

Chapter 9

BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY THE CASE OF RURAL WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN POLAND

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Introduction

Historically speaking, the tradition of rural women's organizations (*Kola Gospodyń Wiejskich*) in Poland can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when, after the enfranchisement of peasants, the first social and economic rural associations started to emerge. Their main goal was to support the advancement of agriculture and living standards in rural households by turning rural women into active actors in these processes. Since the beginning, rural women's organizations have been initiating many cultural and educational activities for women as well as all people living in villages. Before World War II, their members became the female vanguard of rural development, who set up new and innovative ways of increasing the quality of agriculture and rural families' well-being as well as community life. During the state-socialist period, rural women's organizations were incorporated into the complex system of ideological control over the rural population. At the same time, as female structures, they were perceived as "politically harmless" and managed to continue and even broaden their cultural and educational activities, which were highly appreciated in rural communities. Soon, rural women's organizations became one of the most characteristic and prevalent entities in the Polish countryside. When the systemic transformation began in 1989 rural women's organizations faced new challenges and structural changes.

First, many organizations operating in the state-socialist period not only were discredited as being “infected” by the previous system, but were also deprived of the institutional and financial support that had formerly been provided. Most of the organizations existing at that time, regardless of their activity and the results they achieved, tended to be classified as “bad,” irrespective of the fact that the historic traditions of some of them went back much further than the postwar period. At the same time, the concept of civil society, which was basically limited to new nongovernmental organizations (associations and foundations) established after 1989, became dominant. Moreover, civil society in Poland used to be described as universal, ignoring the perspective of the local context—the specific needs, traditions, and expectations in the diversified local communities (see Bartkowski 2003; Ekiert and Foa 2011; Ekiert and Kubik 2014; Kurczewska and Kurczewski 2011). This led to local concerns’ exclusion from the debate and research on civil society of many groups and organizations, other than associations or foundations registered after 1989.

Rural women’s organizations, which were numerous and active in the state-socialist period, and have an underestimated, rich historic tradition, rooted deeply in the local rural communities, in fact, fulfilled all of the prerequisites for such exclusion. Therefore, during the transformation period of the early 1990s, regardless of their merits, they were commonly depicted as “communist” and “backward” structures that did not fit the new reality. However, not only have many of these organizations survived, but new ones have been established in recent years. This raises the question of why the rural women’s organizations still exist—who needs them and why? What are their strategies of action? This chapter explores this phenomenon, focusing on the modes of working adopted by rural women’s organizations today. The main aim is to address three basic research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of rural women’s organizations’ members? (2) What kind of activities are implemented by these organizations? and (3) How do these organizations operate and find their place in the structural conditions shaping the modern civil society in Poland? It is argued that rural women’s organizations, despite their shared core of activities, are deeply rooted in the local contexts where they operate. The variety of their forms and modes of action is simply ignored when they are observed through lenses focused on formal structures of nongovernmental organizations. Thus, this study shows the theoretical and empirical limits of using a universalist model of civil society in the assessment of actually existing civil societies.

The chapter starts with a methodological section, presenting the empirical data used in the analysis. Thereafter, the basic mechanisms of narrowing and unification of the concept of civil society in Poland are discussed. This section shows how this has led to unjust belittling of the significance and po-

tential of traditional rural organizations. The following section discusses the specific characteristics of rural women's organizations and the role that these organizations have played in various historic periods. The subsequent parts of this chapter are devoted to the analysis of the empirical data, arranged in sections corresponding to the posed research questions.

Data and Research Method

This chapter is based on the results of analysis of data from two rounds of data collection.¹ The first one was conducted in 2005. It encompassed fifteen in-depth interviews conducted with the leaders and members of four chosen rural women's organizations, which differed in terms of when they were established—one existing since the second half of the nineteenth century, one established in the state-socialist period, and two reactivated in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. The organizations examined operated in various types of rural communities: an urbanizing village located next to a large city, a village with a significant number of residents living off of agriculture, a village, where the state farm (PGR) operated before 1989. The interviews with the leaders and members of the selected rural women's organizations were complemented by four interviews with the "key informants" in the corresponding village, such as the village representative (*sołtys*),² the head of the local school, or the mayor.

The second source of empirical material consists of results of the analysis of qualitative data collected from ten communes located in different regions of Poland. The communes were chosen because of their different proportions of women serving as village representatives and commune councilors.³ Two communes—one "feminized" and one "masculinized"—were examined in each of five chosen regions of Poland. The former was based on the percentage of women among village representatives and commune councilors, which was close to 50 percent, and the latter represented communes where the percentage of women village representatives and commune councilors did not exceed 30 percent. Eight individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the leaders of the rural women's organizations. In addition, interviews were conducted with female and male village representatives (fifty-one) and representatives of the local authorities, public institutions, and organizations (forty-nine). One of the topics discussed was the activity of the local organizations, and thus, some of the interviews contained information concerning the rural women's organizations in examined communes. Fieldwork was conducted between November 2008 and December 2010.

In addition, the chapter includes the results of a short survey, which was conducted in May 2005 among the participants of the Conference of Female

Village Representatives “It’s time for the countryside!” (N=100). The conference was organized in the Polish Parliament by the Administrative Office of the Governmental Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Women and Men and the Women’s Parliamentary Group. Some of the questions in the survey questionnaire pertained to rural women’s organizations.

Collecting the data in the two different time periods allows for capturing the processes of change in terms of the rural women’s organizations’ modes of working as well as the influence of external factors, such as Poland’s accession to the European Union. The chapter also draws on the latest available secondary data.

The Concept of a Civil Society in Poland

According to Lane (2010: 259), most of the definitions of civil society share three main components: “an area between the individual (and family) and the state; an economy based on private ownership and the market; and a particular set of values and norms, which include the legitimating concepts of freedom and democracy.” Rather than proposing or imposing a specific definition of civil society, however, the aim of this section is to reconstruct the notion of civil society that became dominant among Polish researchers as well as public opinion leaders.

