regulations introduced in 1990, which recreated the local self-government in Poland after decades of state centralization under the communist regime, the institutions of the rural subcommunal self-government operate in the frame of a rural subcommune (*sołectwo*) being the auxiliary structure for the commune (*gmina*). In terms of territory, rural subcommunes are the administrative units located within communes. The area of a rural subcommune usually covers one village or, less frequently, two or more small villages or a part of a bigger village. Currently, there are 40 583 rural subcommunes in Poland (Central Statistical Office 2014: 39). In terms of the structure of power, rural subcommunes are dependent both financially and institutionally on a communal self-government – they have neither their own full legal identity nor an independent budget². Today, a village representative is the executive officer of a rural subcommune (*sołectwo*), which functions as the auxiliary structure for the commune (*gmina*). The institutions of rural subcommune also include a village assembly (*zebranie wiejskie*) – the legislative body – and a village council (*rada sołecka*) – the advisory body to the village representative. Their position within the structure of the Polish local self-government is presented in Table 1.

¹ Articles discussing the issue of the structure of social capital of female and male village representatives (Matysiak 2013a), the motives to perform the village representative function, presented by women and by men, as well as various benefits of this function (Matysiak 2013b), “feminization” of the village representative function (Matysiak 2014a). The complex analysis of the mentioned threads as well as other relevant topics not elaborated in this article are provided in the book on the role of female and male village representatives in rural communities in today’s Poland (Matysiak 2014b).

² Since year 2009 the commune councils can create a village fund (*fundusz sołecki*), used to provide financial support for the rural subcommunes. However, it should be noted that some communes implement their own mechanisms of providing financial support for their rural subcommunes, independent of the village fund (Lachiewicz 2013).

Table 1. The organs of local self-government entities in Poland in year 2013

Entities	Executive bodies	Legislative bodies
16 provinces (województwa)	province executive board (zarząd województwa) chaired by province marshal (marszałek)	province regional assembly (sejmik wojewódzki)
314 districts (powiaty)	district executive board (zarząd powiatu) chaired by starost (starosta)	district council (rada powiatu)
66 cities with district status (miasta na prawach powiatu)	city president (prezydent miasta)	city council (rada miasta)
2 479 communes (gminy)	mayor (wójt/burmistrz)	commune council (rada gminy)
40 583 rural subcommunes (sołectwa)	village representative (sołtys) supported by village council (rada sołecka)	village assembly (zebranie wiejskie)

Source: Central Statistical Office (2014: 38–39).

Village representatives embody the interests of the residents and are expected to manage the daily problems of a given rural subcommune, such as those associated with the local infrastructure. They also perform administrative tasks, such as informing the residents about the communal authorities' plans and decisions or organizing village assemblies, and they are expected to mobilize the residents for collective initiatives. Village representatives and members of the village council, as their advisory body, are elected by the residents of rural subcommunes. The election involves a secret, direct voting method, which mostly takes place at the village assembly. Residents of the rural subcommune can present themselves as a candidate. The term of office for the village representative is usually four years.

According to the principle of subsidiarity, the local authorities of each commune are free to decide what range of responsibilities should be passed to the rural subcommunes' self-government within their administrative territory. However, often, communal authorities do not bother to precisely define the competences of village representatives. This lack of action is because they are not eager to pass any significant tasks to rural subcommunes or they perceive the scope of duties of village representatives to be common knowledge and not requiring specification. As a result, the activities of the village representatives become determined by the expectations of the residents, attitudes of particular commune authorities, and intentions of village representatives themselves. It has to be noted that village representatives can participate in commune council meetings, but they do not retain the right to vote. Therefore, the impact of the village representative on local decision-making processes consists of "back-stage" negotiations or exerting informal

influence over the local authorities. The position of the village representative is perceived as unpaid, voluntary work. However, four times a year, many village representatives collect local taxes from the rural subcommune residents on behalf of the local authorities and receive the equivalent of a small percentage of the collected sum as the gratuity for their efforts. The local authorities may also assign to their village representatives a remuneration for participating in the commune council meetings (Matysiak 2014a: 702–703). However, usually, the amounts of money received by village representatives are perceived as rather symbolic.

Women's participation in the rural subcommunal self-government

Polish women officially acquired the right to run in elections at all levels in year 1918. However, women living in rural areas were not expected to even take part in village assemblies, as the role of representing the voice of a given family was traditionally prescribed to men. According to the existing literature, women were not really present in the structures of rural subcommunal self-government neither before the World War II nor shortly after (Jakubczak 1976). However, the available data indicate a significant and stable increase in the percentage of women among village representatives in Poland in recent decades. In 1958, the share of women performing this function amounted only to 0.8%; however, in 1967, the percentage reached 2.8%. The survey of a national sample of Polish villages, conducted in the mid-1990s, showed that the share of women among village representatives was 11.0% (Ostrowski 1995). Currently, at the end of 2013, the percentage has amounted to 35.5% (Table 2).

