

## Traditional and new women's roles in rural areas

### Tradycyjne i nowe role kobiet na obszarach wiejskich

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**Abstract.** Entering Poland to European Union which resulted in accepting The Common Agricultural Policy caused a variety of changes in Polish villages and countries. Previous problems of rural areas like fragmentation and low efficiency of farms, bad financial situation of inhabitants, high rate of unemployment, relatively low educational level and lack of professional practice in non-agricultural occupations caused by lack of workplaces outside of agriculture – were visible and highlighted to a greater extent. Also traditional understanding of women's role as mothers and wives making ancillary works in agricultural farms has changed. Picture of modern country woman shows two opposing tendencies. On one hand it is fulfilling by women the traditional roles and patterns of behaviour resulting from traditional model, on the other hand new roles connected with awakened educational and working aspirations and non-agricultural activity. Realization of expectations connected with traditional and new duties of country women carries a number of difficulties, but will be possible with institutional support and common acceptance of new roles of women in system of values or rural communities.

**Keywords:** rural women • social roles • job activity • rural areas

**Streszczenie.** Wejście Polski do Unii Europejskiej, owocujące przyjęciem Wspólnej Polityki Rolnej, zapoczątkowało na polskiej wsi szereg zmian. Dotychczasowe problemy obszarów wiejskich, takie jak rozdrobnienie i niska efektywność gospodarstw, zła sytuacja materialna mieszkańców wsi, wysoki poziom bezrobocia, stosunkowo niski poziom wykształcenia i brak praktyki zawodowej w profesjach pozarolniczych uwarunkowany brakiem miejsc pracy poza rolnictwem, uwydatniły się jeszcze bardziej. Również tradycyjne pojmowanie roli kobiet jako żon i matek wykonujących prace pomocnicze w gospodarstwach rolnych uległo zmianie. Obraz współczesnej kobiety wiejskiej przedstawia dwie przeciwstawne tendencje. Z jednej strony jest to pełnienie przez kobiety tradycyjnych ról i wzorów zachowań wynikających z tradycyjnego modelu, z drugiej zaś nowych ról związanych z rozbu-

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dzonymi aspiracjami edukacyjnymi, zawodowymi i aktywnością pozarolniczą. Realizacja oczekiwań związanych z tradycyjnymi i nowymi obowiązkami kobiet wiejskich niesie szereg trudności, będzie jednak możliwa przy wsparciu instytucjonalnym oraz powszechnym akceptowaniu nowych ról kobiet w systemie wartości społeczności wiejskich.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kobiety wiejskie • role społeczne • aktywność zawodowa • obszary wiejskie

## Introduction

Since the Polish accession to the European Union and the ongoing socio-economic transformations, the problems of women have also gained greater importance. The interest in rural women is associated with a new concept of rural development, referred to as sustainable and multi-functional development of rural areas. According to this model, in addition to the traditional agricultural function, the village is to perform other important functions, such as the economic, recreational and socio-cultural functions. This is closely connected with the development of the service sector and the necessity of the social and professional activation of women in rural areas. This activation should consist in combining the family and occupational roles and in participation in social and political lives of local communities (Krzyszowski, 2008). Social and professional situation of rural women is inconsistent and full of contrasts. On one hand they are active, resourceful, they strive to acquire knowledge, education, and are more active than men. On the other hand, they are passive and do not show a willingness to work, and their historically established roles limit the arrival of change. Therefore it is difficult to determine the actual participation of women in contemporary transformations in Polish villages (Michalska, 2013).

The recent socio-economic transformations in our country have changed the structure of the primary roles assigned to rural women. As a result of accelerated industrialization of the Polish agriculture we have seen partial or total withdrawal of men from non-agricultural jobs. This translated, among others, to a change in the traditional role of women in the family, equated so far mainly with raising children and running a household.

The formation of the family role of women is affected by many factors, such as structural and institutional family models, the legal situation of women, the system of social benefits for the family and maternity protection or activities of women's organizations which help to reconcile the family and occupational functions. A factor which significantly determines the position of women in the family is professional work, which, however, does not have a uniform importance and place in the hierarchy of the priority values. Women's professional work has aroused diverse opinions and points to:

- striving for the full professional activation of women,
- the desire to inhibit the rate of professional activation of women, arising from the conviction of the primacy of the family role of women. This view stems from the belief that only economic compulsion drives women to work (Wachowiak, 1999).

The goal of this article is to present the role of contemporary rural women, which is the result of two equally functioning attitudes: the traditional one, which emphasizes the need for the fulfilment of significant involvement in the performance of family, domestic, economic, educational and protective responsibilities and the new one, which shows the new opportunities for development, gaining knowledge and education, development of professional activity and own entrepreneurship. The characteristics of the problem are based on the analysis of the subject and results of studies into the situation of women in rural areas.

## Material and methods

This paper reviews the available literature, and also is based on data derived from the Central Statistical Office, the study report entitled "The situation of women in agriculture and rural areas. Specific aspects, standards, parities and expectations", "Rural Poland 2014" Rural development report. There are a number of studies and reports on the role of rural women therefore in the work of an attempt to present the traditional and the new role of women over the years. The work is a review based on the available literature. The results of the analysis are presented in narrative form.