Due to the complex nature of the concept of civil society, its comprehensive operationalizations, encompassing both structural and normative components, assuming both quantitative and qualitative indicators, are rather rare. In the late 1990s, Szacki (1997: 30) pointed out that: “From the perspective of researchers—empiricists, a civil society is usually perceived simply as the so called third sector, identified on the basis of a relatively simple process of reasoning, where the starting point is the division into private and public entities and public and private objectives of activity. The first sector is the market, where the entities and the objectives are private; the second sector is the government, where the entities and the objectives are public; the third sector is the civil society, where the entities are private and the objectives are public.” In the period of systemic transformation, an even narrower concept of civil society caught on in Poland, influencing not only research undertaken in the subsequent years, but also public debate and the practice of supporting citizens’ activity. The mainstream way of thinking of civil society was reduced to several types of entities and deprived of a historic perspective, as well as of the local dimension.

First, relating to the experiences of Western countries and concepts, which have become popular in this part of the world,⁴ civil society understood as the third sector was identified with nongovernmental organizations,

that is, associations and foundations, which, since 2003, have been regulated by the Act of Law on public benefit and volunteer work (see also Jeziarska's chapter in this volume). Consequently, entities operating on the basis of other legal provisions—such as various professional organizations, Catholic Church-based nonprofits, and various unregistered organizations like councils of parents or committees building local infrastructure—were by and large ignored (Leś et al. 2000: 13–16).

Second, the “old” organizations, established before 1989, were generally recognized as facade entities, entirely subordinated to the Communist Party and doomed to die out in the new reality. This point of view, however, fails to reflect the complexity of structures “inherited” from the period of the People's Republic of Poland. According to Ekiert and Foa (2011: 9), even mass organizations could not always be boiled down to the “transmission belts” subordinated to the party: “Following de-Stalinization in the 1950s and especially since the mid-1970s, this official institutional sphere experienced a gradual process of pragmatization, de-ideologization, and even pluralization. This happened to a different degree in various countries, with Poland and Hungary leading the way. In the 1970s and 1980s many of these organizations became less ideological, and acquired a degree of autonomy in managing their internal affairs, as well as a growing lobbying capacity.”

In addition, as Ekiert and Kubik (2014: 47; see also Ekiert and Kubik in this volume) point out, some of the organizations functioning in the state-socialist period were rooted in much older traditions: “Some pre-communist civil society traditions and even organizations (mostly in the realms of leisure, education, and culture) survived under communist rule, especially at the local level. They served as semi-official carriers of local traditions and provided a modicum of public space somewhat sheltered from direct political interference.” Literature on the subject includes a number of publications, presenting historical details on structures and patterns of organized cooperation in Poland in the partition and prewar periods, as well as in earlier times (for example, see Bartkowski 2003; Leś et al. 2000). Poland thus entered the transformation period with some significant assets, including strong professional associations, numerous sports clubs, cultural organizations, as well as organizations associating specific groups, such as farmers, veterans of war, or women. Many of them had such resources as well-developed local structures and experienced activists (Ekiert and Kubik 2014). Thus, seen from a historic perspective, associations and foundations established after 1989 are only one possible type of third-sector entity in Poland.

Third, due to the diversity of such local factors as tradition, character of social bonds, and activity of the local authorities, in Poland we should refer to local civil societies rather than to a single, universal model of a civil society (Kurczewska and Kurczewski 2001; Misztal 2003). However, in the trans-

formation period, the reflection on the meaning of the dimension of locality was clearly insufficient. These tendencies were strengthened by the destinations of foreign aid for Polish civil society. Regulska (1998) has pointed out that American funds for nongovernmental organizations have been received mainly by large entities operating in large cities. On the other hand, expert support for local organizations and institutions, financed by Western countries, has often been delivered by external consultants, who are not familiar with the peculiarities of the local contexts.

Disregarding of diversity of forms of civic engagement, of the historic perspective, and the dimension of locality, typical in the transformation period, has established the framework for defining of the civil society in Poland and the methodology applied to its analysis. This has led to marginalization of the significance of, among other things, traditional rural organizations and the specific character of other collective activities undertaken by rural residents.

The Concept of a Civil Society and Rural Communities in Poland

Poland is characterized by a relatively high share of inhabitants of the rural areas in the total population. According to the results of the National Census of 2011, the percentage of the Polish rural population was 39.2 percent (GUS 2012: 47). In 2009, the share of rural areas of the total geographic area of Poland amounted to 85.4 percent based on the criteria of Eurostat and 90.8 percent based on the criteria of the OECD (Stanny 2011: 105).⁵ The agriculture sector is characterized by a great number of small family farms—in 2010, the average area of a farm in Poland was 9.6 hectares (Poczta 2012: 84).

At the same time, the social structure of the rural population has been changing. Due to the progressing de-agrarization of employment, more than 60 percent of rural residents have nothing to do with agriculture, while the percentage of rural households living on farming only has dropped below 10 percent (Wilkin 2011: 117). The education aspirations of the rural population are growing, and the migration flow from the cities to the countryside—in particular, to the suburbs—is increasing. Halamska (2013) indicates that, as a result of all these changes, “the rural middle class,” which consists of white-collar workers and specialists, is emerging. Also, the quality of the rural “technical” infrastructure, including roads, sewage systems, etc., has been improving, along with the “social” infrastructure—e.g., public utility buildings (schools, community centers, etc.). It should be underlined, however, that the developmental changes in specific communities differ greatly in terms of their intensity, depending on the characteristics of the local context (*ibid.*).