Table 2. The share of women village representatives, years 1958, 1967, 2009, 2013

Year	Village representatives (total number)	Women village representatives (total number)	Share of women among village representatives (%)
1958	40,589	317	0.8
1967	39,822	1,099	2.8
2009	40,254	12,144	30.2
2013	40,382	14,322	35.5

Source: Central Statistical Office (1968), Local Data Bank, www.stat.gov.pl [date of access 9.10.2015].

The analyses of data, conducted by the author, pertaining to the share of women among village representatives in years 1990–2007 in 172 rural and rural-urban

communes, located within the selected nine subregions³ showed that stable, linear growth in the number of women among village representatives in this period was particularly visible during the last two terms of office of the rural subcommunal self-government (see Matysiak 2014b: 81).

Interestingly, in the case of some Polish regions, the share of women among village representatives is significantly higher in comparison with the other parts of the country. The similar pattern is observed in case of women among commune councilors. The percentages of women village representatives and communal councilors are visibly higher mostly in the areas added to the Polish territory after the World War II (marked in a lighter grey color) and lower in the areas of the South-East Poland (marked in a darker grey color) (Table 3).

Table 3. The share of women among commune councilors and village representatives in rural and urban-rural communes by provinces in 2013

Provinces	Share of women among council members	Share of women among village representatives
Zachodniopomorskie	32.2	47.4
Dolnośląskie	32.0	42.9
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	31.5	40.7
Lubuskie	30.1	42.5
Pomorskie	27.7	39.4
Opolskie	27.3	42.5
Łódzkie	27.3	36.1
Śląskie	26.5	36.5
Mazowieckie	25.9	36.6
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	25.6	35.9
Wielkopolskie	23.4	30.6
Małopolskie	23.1	30.9
Świętokrzyskie	23.1	38.4
Lubelskie	21.3	34.2
Podlaskie	20.8	24.8
Podkarpackie	18.3	20.7

Source: own calculations, Central Statistical Office, Local Data Bank, www.stat.gov.pl [date of access 9.10.2015].

³ The data were obtained via e-mail directly from the communal offices on the basis of the request for access to public information.

These observations indicate that also the contextual factors must be taken into account while analyzing the determinants underlying the increase of women among village representatives. Differences between Polish regions, which historically belonged to different powers after the partitions and territorial redistribution following the World War II, pertain to many aspects of life, including the degree of urbanization, demographic structure, access to communication infrastructure, voting preferences and economic performance (Nowak et al. 2000; Żukowski 2004; Zarycki 2007).

Theories of the political elite recruitment and own research assumptions

The concept of recruitment of political elites has its roots in the classical theory of elites of Mosca, Pareto and Michels, developed by the subsequent researchers, e.g. in the dimension of the government elites and the functioning of elites in the democratic system. Putnam defined the political elite as those, who, in a given society, occupy the highest positions in terms of political interests, involvement and influence (1971: 651). We can also speak of local political elites, that is, persons, who occupy key positions in the formal structure of authority and/or are perceived as people having power, or playing substantial roles in the course of the real political processes at the local or regional level (Bartkowski 1996).

Membership in political elites at various levels is conditioned by the political recruitment mechanisms. According to Schwartz (1969: 552), political recruitment has been conceptualized “as a process by which individuals possessing certain personality traits and occupying specified social positions [...] are screened by political institutions for elective office”. The personality traits as well as the individual’s expectations or predispositions about politics constitute the motivations, which, also, tend to be regularly associated with specified social backgrounds and positions providing visibility, social prestige and valuable experiences. Those individual’s motivations and social resources meet the preferences of the screening institutions, for example political party recruiters (*ibidem*). According to Prewitt (1970), the recruitment process can be compared with a Chinese box puzzle, which serves as a metaphor of gradual and continuous selection and elimination which reduces the population to the few who eventually get into the political positions.