## Results

Rural areas in Poland account for 93.2% of the country area. According to the Central Statistical Office (GUS, 2015), in 2014 the Polish population was 38.5 million, of which 15.3 million people lived in rural areas, which accounted for 39.7% of the total population of the country. About 7.7 million women lived in villages. The share of rural women in the total number of women in Poland was 38.5%. Compared to cities, rural areas were characterized by a lower feminization coefficient – 101 women per 100 men (this parameter in the cities was 111, and 107 for the whole country), which gives Poland 11<sup>th</sup> place in Europe, between Great Britain and Italy. Currently it can be said that this is a fairly typical situation in the Polish countryside, which has visibly begun to grapple with the problem of the emigration of women. The reason for this is primarily education and seeking employment outside the agricultural sector. In some rural areas of the country, men, traditionally stronger connected to the land, have begun to predominate in terms of numbers. The CSO (2015) data show that in 2014 there were 1,413,028 farms, which employed more than 2.3 million people, and every fifth household was ran by a woman. This percentage, however, decreases with the increase of the area group. Relatively few women manage farms with an area exceeding 15 hectares. The highest percentage of women running farms could be found in the 1–5 ha group.

As the authors stress (Michalska, 2013; Sikora, 2014; Sawicka and Skwara, 2015) the Polish village has always been a place where women exercised traditional social roles related to home, family and farm. The traditional perception of women in the rural community clearly defined her place in the community, formulated expectations

and gave clear guidance on the tasks, responsibilities and privileges. The woman of peasant origin, was prepared, in a special way, for the roles she had to perform in the future. These roles were mainly associated with work on the farm, but also the duties the woman had to perform as a housekeeper, running the home, caring for the elderly, upbringing the children, and maintaining family and social ties (Michalska, 2013). There were very few professional, scientific or social models in fields other than the family field. Women performing in these areas came mostly from the outside, they were not part of the peasant community. In contrast, women who tried to move away from the performance of the traditional roles and assume other social and professional roles often had to leave the village (Sikora, 2014). Only few female inhabitants of villages were the exceptions manifesting the determination, stubbornness and perseverance, and who performed roles other than those related to home and supporting work on the farm (Michalska, 2013). It is very difficult to make a distinction between work and family in agriculture. Women on farms are involved in almost all types of production, both production destined for the market as well as for self-consumption, all year round, not just during periods of particularly intensive work. In a rural family, virtually all housework rests on the shoulders of the woman (Wachowiak, 1999). The traditional division of roles attributes permanent, routine and repetitive tasks to rural women. Such a method of separation of functions and reduction of the activity of women only to the family realm has led to the absence of women from the public sphere. This was justified by the biological difference of sexes and the functional division of social roles based on it, related to, *inter alia*, reproduction, but also the limitations resulting from the nature of the work of the farmer, from whom physical strength and resistance was required (Michalska, 2013). In the post-war period, and before the social and political transformation, Polish women did not fight to change their position and place in society while there were waves of feminism and women gaining new civil rights in Western Europe (Michalska, 2013). The legacy of socialism was the “gender equality policy” implemented by the socialist state, which consisted in adding professional work to the traditional domestic duties of women. At that time, work of women in the male professions was promoted.

In the transition period, the entire baggage of responsibilities in the sphere of education, family, social, and even production rested on the shoulders of women. New factors that modified the existing system of family roles between men and women did not reduce the existing tasks assigned to women only. Although women were increasingly more often allowed to have a say in production decisions, the caring and upbringing roles were attributed to the woman. The process of democratization of life in a rural family has so far remained less advanced than in the urban family. Besides, as the man is looking for a non-agricultural job, functions of women are being expanded with new responsibilities. The current way of understanding life and work in the countryside left little leeway for women to develop their own personality, self-education, or pursue other values, *inter alia*, in matters of culture, leisure and recreation. Any attempts to break away from the existing regimen of work were reluctantly received by the rural community (Wachowiak, 1999).

For the last twenty years the acceptance of women reconciling family and professional roles has increased very clearly. At the end of the socialism period (1979) still

over 53% of women entering adult life saw themselves mainly in the traditional roles of wives and mothers. In subsequent years, the percentage of women who saw themselves in this way significantly decreased and amounted to: in 1989 – 45.8%, in 1998 – 31.1%, in 2003 – 27.6%. Most women entering adult life saw themselves in double roles, reconciling their professional career with domestic responsibilities. Professional roles became the priority for few women; their percentage in subsequent years fluctuated, but did not exceed 7%. Roles of wives and mothers are often the life-long task for rural women with lower education (Titkow and Duch-Krzystoszek, 2009).