At the end of 2011, only 24 percent out of seventy-two thousand associations (excluding the voluntary fire brigades) and eleven thousand foundations existing in Poland were registered in the rural areas (Przewłocka 2013: 2). Focusing on the registered associations and foundations, however, leads to a false conclusion concerning the low level of civic engagement of rural residents. Associations and foundations are just two of many possible types of organizations and collective actions present in local rural communities. Moreover, in the villages, we also deal with the entire spectrum of organization forms, which are not found in the national registers or databases. These are groups and initiatives associated with the local parishes, schools, committees for construction of the local infrastructure (which are usually dissolved after they have completed their task), as well as informal groups established on the basis of economic cooperation or relations with the neighbors (Herbst 2008). A significant indicator of civic engagement in the rural communities is also the activity of the rural self-government (*samorząd wiejski*), which comprises the local initiatives of the village representative (*sołtys*) and the village council (*rada sołecka*), usually undertaken together with the inhabitants (Matysiak 2014). The rural population is also characterized by various informal activities, undertaken spontaneously in order to solve a specific local problem.

Particularly noteworthy here are the so-called traditional rural organizations, many of which were established as early as the second half of the nineteenth century (Bartkowski 2003). These entities vary in terms of their legal form, and usually are subject to legal provisions other than those regulating the activity of nongovernmental organizations (associations and foundations). The most significant are the voluntary fire brigades (*ochotnicze straże pożarne*), usually established as associations; farmers' organizations and rural women's organizations, formally registered as socioprofessional farmer entities similar to trade unions; and amateur sports clubs. In the state-socialist period, traditional rural organizations were controlled by the state through the complex system of numerous formal vertical and horizontal dependencies. Nevertheless, many of them implemented a great deal of useful initiatives on behalf of the villages and their residents.

The dimension of locality is of key significance for the theory and practice of civil society in Poland. Some authors pointed to the need to "sensitize" the research on the specific character of the rural communities. For instance, Herbst distinguished two models of civil society in Poland—"urban" and "rural" (Herbst 2005, in Bartkowski 2007: 90), Lewenstein (1999) wrote about the "community based model of cooperation," typical for the rural areas, and Fedyszak-Radziejowska (2012: 122) emphasized the significance of traditional informal bonds based on relations in the frame of family and neighborhood circles as well as religious community formed by the local parish. Going even further, Klekotko (2005: 105–116) underlined that the

Polish rural communities were not only different from those in the cities, but also from one another. Therefore, according to Klekotko, we should not construct a universal model of the “rural civil society,” but we can speak of “rural civil communities” as civil society manifests itself at the local level, strongly related to the specific social and historic context.

Limiting the operational definitions of civil society to nongovernmental organizations established after 1989 has popularized the false belief that it is a new phenomenon, observed mainly in the urban context. This perspective has turned out to be extraordinarily resistant to change, despite the efforts of some researchers who point to the diversity of types of civic engagement in the rural communities (e.g., Bukraba-Rylska 2011; Herbst 2008; Kamiński 2008). The victims of this way of thinking include the rural women’s organizations—traditional entities that are still insufficiently noticed and constantly underestimated.

Rural Women’s Organizations: A Historic Sketch

The first organizations of rural women started to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century, during the period of liquidation of the corvée farm economy. The decline of the patrimonial role of landlords resulted in a growing demand for institutions and collective structures that would support the processes of modernization of agriculture, peasant farms, and conditions of living in the rural areas (Bukraba-Rylska 2008). Such initiatives were undertaken with the assumption that rural women should participate actively in the changes taking place. The first female organizations in rural communities were founded by representatives of the gentry and the clergy, as well as activists of the peasant movement (Kostrzewska 1992). Usually, these were established simultaneously with the farmers’ organizations (*kółka rolnicze*)—the peasant socioeconomic associations for men (Sawicka 1996). Before the World War II, rural women’s organizations (*Kola Gospodyń Wiejskich*) were the most popular associations for female inhabitants of the rural areas. Under the supervision of full-time female instructors and activists of the peasant movement, their members acquired practical skills associated with household and farm work and they developed rural cooperatives. Another aim was to engage the rural women in the cultural initiatives and draw their attention also to involvement in local self-government and decision-making processes (Kostrzewska 1992). In 1937, there were 4,221 rural women’s organizations with more than ninety-nine thousand members in Poland (Marczakiewicz et al. 1992: 19). The membership was not mass, but the significant group of rural female activists was formed within these structures.

In the early postwar years, traditional rural organizations, including the rural women's organizations, tried to continue their activity from before 1939; however, they were quickly "absorbed" by the centrally controlled structures founded by the Communist Party. Their revival took place only after 1956, when the state policy became "softer," including toward the rural organizations. In the state-socialist period, rural women's organizations became a mass structure—in 1959, there were more than eight thousand of these, with almost one hundred and sixty thousand members, and in 1989—more than thirty-five thousand organizations with more than one million members (Marczakiewicz et al. 1992: 27). Before 1989, the rural women's organizations were "fitted into" the system of vertical and horizontal institutional interdependencies controlled by the state. They were an autonomous component of the structure of "male" farmers' organizations, and until 1966, they had also formed a part of the League of Polish Women (*Liga Kobiet Polskich*). Nevertheless, the rural women's organizations performed many activities that were useful on the local level with regard to agriculture (e.g., poultry collectives), education and culture (e.g., courses in cooking, baking, sewing, handicraft, as well as trips for sightseeing, to the movies and theaters), child care (e.g., during intensive agricultural work), health care and hygiene (e.g., by organizing experts' talks and medical examinations), promotion of handicraft, folk culture (e.g., through establishment of singing and acting groups), and agrotourism (Grzebisz-Nowicka 1995). However, involvement in the rural women's organizations also facilitated access to resources and services, which were hindered under the conditions of the "economy of shortage" (Kornai 1985), such as household equipment (e.g., washing machines, irons) and farming devices (e.g., potato lifters), which were distributed or co-used among the members.