According to the political recruitment theories, this process can be analyzed in two dimensions: “Studies of selection will mainly concentrate on those who select candidates, the demand side of recruitment, while studies of self-selection will mainly focus on features of the individual candidates, the supply side of recruitment” (Aars, Offerdal 1998: 210–211). The dimension of „supply” can be ascribed the social and the individual aspect. The former encompasses social and

demographic characteristics of individuals. As it has been noted by Gąciarz and Bartkowski (2012: 143), "In the perspective of the local politics, significant for the politician are such resources as education, a profession, which gives them social recognition (doctor or teacher), social origin and – very significant for the local communities – the place of birth". Great importance is also attached to social and political activity experience within the framework of various types of local structures (Bartkowski 1996). The latter refers to individual preferences, mainly psychological, including motivation and interest in politics (Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz, Betkiewicz 2012: 256). The dimension of "demand" is ascribed an organizational aspect, that is, political structures and institutions, which "attract" specific individuals (*ibidem*). According to Harasymiw (1984: 17–25), the nature of political roles as such and the preferences of the "political selectors" are of significance here. At the same time, the analysis drawing at the political recruitment approach should combine both perspectives in order to avoid being too institutional or too individual (Fowler 1993: 42).

The assumptions of theories of political elite recruitment are inspiring in the context of analysis pertaining to female and male village representatives. First of all, the function of a village representative is subject to election – thus, it can be expected that the elections are usually accompanied by political behaviors, associated with building of support among the inhabitants or election competition. Secondly, female and male village representatives, should cooperate with the local authorities and officials as well as other actors of the local public scene, convince them of the rightness of what they plan to do, build alliances and coalitions. Thus, it can be stated that the position of a village representative is a social and a political one. On the one hand, it assumes the voluntary commitment of the village representative to the local public affairs; on the other hand, it is associated with representation and activity within the framework of the local politics.

What are the determinants, which are decisive for women currently becoming village representatives much more frequently than in the past? Should the reasons be sought in the structure of social resources of women, their individual motivations or the character of the function itself? Searching for an answer to these questions, first, we will analyze the social and demographic resources as well as motivations of female village representatives in comparison with men, performing the same function. Secondly, we will analyze the social perception of the village representative function itself. In the light of research conducted by Fuszara (2006), this function is not perceived as attractive and prestigious, which may result in its greater "availability" for women. Thirdly, we will examine the importance of the specific nature of the local context.

The chapter is based on an analysis of qualitative data collected from ten communes located in different regions of Poland. Due to the goals of my doctoral thesis, the communes were chosen because of their different proportions of women serving as village representatives and commune councilors. Two communes

– “feminized” and “masculinized” – were examined in each of five chosen regions of Poland (Table 4). The former was understood as the percentage of women among village representatives and commune councilors, which was close to 50%, and the latter represented communes where the percentage of women village representatives and commune councilors did not exceed 30%.

Table 4. Characteristics of communes subject to research, year 2009

Province	Zachodnio-pomorskie		Mazowieckie		Lubelskie		Wielkopolskie		Podkarpackie	
Commune	Dobra Szczecińska	Miel- no	Kału- szyn	Wy- szo- gród	Ser- niki	Ryki	Muro- wana Goślina	Czer- wo- nak	Lu- towi- ska	Łań- cut
Type	rural	rural	urban- rural	urban- rural	rural	urban- rural	urban- rural	rural	rural	rural
Population	15,569	4,935	6,086	5,939	4,876	20,505	16,248	25,300	2,195	20,849
Share of women among commune councilors	53.3	33.3	53.3	6.7	40.0	19.0	53.3	28.6	13.3	9.5
Share of women among village representatives	66.7	12.5	75.0	11.8	46.2	23.3	25.0	36.4	66.7	11.1

Source: Central Statistical Office, Bank Danych Lokalnych, www.stat.gov.pl [date of access 15.03.2011].

Fieldwork was completed between November 2008 and December 2010⁴. In total, 108 individual in-depth interviews were conducted in all ten communes. The interviewees consisted of 51 women and men village representatives and 57 persons from local authorities, public institutions and organizations. The positional-reputational method was used for recruitment of the research participants. The qualitative data gathered provided exhaustive information on 62 rural subcommunes.

Own research results: age, education and origins

Both women and men village representatives were mostly between 41 and 70 years of age. Average age among women was 49, and men – 51. A decisive majority of the participants were married while research was conducted, and

⁴ Research was conducted within a research project financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (N N116 433 237).

they had children (most often – two or three), in many cases, fully grown-up. However, the age structure of female and male interviewees also revealed some differences; women prevailed in the “younger” age categories (between 31 and 40 years). In the case of the youngest female representatives, they were often able to assume the function thanks to support in childcare, offered by their closest relatives.

A large number of female village representatives had completed vocational secondary education, whereas most of the male respondents had completed up to vocational secondary and a basic vocational level of education. Only a few had university education, and one – a PhD degree (Table 5).

Table 5. Level of education of the village representatives according to gender

Education	Women (N = 28)	Men (N = 23)
PhD	–	1
Higher	2	4
Secondary (including vocational secondary)	19	7
Basic vocational	5	6
Elementary	–	2
No data available	2	3

Source: own research.