Polish accession to the European Union in 2004 brought revolutionary changes to agriculture, which resulted from application of the Common Agricultural Policy to the sector. Socio-economic transformations have changed the structure of the primary roles assigned to rural women. As a result of accelerated industrialization in the Polish agriculture we have seen partial or even total withdrawal of men to non-agricultural jobs. This translated, among others, to a change in the traditional role of women in the family, equated so far mainly with raising children and running a household. A contemporary rural woman often combines elements of tradition and modernity. The structure of rural families has been changing. Rural families are not as numerous as years ago, and the exercise of parental duties has changed its qualitative reach. The approach of a contemporary woman to children forced new tasks. Parents, but primarily women, invest in the education of their children, providing them better conditions for education and personal development, organizing leisure activities outside their home. Professional activity of rural women is very high. They combine running the households with the agricultural skills, and agricultural roles interweave with production roles, which places a great burden on a woman. Many of them combine work for their own household with other forms of activities, which on one hand translates into an improvement of the economic situation of the family, and on the other hand is an expression of the search for their own identity. For many women, financial independence and self-esteem is more important than income. However, the career development of women is largely dependent on the role of a wife and a mother attributed to them. Family is the fundamental determinant of developmental changes in women. Professional activity forces the married women with offspring to perform a double and even a triple role, which sometimes leads to conflicts of interest. In rural communities, where the traditional perception of the functions performed by women still dominates, a woman who is professionally successful is often seen by the environment as a bad mother, who is not sufficiently involved in the affairs of her family. This often puts a woman in front of a choice: work or family. However, next to the negative effects of the dual role of women, one can also see positive aspects, i.e. the more comprehensive development of personality, mature motherhood and partnership, as well as increased self-esteem and self-acceptance. Rural women are increasingly seeking to work outside the agricultural sector, to set up their own businesses or public benefit organizations, as well as to modernize their farms. They want to fulfil themselves through further training in business management and human resource management.

They are an important target group for measures aimed at the development of non-agricultural activities in rural areas. With money from the European Union we

have seen a very dynamic development of the communities of rural women. As the study report "The situation of women in agriculture and rural areas. Specific aspects, standards, parities and expectations" demonstrates, economic activity of women is higher in urban areas than in rural areas in the European Union, data refer to 2010. The greatest differences between activity of urban and rural women can be seen in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Lithuania. The highest ratio of rural women activity was recorded in Sweden (68.7%), with the lowest in Italy (45.4%). In this aspect Poland ranked 12, with the ratio of 51.5%.

The situation of women in the labour market is determined by many factors. They are required to have better education and higher qualifications than men who apply for the same position. Quite often, qualifications and the level of education are secondary, because employers during the preliminary interviews inquire about the family status of candidate, and only later ask about her specific professional competencies (Krzyżanowska, 2014). The rural labour market provides women with much fewer opportunities than the urban market; so to fulfil their roles women must make greater effort and be more determined. Despite the fact that Polish law prohibits discrimination based on sex, this phenomenon still exists on many levels – it is not just about lower salaries, but also uneven promotion opportunities, fewer chances of finding a job, and a greater risk of losing the job (Omyła-Rudzka, 2010). As the author observes, opportunities for women in the labour market are also reduced by their attachment to the traditional family model, which assumes greater involvement of women in domestic work and which requires longer career breaks after the birth of children. One could argue that women still have to try harder and prove their value. Also for these reasons there has been an increase of educational aspirations among rural women, to supplement their formal education, improve occupational skills and deepen knowledge of foreign languages. The expectations of women regarding their participation in the labour market are dedicated primarily the desire to reconcile family, parental and professional responsibilities. Today's women have completely different aspirations than years ago, therefore the role of women is significantly different from that of the past. The model of life has been changing – women are not only mothers and housewives, as we can clearly see social and material advancement of women. In 2011 nearly 55% women graduated from secondary schools and more than 15% graduated from universities. 9% of women aspire to graduate from secondary schools and nearly 25% of respondents wish to graduate from universities (*Sytuacja kobiet...*, 2012). More than 16% of respondents want to complete postgraduate studies. The surveyed women plan to achieve these goals over the next three years. Achievement of aspirations and career and educational goals seems to be the key aspect for rural women.

## Summary

Traditional and new roles of women differ significantly from each other, but the core is common. The new roles of rural women require activity and involvement that is different than before. Rural women not only continue to perform many tasks assigned to

them in the traditional division of roles, but also try to respond to the new challenges and social expectations. Despite more frequent professional work, non-agricultural activities, social activities and activities performed in a variety of organizations and associations, performance of the traditional role is still valid. The maternal and caring role that is related to securing the needs of the family and housework, and sometimes the auxiliary jobs on the farm, is an integral part of women's lives. Female residents of villages are active in areas where previously no one expected them to engage in, or even roles that were assigned exclusively to men. They educate themselves, take paid work and establish businesses. However, as it often turns out, as far as women in rural areas are ready for such changes, the external environment is much slower and less responsive to adapt to the new circumstances. If the new roles of women are widely accepted in the system of values of rural communities and appropriate institutional support is provided, expectations associated with traditional and new responsibilities of rural women can be fulfilled, which will allow women to utilize their potential to their full advantage.

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