In the literature on the subject, it has been noted that unlike the farmers' organizations, the rural women's organizations, perceived as dealing with practical "female issues," largely avoided ideologization and political infiltration. They provided rural women and the rural population in general with needed information and services that were inaccessible otherwise. At the same time, as it has been noted by Siemieńska (2005: 245), during the state-socialist period, rural women's organizations were not feminist structures acting on behalf of women, but rather entities that acted in the best interest of the state through the agency of women.

Rural Women's Organizations Today

The legal basis for rural women's organizations is provided by the Act on Socioprofessional Organization of Farmers of 1982. In the Act, the female

structures are referred to as a “separate organizational unit of a farmers’ organization” (Art. 22, clause 2). According to official information, the objectives of the rural women’s organizations include: providing assistance for the rural families in bringing up and educating children and ensuring their participation in various forms of holiday recreation; activities on behalf of health care and well-being of rural families thanks to development of health-care education; improvement of the sanitary conditions of the farms and whole villages and assistance to the elderly and the disabled; development of various forms of entrepreneurship among rural women; increased efficiency in management of rural households and areas of agricultural production; increasing participation of the rural inhabitants in culture, promotion of folklore, and folk art.⁶ It does not mean, however, that the rural women’s organizations fit the model of service providers, which is often imposed on nongovernmental organizations. The great majority of these official objectives remained the same as before 1989 and, according to the empirical data presented later, are met only to some extent today.

According to the legal provisions quoted, the rural women’s organizations, as before 1989, formally remain a part of the structure of the “male” farmers’ organizations, which make up the Association of Farmers, Farming Groups and Organizations (*Związek Rolników, Kółek i Organizacji Rolniczych*). The structures of the Association include those established at the national, provincial (that are, relatively speaking, the most dynamic), and local level (districts and communes) as well as the farmers’ organizations operating at the level of villages. The rural women’s organizations have their councils at all levels of the Association structure—from the national to local one; individual organizations operate at the level of the village. The “institutional dependence” of the rural women’s organizations on the farmers’ structures has many significant consequences.

First of all, the rural women’s organizations are not entered in any official registers or databases on third-sector organizations, such as those established by the Klon/Jawor Association or Polish Central Statistical Office. Thus, it is not possible even to estimate their number. On the website of the National Association of Farmers, Farming Groups and Organizations, it is stated that there are 25,800 rural women’s organizations with more than eight hundred thousand members;⁷ however, this number seems to be highly overstated.⁸

The situation becomes even more complicated if we consider the fact that the rural women’s organizations survived the transformation period or were revived in the recent years, while a lot of farmers’ organizations simply disappeared, being too dependent on the previous state system of support for agriculture (Grzebisz-Nowicka 1995). Thus, many of the rural women’s organizations were deprived of their “parent” institutional structure. As a result, some of them, particularly in the areas in which the farmers’ organi-

zations no longer exist, function as informal groups. Others, located in the areas in which the farmers' organization structures survived, retained their former legal and institutional format. However, the Association of Farmers, Farming Groups and Organizations, operating dynamically at the national level, but rather weak when it comes to the local structures, is able to control the rural women's organizations operating at the local level only partially. At present, the Association estimates the number of organizations that still "belong" to its institutional network to be around 2,500.⁹

Second, as they officially belong to the farmers' structures, the rural women's organizations are not "independent" legal persons, which substantially limits their ability to apply for funds, e.g., in grant competitions. As a result, women decide to register their organizations as autonomous associations and gain the status of a nongovernmental organization as defined in the Act of Law on public benefit and volunteer work.¹⁰ It must be underlined that the farmers' structures usually do not financially support the rural women's organizations. The National Council of Rural Women's Organizations (*Krajowa Rada Kół Gospodyń Wiejskich*), connected strongly to the Association of Farmers, registered the separate entity called the Association of Rural Women (*Stowarzyszenie Kobiet Wiejskich "Gospodyni"*), which may create local branches that "lend" legal personality to the rural women's organizations operating at the local level. However, no information has been obtained with regard to whether this solution has proven to be effective or not.

It can thus be said that, attempting to find their place in the new reality, today's rural women's organizations select various paths and strategies. The empirical data gathered have allowed for in-depth analysis of their modes of action.

Members of the Rural Women's Organizations

In the rural women's organizations included in the 2005 research, the number of members ranged from seven to thirty-two. In the later research, conducted in 2008–2010, some organizations operating in much larger villages had fifty or even more than one hundred female members. In most cases, women, who were members of these organizations, were older or at least middle-aged (about fifty years old or more) and most of them were no longer employed. Younger women were a minority, usually connected by family ties to the older members (daughters, daughters-in-law, granddaughters). Only two of the examined organizations consisted exclusively of younger women, aged approximately between thirty and fifty. It should be emphasized that the weak engagement of young women is one of the most significant problems faced by the rural women's organizations. In general, the great majority

of the analyzed organizations' members were married; most of them had children. It should be noted, however, that among the oldest members, there was a large group of widows whose children had left for the city or gone abroad. In almost all the examined rural women's organizations, their members came from the rural areas, often from the vicinity, or they had lived there since their childhood. In some organizations operating in suburban villages or in areas characterized by good transport connections with the cities and thus attractive for "settlers" from the outside, the members included women who used to live in the city. One of them declared having become a member of the rural women's organization to get to know the local community better and learn about the local traditions: "I got enrolled, because I'd grown up in a city ... first of all, I was curious what it was like. I also attended the meetings gladly, because ... one could find out many interesting things, for instance, how the countryside used to be in the past, how people used to do this or that, for example, the harvest festival" [M.Z.2].¹¹

The qualitative research conducted in 2014 by The Unit for Social Innovation and Research—"Shipyard" (*Pracownia Badań i Innowacji Społecznych Stocznia*) contained an interesting case of a rural women's organization established by the female "newcomers" who had moved to the rural areas from the city. Mostly young women, with small or school-age children, not working, organized themselves in order to spend time together, develop their interests and hobbies (mainly sports), and act on behalf of the community, in which they were otherwise strangers. Interestingly enough, the organization encountered distrust and discontent from the "indigenous" elderly population, who felt "robbed" of their rural tradition by the "newcomers." The members of the organization had to prove their sincerity for a long time, and only after they organized the celebration of an anniversary of the establishment of the village did they win the hearts of the elderly (Milczewska et al. 2014: 32).