The increased share of women among village representatives may be associated with overall improvement in the structure of education of female rural population in the recent decades, which has resulted in an increase in the level of their competences and life aspirations. In 1970, 5.7% women and 4.9% men living in the rural areas had secondary education, and 0.2% women and 0.6% men – tertiary education (Central Statistical Office 1981: 45). In year 2011, 25.6% rural women had secondary education (including vocational schools), in comparison with 22.2% men, while 12.1% women and 7.7% men living in the rural areas had university education (Central Statistical Office 2013: 106). It should be noted, however, that women and men with university education become village representatives less often.

In the literature on the subject, being „from here” is one of the main decisive factors in joining the local political elites (Bartkowski 1996; Pańków 2006; Bartkowski, Gąciarz 2012). One half of the females and two thirds of all interviewees were “from here”, which means: from the village, in which they are currently the representatives, or – possibly – from another village, located in the same commune (Table 6).

Table 6. The place of origin of female and male village representatives examined

Place of origin	Women (N = 28)	Men (N = 23)
„Own” village	12	12
A village in the same commune	2	4
The same region (district, province)	8	3
A different province	5	2
No data available	1	2

Source: own research.

As it was noted by one of the male village representatives examined, during the local election, a candidate “from here” has greater possibilities of mobilizing support within the framework of the family and neighborhood networks. Moreover, the chances for winning the post can be increased by being a member of a respected, committed family, recognized as such in the local community: *Well, my dad is in the village council. Earlier... he was a president of a farmers’ organization (kółko rolnicze). My mom is currently a member of the rural women’s organization (koło gospodyń wiejskich) [W.MG.8_m.v]*⁵. Five female and two male village representatives mentioned that they „inherited” this function directly in the family, most often from the father: *Perhaps it’s just going like this, generation to generation – before, it was my father, and now, there’s me... there was no competition. When people knew I would run in the election, nobody else would try [M.K.2_f.v]*.

On the other hand, in the case of one half of the women examined, coming „from somewhere else” did not make it difficult for them to become village representatives. Some of them stated they were perceived as warrantors of neutrality in the local conflicts. At the same time, due to lack of familiarity with relationships between the inhabitants and with the interest groups in the community, a “new-comer” may be more susceptible to manipulation by various “coteries”.

In the light of the above data, assuming of the function of a village representative is made easier by limitation of family duties due to age, or, in the case of younger women, getting some family support in childcare. Female rural inhabi-

⁵ Marking of interviews: the first letter means the province (Z – zachodniopomorskie, M – mazowieckie, L – lubelskie, W – wielkopolskie, P – podkarpackie), the second letter refers to the first letter(s) in the name of the commune, letters ‘f’ or ‘m’ refer to the respondent being female or male, the last letters indicate the category of the respondent – ‘v’ means village representative, ‘l’ means local leader, ‘c’ means commune councilor and ‘o’ means public official or a representative of another local institution.

tants are increasingly well-educated, which determines their life aspirations. The role of the origins is not clear – slightly more often, the village representative function was assumed to females from “elsewhere” in comparison to men.

Professional experience and social activity

The majority of the interviewed village representatives were farmers or beneficiaries of old-age or disability pensions (Table 7). Thus, they were able to manage their time more flexibly than people employed outside the agricultural sector, spending most of their time at their place of residence. This is of significance when taking into account the typical tasks of village representatives described earlier.

Table 7. The village representatives' status on the labor market according to gender

Status on the labor market	Women (N = 28)	Men (N = 23)
Working at a farm	6	4
Employed outside agricultural sector	5	3
Self-employed outside agriculture	3	2
Old age pension (including farm retirement)	9	6
Disability pension	2	4
Not employed*	3	1
No data available	–	3

*In case of women “not employed” meant housewife or being unpaid helper in a family farm.

Source: own research.

However, most of the female and male village representatives examined had some experience in professional work outside agriculture. In the case of women, the scope of activity included: business activity (managing of canteen, milk purchase, agro-tourism, parking lots for tourists), working as a salesperson at the local store, a caregiver, local official, chief accountant, zoology technician, vacation center manager. Men mentioned such professions and activities as: business activity (managing of slaughterhouse, agro-tourism), mechanic, forester, academic teacher, assembler of airplane engines, jobs in the farmers' organization, at the railway or the post office. Some of the interviewees – men slightly more often than women – pointed out they had been elected as village representatives mainly thanks to their professional experience, which warranted

them “visibility” in the local community and extensive possibilities of establishing relationships with people: *I have lots of contacts with people, as I purchased milk from them for so many years [L.S.1_f.v]; many workers were people, who used to work at the State Agricultural Farms⁶, so I know them directly, because they either reported to me, or their worked in mechanics, and I also knew them, if they worked at the cow houses and piggeries, I knew them all the same [W.Cz.1_m.v].*

At the same time, the most frequently indicated source of support and trust of the village inhabitants were the social activity experiences. 14 women and 13 men pointed to various forms of involvement before they became village representatives. Activity within formal structures was more typical among men than among women; there was also a trend of segregation of activity types of the interviewees depending on their gender (Table 8).