In terms of the two research projects, it can be concluded that the key role in all of the rural women's organizations examined was played by their leaders (their chairwomen). Their persistence and willingness to preserve the traditions of the organization often served as the main conditions for its existence. It is interesting to note that most of interviewed leaders of the rural women's organizations had unique social resources and life experiences. First, all of them had at least vocational secondary (technical school) education; there were also several university graduates. Some of them had occupations not associated with agriculture (e.g., teachers, accountants), and this group included former holders of managerial positions in local institutions or companies. Some of them had managed family farms, engaging in agricultural work as their husbands worked away from home. Also, most of the interviewed leaders mentioned their activity in youth organizations

in which they were involved when they were young—the Rural Youth Association (*Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej*), the Socialist Polish Youth Association (*Związek Socjalistycznej Młodzieży Polskiej*), or scouting. Some of them pointed to their involvement in the local public life: positions in the local administration, in parents' committees, village councils, etc. A great majority of the interviewed leaders of rural women's organizations also pointed to the patterns of public activity among their closest relatives, e.g., grandfathers, who were the activists of peasant movement; mothers, who were also involved in the rural women's organizations; and fathers, who became village representatives or communal council members. It can thus be said that women leading the rural women's organizations had relatively diverse and rich cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986), and they were strongly socialized to public activity both in their family and—in many cases—in the structures of the youth organizations, as well as later in adult life.

Activities of the Rural Women's Organizations

Along with progress of the systemic transformation, which led to a structural change of the rural areas and improvement of their inhabitants' standard of living, the rural women's organizations gradually ceased to engage, e.g., in poultry collectives, rental of household equipment, organizing of courses or trainings related to children's upbringing, maintenance of the household, or talks on health and hygiene. According to the interviewees, all this information is easy to find in women's magazines or on the Internet. It does not mean, however, that they gave up all types of traditional initiatives. The analyzed rural women's organizations continued their activities from the past to a greater or lesser extent, combining them with new concepts and ideas.

Among the organizations examined in 2005, the most visible type of activity was associated with the broadly understood continuation of folk traditions and participation in various local events and celebrations. Female members of the rural women's organizations prepared harvest festival garlands, dishes, and handicraft for the local picnics and other events, and participated in the local contests—e.g., in cooking. Members of three of the organizations examined also created folk singing groups, attending local celebrations and festivities. In addition, the rural women's organizations participated in organization of local cultural events—the female members of one of the examined organizations initiated and then, with the support of the local authorities, co-organized, a two-day festival of folk culture in their village. Members of the rural women's organizations also prepared official treats for the guests visiting their villages, e.g., representatives of state institutions or

Catholic Church authorities. One of the organizations examined was particularly strongly connected with the local parish—women were engaged in cleaning of the church and caring for the internal decorations.

Another typical field of activity was the organization of meetings and celebrations for the residents of the village, such as a New Year's party, Christmas party, Women's Day, Children's Day, etc. One of the organizations examined, in which most members were older women, "specialized" in organizing meetings for the elderly, e.g., Seniors' Day, trips to the movies or the theater. The leader of this organization pointed out that, thanks to their initiatives, these events were also accessible to people, who could not afford them independently: "Of course, this is rather for the group of those less affluent, because . . . those, who have cars, I guess they have reached a certain standard of living . . . when there is a trip to a theater or to the movies, or a meeting, a bonfire, well, for such people, this is not attractive . . . we help those, who stay at home . . . we organize this Seniors' Day, or a Christmas party, an Easter party or a bonfire" [M.Z.1].

In one of the organizations examined, whose members were mostly relatively young women (aged about thirty to fifty), innovative ideas for activities in the near future emerged: organizing of fitness classes for all interested women, talks on women's health, meetings and discussions with experts in various fields: "I used to dream of something like aerobics, some exercising . . . because everyone complains after the winter. We could do something like that for the women . . . well, we could invite a doctor, organize some lectures, for instance, these days, those gynecological problems, right? . . . We could invite someone, who would present the issues, which are more, well, I don't know, in the rural areas, people tend to fall behind, we don't even know what's happening out there, in the world" [Z.P.2].

The organizations examined in 2008–2010 presented very similar types of activities—participation in local events and festivals, organization of meetings for the members and inhabitants of the village, management of folk bands. Some of them were also very strongly connected to the parish and the church, for instance, they prepared the altars for the Corpus Christi celebrations or decorated the church for religious celebrations. However, this time the trainings were mentioned—one of the interviewed leaders pointed out the free floral and regional cuisine courses open for all interested women from the village. According to the interviews, these activities enjoyed great interest among women of various ages, which means that, despite the availability of information, such collective learning through courses and workshops is still needed. Members of the same organization also prepared an exhibition of old rural household equipment: "for our fiftieth anniversary, we had this exhibition of old stuff, which people no longer remember, particularly the young ones—they have no idea what a churn looks like, all kinds

of old tools, for spinning, mangling, etc." [L.R.2_k.l]¹² In this sense, the rural women's organization should be perceived as a guardian and promoter of local traditions and folk culture.

Similar types of activity of the rural women's organizations were found in quantitative research conducted in 2014 by "The Shipyard" in 300 communes (stratified and proportional sample), where 200 rural women's organizations were randomly selected. The organizations examined (N=139) engaged in cuisine and cooking (92 percent), handicraft and arts (77 percent), folk singing, theatre, and dancing groups (39 percent), organization of classes and workshops (28 percent), promotion of local products (22 percent), organization of trips and pilgrimages (12 percent), reconstruction of the history and tradition of the region (10 percent), and organization of festivities and events (7 percent) (Milczewska et al. 2014: 17).

Statements of the interviewees of 2005, and even more so, of those of 2008–2010, indicate a process of "renaissance" of the women's rural organizations. On the one hand, these organizations are perceived by the local authorities and cultural institutions as excellent "tools" for promotion of the whole community, e.g., during folklore festivals or any kind of local celebrations. On the other hand, rural women's organizations are valuable "operational" resources when the local events are organized. This "renaissance" of rural women's organizations is also due to the growing interest in regional products, local cuisine, and handicraft traditions, etc., which have been strengthened by the availability of EU funds in this area. During the "picnics of local tastes" organized in various villages and towns, the rural women's organizations present the forgotten local dishes and they promote new recipes, which reflect a mix of tradition and modern inspirations.

Modes of Working of the Rural Women's Organizations

None of the rural women's organizations examined in 2005 had the status of an independent legal person, but at the same time only one of them was strongly associated with the Provincial Association of Farmers, Farming Groups and Organizations. Two other rural women's organizations officially belonged to the structure of the Association, but in the face of liquidation of farmers' organizations in their vicinity, they no longer perceived themselves as being a part of it: "the farmers' organizations, which were formerly connected to the rural women's organizations were . . . well, they are practically diminishing, they are dissolving, they no longer exist, and so we are now 'abandoned', as the rural women's organization." [M.Z.1] The remaining fourth organization was reactivated in 2003 as an informal group operating at the local community center.

As a result, the budgets of all rural women's organizations examined were very limited. The basic sources of funds were membership fees, revenues from the lending of kitchen utensils and dishes for wedding parties, sales of their own products, and awards received for performances and harvest festival garlands. Usually, some small support was provided by the local authorities (e.g., a one-time subsidy of about 100 € for the purchase of products to prepare dishes for the local event). The local authorities provided the rural women's organizations with some support, e.g., rooms for their meetings or buses for trips.

An exception was one of the organizations examined, subsidized with relatively high amounts of money (about 1,000 €) by the local authorities and the Provincial Association of Farmers, Farming Groups and Organizations. Both actors have seen this financial support as an investment that should pay off in terms of their promotion in the region. According to one of the interviewees, the folklore festivals and other events of this kind were extremely popular there and each commune or local institution wanted to be represented: "At first, we just created this singing group, but some of us did not expect it to be such a duty. Well, some say, 'hey, we thought we would just sing a little, just like that.' Because, well, who would give us money to sing only here, in our village, at the community center or the playing field? Well, it is normal, we have to represent our commune, make it famous, so that they know this money isn't wasted" [Z.P.2].

Given the lack of funding, almost all the other examined rural women's organizations searched for a new formula that would allow them to obtain greater funds for their undertakings. A leader of the informal group operating at the community center planned to register the organization as an association. Another leader indicated that she was a cofounder of the District Association of Women and that her aim was to take advantage of this structure to obtain the funds for her rural women's organization as well: "the possibility of having our own account, making money, performing, addressing sponsors, having some real assets, ... because, as a rural women's organization we have no such possibilities." [M.Z.1] Also, in her opinion, in the suburban villages, which were undergoing significant urbanization and "colonization" by newcomers from the cities, a women's association would have more opportunities to act and to survive than would a rural women's organization, which is associated too strongly with tradition and agriculture. A leader of yet another organization was looking for an "umbrella" structure with a legal person status, which is necessary to apply for more significant funds from sponsors other than local authorities. At the time of the research, none of the organizations examined had made an independent attempt to obtain funds from a grant competition, although the leaders were optimistic about such a possibility.

Among the organizations examined in 2008–2010, only two were still connected with the structure of the Association of Farmers, Farming Groups and Organizations. These relations were due to the existence of the still relatively dynamic farmers' structures in their region, but they did not translate to substantial financial support. Most of the remaining rural women's organizations operated as nonregistered informal groups, one of them connected with the local community center.

An exception to the rule was the rural women's organization transformed into the Association of Creative Women: "There was a very dynamic rural women's organization, and the Association emerged, in fact, from this organization." [M.K.4_k.l] In the opinion of the leader, this was mainly due to its willingness to become independent from the local institutions associated with farming, which interfered too much in the activity of the former rural women's organization.

Basic financing of the organizations examined turned out to be similar to the situation in 2005. These included the membership fees, funds, and support provided by the commune authorities and the local cultural institutions. Some of the organizations examined also attained small amounts of money for their activities thanks to introducing fees for celebrations organized in the village (e.g., New Year's parties) or sale of their dishes during the local festivities or events.¹³ One of the interviewed leaders, who, despite the lack of legal personhood status for her organization, was the least eager to complain about the financial problems encountered, said this was mainly due to her individual resourcefulness:

I wrote a request to the communal cooperative, to the dairy, we wrote a request to the local bank, here we got 50 €, there we got 70 €, here we got 20 €, this is not important, how much they gave us, it is good that they did and we could do something, this way or another, certain things. But, if you don't have the courage, if you have nobody to help you or encourage you and you lack the courage to simply go and ask for the money, well, it's difficult . . . A village fund¹⁴ has been established in our commune, and this year, we wrote a request to the council for next year, concerning the division of funds. [L.R.2_k.l]

It seems that the Polish membership in the EU does not directly affect the rural women's organizations in terms of greater financial independence. Even the members of the only registered association among all the organizations examined made no attempts to obtain funds for activity through a grant competition, relying mainly on their membership fees and money from the local authorities. The interviewed leaders were often skeptical about the programs aimed at applying for EU funds as being too complicated and bureaucratized: "our school, I think it was three years ago, it won the EU project, 'The School of Your Dreams'. But the teachers don't want that, because you

have to record every penny and that's a problem ... they also have to deal with various things that are not necessary, formal matters ... if anything is wrong, you have to return the money. You take the money, buy this or that—then the money is gone and how will you return it? It's gone" [P.Ł.4_k.l]. It seems that the rural women's organizations are more eager to undertake tasks in projects implemented by others than as direct applicants. The free floral and regional cooking courses, offered by one of the organizations, mentioned earlier, were financed from EU funds obtained by the regional organization run by the local government: "In fact, this year, we managed to obtain the funds from the European Union and we offered two courses, here, in the village, but not only for the ladies from the organization, absolutely, for anyone, who wanted to participate ... the applicant was the Association of Communes of Lubelskie Province in Lublin, and they prepared the application. They devised the project, they helped us with this" [L.R.2_k.l].