Table 8. The previous social activity of men and women village representatives

Type of experience	Female Village Representatives (N = 14)*	Type of experience	Male Village Representatives (N = 13)*
Rural women's organization	6	Voluntary fire service	4
Parents' committee	5	Village council	3
Informal activity	5	Sports organization	3
Youth organization	5	Informal activity	3
Church organization	2	Commune council	2
Participation in village assemblies	2	Social committee on local investments	2
Voluntary fire service	2	Hobby organization	1
Trade union	1	Trade union	1
Commune council	1	Farmers' organization	1
Sports organization	1	Political party	1
Farmers' organization	1	Youth organization	1
Village council	1		

* Most respondents pointed to more than one type of social activity.

Source: own research.

⁶ A State Agricultural Farm (Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne – PGR) was a form of collective farming created by the communist government in the Polish People's Republic. The great majority of them have been resolved after 1989 due to political reasons.

In the case of female village representatives, the dominant structures and types of activity were those perceived as „feminine”, that is, engagement in parental committees and councils of parents at local schools, rural women's organizations and informal activities, e.g. helping the local inhabitants in dealing with local authorities and officials, organizing of food collections for the needy etc.: *It all started with the rural women's organization, and in the schools... I was in the [parents'] committee, or in the class committee, and lately in the parents council... it's all combined with one another* [L.R.6_f.v]. Interestingly enough, more women than men pointed to involvement in various youth organizations, such as the Rural Youth Association, the Association for Socialist Polish Youth, the scouting movement or the school self-government. This may mean that women, who started their „training” of participation in the local public life early, established a greater number of valuable contacts, and they were more widely accepted as the appropriate candidates for activity of this type.

A comparison of experience of social involvement of female and male village representatives with the generation of their parents indicates a visible increase in differentiation of the possible types of activity of women. 13 females and 15 males examined spoke of the broadly understood social or public activity among their close relatives. More often, these referred to the fathers – council members in the period of the Polish People's Republic⁷, village representatives and members of village councils, involved in the farmers' organizations, voluntary fire services (ochotnicze straż pożarne), folk ensembles and theaters; some interviewees also mentioned their grandparents and uncles, active in the prewar period or earlier (council member, people's movement activist, village representative). Active mothers or mothers-in-law were mentioned less often: mostly, they were involved in the rural women's organizations; several persons spoke of female council members, village representatives or librarians.

Thus, professional experience and social involvement contributes to becoming a village representative among women as well as men. However, the former, in the case of women, turned out to be slightly more differentiated than in the case of men. A similar phenomenon was observed with regard to the types of social activity undertaken by women, the scope of which has increased substantially in comparison with the experiences of the older generation. It should be noted, however, that the structure of professional experience and social involvement of the female and male village representatives has turned out to be strongly differentiated according to gender. It proves that women are able to make use of these experiences, even though they are less often connected to the local power structures.

⁷ The Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa – PRL) was the official name of Poland since the early postwar years till 1989.

Individual motivations

Motivations to participate in the election for a village representative, referred to most often, included: willingness to do something for the village and its residents, a need to introduce changes, in many cases, due to lack of activity of the previous village representative, as well as satisfying of the need to get the feeling of causation and impact on the local affairs and being socially active. Money was rarely mentioned as associated with becoming a village representative candidate.

In the case of persons, who used to work outside the agriculture – both women and men – one of the impulses, accompanying the decision to become a village representative, was the need to remain active after becoming an old age or disability pensioner: *I had always worked with people, and I felt bad when I retired [L.S.12_f.v]; I am getting a disability pension, because I had a car accident... I'd sit at home, I couldn't work, my leg is causing problems. To find something to do for myself, well, that was one of the reasons to become a village representative [L.R.7_m.v].*