It can thus be said that the initial enthusiasm accompanying Poland's accession to the European Union and the hopes for availability of funds for local initiatives is largely gone. Excessive bureaucratization of the programs and procedures for distribution of EU funds leads to a situation where, in order to obtain these funds, one needs knowledge, experience, as well as specific cultural capital resources (e.g., the "skills" of writing grant applications and using the language of bureaucracy).¹⁵ Perhaps this is why relatively few rural women's organizations transform into registered associations. This has been confirmed by the results of quantitative research, conducted in 2014 by "The Shipyard." Among the rural women's organizations examined in 300 communes (N=139), 49 percent act as informal groups, 36 percent are within the structures of the Association of Farmers, Farming Groups and Organizations, and 15 percent as registered associations (Milczewska et al. 2014: 11).

At the same time, it can be assumed that the growing number and popularity of local events focused on regional traditions, including cuisine, would increase the financial support for rural women's organizations. However, according to some of the interviewees, the effect may be quite the opposite. The greater popularity of such activities results in more intense competition between the growing number of local entities as the rural women's organizations are not the only structures focused on cultivating regional traditions.

Role of Today's Rural Women's Organizations

It seems that the rural women's organization is perceived as a dominant model for female self-organization, strongly accepted by the rural population: "we are strong enough as an organization ... we have these roots ... this

will surely never die . . . it has been going on for many years, for generations, it's the way it is" [RK KGW]. This tradition can be used in various ways, depending on the creativity of the members and the needs of the inhabitants of a given area. Still, it is worth asking why women living in the rural areas become members of the rural women's organizations today.

According to the interviewees, for most elderly women, who are widows and/or retired, such engagement provides them with the ability to maintain social contact with other people: "most of the ladies have retired already, this is a certain return to social activity, to seeing people, we don't lock ourselves at home, we come here instead. Even to gossip, even without doing anything, just to meet, exchange thoughts." [M.Z.1] Also, the lack of professional activity of relatively younger women, who are still full of energy, can be compensated for through engagement in the rural women's organizations. One of the interviewed leaders noticed that those particularly eager to get involved in the activity of her organization were women who had decided to retire before reaching the statutory retirement age and needed something to fill the gap that emerged after they stopped working: "It was the period of 1999–2001, there was a possibility of early retirement, if you were fifty something and you had a farm and there were problems [with keeping the job], well, many women retired. They were young, they did not realize that at 50s they would not feel [tired of working] . . . they felt free only for a short time, they enjoyed this freedom, because they did not have to work, they were happy to be retired, but they did not realize they were still full of life and energy and that they should be doing something" [P.Ł.1_k.1].

In the case of the younger members, working at home and/or on their family farm and raising children, engagement in the rural women's organization was an opportunity to "get out of the house," to find time for themselves, to talk and cooperate with other women. One of the youngest leaders of the organizations examined pointed out that in her case, involvement in the organization was to compensate her earlier active life as a student: "I needed it . . . I was taking university courses on weekends, I had small children, finally I graduated and it turned out I had plenty of time. I don't have to hurry anywhere, I don't have to go to classes, commute, I have plenty of time" [M.K.4_k.1]. For many years the rural women's organizations were almost the only structures through which rural women could undertake collective activities. From this perspective, these organizations can be seen as structures enabling women to take on public roles. For some interviewees, the engagement in the rural women's organization actually worked as a ladder that they climbed to reach other public positions. Some of them became village representatives or won local elections to the communal council, while others were offered membership in another organizations and local structures. In the light of the quantitative research of 2005, as many as 61 percent

of the female village representatives (N=100) confirmed their membership in the rural women's organizations at the time or in the past (Matysiak 2005: 148). However, among the leaders of the organizations examined, performance of public functions in the rural or communal self-government was not common, which leads us to the question of perception of activity of the rural women's organizations often associated with traditional female roles.

On the other hand, it is worth asking whether the rural women's organizations could develop any other type of activity. We could also ask whether the potential of the rural women's organizations, as still the most popular and numerous structures associating women living in rural areas, is fully taken advantage of. In the survey of 2005, the female village representatives examined (N=100) were asked whether the rural women's organizations were needed in the modern rural communities—93 percent of them answered positively. The respondents pointed out that apart from addressing needs associated with integration of rural residents, organization of free time, and cultural life, the rural women's organizations were needed for their contributions to solving social problems, such as alcoholism, domestic violence, and poverty (17 percent), it was noted that they also integrate and activate rural women (16 percent) (Matysiak 2005: 148).

In the quantitative research conducted in 2006 for the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy on the representative sample of 1,500 rural women, 64.8 percent of the respondents stated that female organizations in the rural areas should in the future deal with counteracting domestic violence; 38.2 percent stated that they should deal with counteracting discrimination of women in the labor market; 32.4 percent, supporting the professional activity of women; 26.8 percent, supporting the access of rural women to education; 24.4 percent, counteracting sexual abuse of women; and 24.0 percent, supporting entrepreneurship among rural women (Walczak-Duraj 2008: 152). It seems that rural women's organizations could have a much wider range of activities and deal much more with the interests and the needs of women themselves.

Conclusions

First, rural women's organizations seem to be particularly important as the space of female collective actions and as tools of social activation for the elderly, particularly women. The "vitality" of these organizations is clear proof of the needs of rural women, who want to meet and cooperate on behalf of their communities. Such activity is also encouraged by growing interest in local traditions, cuisine, and folk music.

On the other hand, it seems that the potential of rural women's organizations, which are widely accepted in rural communities, is not fully used. Their activities are focused mostly on issues associated with traditional female roles. The growing interest in folklore and regional cuisine feeds demand for rural women's organizations, but, at the same time, might relegate them to providers of free catering services during local events and celebrations. The presented data shows that more feminist women's organizations are also needed in the Polish rural areas—the organizations, which could seriously deal with the problems of domestic violence, discrimination of women in the labor market, and under-representation of women in local politics, not only acting as service providers but also lobbying local authorities to influence political decisions, e.g., concerning budgets. It is worth considering whether the activities of rural women's organizations could be broadened and diversified if more young women and female "newcomers" from the cities engaged, as they may be more eager to combine traditions with new ideas.

This case shows also institutional constraints that some groups of activists face and the ways they overcome them. The present regulations, unchanged since the early 1980s, create a situation in which rural women's organizations are still a part of a structure that cannot provide them with sufficient support and acts mainly on behalf of farmers. Under these circumstances, the rural women's organizations are not independent legal persons. Therefore, depending on the age and experience of the leaders, the period in which they were established, the local traditions and available networks of institutions, rural women's organizations adapt various strategies. Some of them act as informal groups, operating on a small scale mainly to fulfill their own needs or those of selected groups. Others try to look for "institutional umbrellas" among other local organizations and institutions. The third group consists of "young" organizations—reactivated or established in the recent years, led by younger women—registered as associations. However, only the rural women's organizations that adopt the latter strategy can fully and independently participate in the current system of support for third-sector organizations in Poland.

Finally, it should be noted that rural women's organizations are based on long-lasting model that can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, they often implement different modes of working depending on the local context. Many of them can be described as located between a formal structure and an informal group or shifting from one category to the other. The analysis presented in this chapter shows that it is necessary to adopt a theoretical and practical perspective depicting Polish civil society as complex and "recombining" new and old organizational forms and types of civic engagement. The dominating "universalist" model of civil society focused on nongovernmental organizations registered after 1989 leads to the marginalization of grassroots groups such as the rural women's

organizations. The integration of the variety of their forms and promising potential could open up new perspectives in the study of civil society in Poland. First, the case of rural women's organizations is inspiring in terms of the process of transforming their tradition according to changing (and unfavorable) structural conditions. Second, the studied organizations indicate the significance of the locality dimension. Especially in case of strongly diversified rural communities in Poland, local factors, such as historical traditions, attitudes of local authorities, available human capital, and specific needs expressed by the residents, to a large extent shape the "profiles" of civic organizations and other entities. Therefore, the emphasis in researching civic activism should be put on extensive exploring of "rural civil communities" rather than "adjusting" the reality to the universal model of civil society imported from the Western context. Last but not least, the study presented in this chapter shows that it is necessary to develop more diversified and "sensitive" indicators that would enable analysis of the informal civic engagement in a more efficient and precise way.

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Notes

1. The data on the rural women's organizations come from my doctoral thesis, which has been recently published in the form of a book (Matysiak 2014) and other own research. See also Matysiak (2009).
2. In general, 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.
3. Research was conducted within the frame of a project financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (N N116 433 237).
4. For instance, the approach proposed by Putnam, who believed voluntary associations to be of key significance for the process of building social capital in a given community—trust, norms that contribute to cooperation, and horizontal networks of civic engagement (Putnam 1994).
5. According to Eurostat, rural areas are those with population density below 100 inhabitants per 1 km², and according to OECD, rural areas are those with population density below 150 inhabitants per 1 km².

6. Retrieved 24 October 2014 from <http://kolkarolnicze.eu/O-nas/Kola-Gospodyn-Wiejskich>.
7. Retrieved 24 October 2014 from <http://kolkarolnicze.eu/O-nas/Struktura-KZRKiOR>.
8. The available estimates on farmers' organizations indicate that out of thirty thousand in 1989/1990, only slightly above three thousand were left in 2008 (Marczakiewicz et al. 1992: 27; Halamska 2008: 109).
9. Information provided by Mrs. Bernardetta Niemczyk, chairwoman of the National Council of Women's Rural Organizations, during the conference "Conditions of Living and Activity of Women in the Rural Areas in Poland," held on 15 October 2014 at the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences. It should be underlined that the Association of Farmers has not finished the process of officially verifying the number of rural women's organizations "belonging" to its structures.
10. In 2009, I found in the National Court Register (Krajowy Rejestr Sądowy) 165 non-governmental organizations with names referring to the tradition of the rural women's organizations (Matysiak 2009: 226).
11. To explain the marking of interviews conducted in 2005: the first letter refers to the province (M—mazowieckie, P—pomorskie, Pd—podkarpackie, Z—zachodniopomorskie), the second letter refers to the first letter of the name of the village, and the number refers to the number of the interview.
12. To explain the marking of interviews conducted in 2008–2010: the first letter refers to the province (Z—zachodniopomorskie, M—mazowieckie, L—lubelskie, W—wielkopolskie, P—podkarpackie), the second letter refers to the first letter(s) of the name of the commune, the letter "f" or "m" refers to the respondent being female or male, and the final 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.
13. To be more specific, these women's rural organizations receive small donations in exchange for their dishes, cakes, etc. According to the legal regulations, an organization that is not a legal person cannot run any business.
14. Since 2009 the communal councils in Poland can earmark funds from their budgets to financially support the initiatives or projects that are collectively chosen by the residents of villages located within their administrative area.
15. For instance, in Poland, EU funds designated for financing of grassroots local initiatives within the framework of the Human Capital Operational Programme were used to a greater extent by the local authorities and administration than by the local social organizations, which prompts the question of whether they are really funding "grassroots" initiatives.

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