At the same time, the motivations typical only for women were identified in the frame of the study. One of the most active, and – at the same time – the eldest of the female village representatives examined (69 years of age) pointed to the „therapeutic” function of this position in the situation of the “empty nest syndrome”: *I am lonely now, because I've been a widow for 14 years, and I have plenty of free time. So I do my best to dedicate this time... to work on behalf of my village, and its residents, and thanks to it I escape from apathy, from feeling empty inside [Z.D.1_f.v].* For these women, who have never worked outside their household, becoming a village representative was the way to go beyond their previous family roles, and for those involved solely in agriculture – the possibility of gather new experiences: *I had not worked anywhere, I stayed at home, you know how it is, the children, the monotony of it all... and now there are meetings with different people, also other village representatives [P.L.3_f.v].*

The structure of motivations behind assumption of the village representative function by women and men thus differs in the context of “masculine” and “feminine” social roles. In the case of men, being a village representative compensates mainly their finished or discontinued professional activity; in the case of women, it also provides the opportunity to try a new role – that of an active member of local public life.

Social perception of the function of village representative

Most of the interviewees from all the communes, both village representatives and those belonging to other categories, expressed a general decrease in the significance of the position of village representative because of the current status of

rural subcommunes in the structure of local self-government: *In fact, there are many tasks assigned to the village representative, but the village representative can't do much. [...] The ideas have to be presented to the commune's authorities to convince the councilors to vote for a given investment to be carried out in this year and not in two or three years* [Z.D.10_f.v].

In the opinion of my interviewees, the function of a village representative was more significant and "attractive" before year 1989. During the period of state socialism, village representatives could access limited resources, such as fertilizers, construction materials, and farming machines, more easily than ordinary residents: *In the past... it was hard to get anything, under the communist rule, and this function allowed us to deal with the matters more easily.* [M.W.6_m.c]; *there were the allotments... fertilizers or something* [L.S.6_m.v]. It seems that, back then, the function of the village representative was more strictly associated with politics in terms of relations to local administration and the ability to benefit from those relations.

On the other hand, my interviewees pointed to the increasing social expectations with regard to activity of female and male village representatives. First of all, the demands of rural inhabitants are growing – they expect a high standard of the local infrastructure and quick solving of the problems reported. In particular, the female village representatives indicated being treated by the inhabitants as a 24-hour "emergency service for everything". Moreover, the village representatives are increasingly often expected to act as local leaders, who build the social capital in the village and commit the people to participate in joint projects of local development: *there is demand rather for an activist, a leader* [L.R.4_m.c]. The growing social expectations are also due to the village fund mechanism. According to the Act on the Village Fund, which came into force in 2009, the communal councils can earmark funds from their budgets to support financially the initiatives or projects, which are collectively chosen by the residents of rural subcommunes located within their administrative area: *And wherever there are young women, village representatives, it really works well. And when you have a 70-year-old male village representative with 40 years of experience... such person will not be able to deal with the village fund* [L.S.10_m.o].

According to the interviews, the position of village representative requires a lot of time and commitment without bringing substantial financial or material benefits. Some interviewees claimed that these lack of benefits are part of the reason why the position no longer attracts men, particularly younger men who are more focused on paid work: *I think that men just don't feel like getting engaged in this. It's like a voluntary social work. They have other things to do* [L.S.1_f.v] (cf. Matysiak 2014a: 712–713).

The significance of the contextual factors

As it was mentioned before, the percentages of women village representatives are visibly higher in the areas added to the Polish territory after the World War II. Their primary inhabitants were forced to leave shortly after the war or fled before it ended. Afterwards, these territories were settled by people from different parts of prewar Poland. According to the literature, the new post-migration local communities created in this area are more willing to accept social innovations, such as women in local power positions, than other communities (Gorzelać and Jałowicki 1998; Bartkowski 2003). In comparison, the percentages of women village representatives are visibly lower in the southern and eastern regions of Poland, where local communities are characterized by the preserved continuity of traditions, which contribute to more conservative attitudes (Bartkowski 2003). Spatial diversity of the share of women in the commune councils are of a similar nature (see Table 3) (cf. also Pieśniewska 2005).

In the light of the qualitative research of the author, quoted here, the interviewees from “feminized” communes (with greater share of women in the local public sphere) much more often expressed positive opinions on the social roles of women and men, as well as women performing the local public functions. They tended to point out changes in the general way of thinking about the equality of men and women: *it seems to me that the social awareness has increased [...] women no longer fit this stereotype of only taking care of the house, children, cleaning, cooking [L.S.8_f.1]*. Apart from that, the “gender-specific traits”, such as sensitivity, scrupulosity, calmness and self-composure as well as a sense of responsibility and discipline, were acknowledged here as particularly useful in performing the functions of the village representative or council member. According to the interviewees, women were more sensitive than men regarding social problems, for example, related to children in deprived families. Emphasis was also put on the greater readiness of women to cooperate with local organizations and engage in activities on behalf of the common good: *they are more committed, more willing to cooperate. And men tend to go their own ways. Unless they're party members already [...] and they know there are benefits in it. Women are more focused on cooperation, on giving [Z.D.6_f.c]*. In those communes, women performing the services of a village representative or a commune councilor were perceived as competent and well-prepared for such tasks. In the “masculinized” communes, the majority of interviewees, including women, tended to declare that women were not interested in public positions because they focused on the home and family. Some of them suggested that it is a strong fear of failure and humiliation, which prevent local women from having public commitments. In the male-dominated communes, the particular “attributes”, described by interviewees as “female” ones, were, in many cases, the same as previously mentioned. How-

ever, they were more often assessed negatively or vaguely by men and women (cf. Matysiak 2014a: 711–712).

The differences identified between the „feminized” and „masculinized” communes indicate also the significance of the type and “density” of the local structures. Interestingly, in the “masculinized” communes, the local male-dominated structures and organizations, mainly voluntary fire service teams, sports clubs and political parties, were listed as the most active and visible in the local public sphere. This decreases the chances of women gaining social support and different experiences, which could strengthen their position in the local community: *No women can be seen. The trainers, men only, are at school, it is about the youth. They are already showing like this [Z.M.11_f.v]; women never meet, really. Perhaps at the school [...] only there, well, it's mommies who usually attend the parents' meetings. And men are like [...] there's a fire service team meeting – they go, a rural assembly – usually men go, and also that PPP (Polish People's Party)⁸ meetings [M.W.8_f.c]*. In contrast, in the “feminized” communes, the number of active local organizations, including male-dominated ones, is smaller, in general. Thus, it can be expected that the lower density of social capital, especially in terms of “masculinized” local structures, contributes to greater openness of the local public sphere for women (cf. Matysiak 2014b: 180–182).

The above analyses indicate that the historic conditions, regional differences in continuity and migratory origins of the local communities as well as dominant types of local organizational structures largely shape the scale of participation of women among village representatives (and, to a lesser extent, the commune councils), as well as attitudes towards female and male social roles. The greater participation of women in the local public sphere, the positive assessment of women in the public roles and lesser „density” of local structures, particularly those, which are traditionally perceived as being „male”, seems to contribute to assumption of the village representative function by women.

Conclusions

Increase in the number of women among village representatives is conditioned by a number of social, individual and organizational factors. On the one hand, rural women are increasingly well educated, they earn diversified professional and social experience, thanks to which they become visible in the local community and they are able to win trust of the inhabitants. Those experiences, however, are different in comparison with men, as usually they encompass profes-

⁸ The Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – PSL) is an agrarian and Christian democratic political party characterized by relatively strong and numerous local structures.

sions and forms of activity perceived as “female”. Assumption of the village representative function by women, particularly those not working outside agriculture or focused mainly on family and home life, is usually accompanied by a specific motivation – perception of being such representative as the possibility to get new experience and “go beyond” the previous roles, associated with family and the farm. On the other hand, the village representative function itself, although often perceived as requiring time and effort and bringing no visible, calculable benefits, is becoming increasingly “available” to women. Men prefer to invest their energy in different areas – in professional activity or in competing for more prestigious positions, associated with a greater scope of formal authority (e.g. a function in the local self-government at the commune or higher level).

The universal tendencies, depicted above, are strengthened or blocked by contextual factors. At the regional level, these include the historically shaped attitudes of conservatism toward traditional gender roles conditioned by the level of continuity of the local communities and their migratory origins. The differences in the historic background overlap with effects of the subsequent social and economic development process and the specific nature of particular localities, which “deform” the pattern of regional diversity.

References

- Aars J., Offerdal A. (1998), *Local Political Recruitment in Crisis? A Comparison of Finland and Norway*, Scandinavian Political Studies, Bind 21 (New Series) 3, p. 207–228.
- Bartkowski J. (1996), *Lokalne elity władzy w Polsce w latach 1966–1995. Zmiany składu społeczno-demograficznego na tle przemian opinii publicznej w Polsce w ujęciu porównawczym*, Wydawnictwo Interart, Warszawa.
- Bartkowski J. (2003), *Tradycja i polityka. Wpływ tradycji kulturowych polskich regionów na współczesne zachowania społeczne i polityczne*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak, Warszawa.
- Central Statistical Office (2014), *Statistical Yearbook of Voyvodships*, Warsaw, Central Statistical Office.
- Fowler L. L. (1993), *Candidates, Congress and the American Democracy*, The University of Michigan Press, Michigan.
- Fuszara M. (2006), *Kobiety w polityce*, Wydawnictwo „Trio”, Warszawa.
- Gąciarz B., Bartkowski J. (2012), *Samorząd a rozwój: instytucje, obywatele, podmiotowość*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa.
- Główny Urząd Statystyczny (1981), *Rocznik Statystyczny 1981*, GUS, Warszawa.
- Główny Urząd Statystyczny (2013), *Ludność. Stan i struktura demograficzno-społeczna. Narodowy Spis Powszechny Ludności i Mieszkań 2011*, GUS, Warszawa.
- Gorzela J., Jałowiecki B. (eds.) (1998), *Koniunktura gospodarcza i mobilizacja społeczna w gminach*, Europejski Instytut Rozwoju Regionalnego i Lokalnego, Warszawa.
- Harasymiw B. (1984), *Political Elite Recruitment in the Soviet Union*, Macmillan Press, London.
- Jakubczak F. (ed.) (1976), *Być w środku życia*, t. 3, Wydawnictwo Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa.
- Jasiewicz-Betkiewicz A., Betkiewicz W. (2012), *Kanały rekrutacji do wielkomiejskiej elity politycznej*, Studia Polityczne 30, p. 251–285.

- Lachiewicz W. (2013), *Gospodarka finansowa sołectw na podstawie ustawy o funduszu sołeckim oraz w ramach ustaleń statutu gminy i statutu sołectwa*, Stowarzyszenie Liderów Lokalnych Grup Obywatelskich, Warszawa.
- Matysiak I. (2013a), *Źródła i zasoby kapitału społecznego sołtysów i sołtyszek w wybranych kontekstach lokalnych*, [in:] *Rynek pracy na obszarach wiejskich Mazowsza – perspektywa gender*, Sawicka J. (ed.), Wydawnictwo SGGW, Warszawa.
- Matysiak I. (2013b), *Sołtysi i sołtyski o pełnionych rolach i motywach sprawowania funkcji w wybranych środowiskach wiejskich*, "Wieś i Rolnictwo", 3 (160), p. 138–152.
- Matysiak I. (2014a), *The feminization of governance in rural communities in Poland: the case of village representatives (sołtys)*, "Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography", 22 (5), p. 700–716.
- Matysiak I. (2014b), *Rola sołtysów we współczesnych społecznościach wiejskich. Płeć jako czynnik różnicujący kapitał społeczny*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa.
- Monitoring list wyborczych w wyborach samorządowych 2014* (2014), Instytut Spraw Publicznych, prezentacja dostępna w ramach „Obserwatorium Równości Płci”.
- Niżyńska A. (2013), *Kobiety w wyborach samorządowych w Polsce w 2010 roku*, [in:] *Kobiety, wybory, polityka*, Fuszara M. (ed.), Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa.
- Nowak A., Kuś M., Urbaniak J., Zarycki T. (2000), *Stimulating the coordination of individual economic decisions*, "Physica A", No. 287, p. 613–630.
- Ostrowski L. (1995), *Rada sołecka w systemie samorządu terytorialnego*, Instytut Ekonomiki Rolnictwa i Gospodarki Żywnościowej, Warszawa.
- Pieśniewska J. (2005), *Środowisko lokalne i ponadlokalne jako kontekst wyników wyborczych kobiet w wyborach samorządowych 1998 i 2002 roku*, [in:] *Płeć, wybory, władza*, Siemieńska R. (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa.
- Prewitt K. (1970), *The Recruitment of Political Leaders: A Study of Citizen-Politicians*. Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., New York.
- Schwartz D. C. (1969), *Toward a Theory of Political Recruitment*, "The Western Political Quarterly", 22 (3), p. 552–571.
- Putnam R. D. (1971), *Studying Elite Political Culture: The Case of "Ideology"*, "The American Political Science Review", 65 (3), p. 651–681.
- Wasilewski J. (ed.) (2006), *Powiatowa elita polityczna: rekrutacja, struktura, działanie*, ISP PAN, Warszawa.
- Zarycki T. (2007), *History and Regional Development: a Controversy Over the 'Right' Interpretation of the Role of History in the Development of Polish Regions*, "Geoforum", 38, p. 485–493.
- Żukowski R. (2004), *Historical path dependence, institutional persistence, and transition to market economy: The case of Poland*, "International Journal of Social Economics", 31 (10), p. 955–973.

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.



WYDAWNICTWO
UNIwersytetu
ŁÓDZKIEGO

www.wydawnictwo.uni.lodz.pl
e-mail: ksiegarnia@uni.lodz.pl
tel. (42) 665 58 63, faks (42) 665 58

ISBN 978-83-7969-842-4



9 788379 698424