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## **THE ROLE OF RURAL WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN POLAND**

Janina Sawicka

*Department of Agrarian Policy and Marketing, Warsaw Agricultural University, Poland*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper presents the background of rural women situation in Poland in 90. Traditional rural development associated with the development of the agricultural sector that provides employment for most rural inhabitants is nowadays a thing of the past. Currently, with increased productivity and efficiency of the labour force employed in the sector, the number of people employed mainly in agriculture within the structure of rural population is going down. The future of rural communities, also in Poland, will to a lesser extent depend on agriculture only.

Thus, what we need is a new look at work and employment including women's work in the rural environment in the context of its multi-functional development.

Basic forms of rural women's professional activity in Poland are mainly work on the farm and in the household, but also non-farming activity including own business, which is now gaining importance. Rural women face new challenges and the necessity of searching for the possibilities of economic activity that would be a source of decent income for them and their families.

The paper contains the syntheses of two different empirical research conducted by author on the Economic Faculty, Agricultural University in Warsaw. The synthesis of the research results contains both theoretical premises and practical conditions for women's professional activity including that connected with the development of small business and managing the farm.

**Key words:** Labour market in Poland, equal opportunities for women, rural development

## INTRODUCTION

Poland is still a country where the rural population is numerous and farm families prevail in many rural areas.

The situation of rural households evolves in the direction of stratification, or polarisation of groups with different conditions and behaviours on the labour market. As a result of specialisation farms have divided into plant production and animal production holdings where the duties assigned to the family members have changed. Though Polish country differs from that of the West European countries because of stronger dependence of its population upon agriculture, there are numerous similarities as far as specific features of households and the role of women therein are concerned. The division of labour into masculine and feminine ones both on the farm and in the house hold, conflicts between home and occupational duties, feminisation of poverty constitute only a few examples of similar problems faced both in the West European countries and in Poland. There are tendencies to consolidate farm and non-agricultural incomes. People move from agriculture to services, from public sector to private sector, from full time job to temporary or seasonal job. In consequence of agrarian transformation small farms go bankrupt and the new labour released from a agriculture look for employment in the agricultural environment, in the agribusiness and social services where small and medium enterprises play a specific role.

The progress in farm work mechanisation allows women who have been mainly or partly working on the farm to undertake new activities outside the farm. Using the available agricultural resources they seek for "income niches" to undertake the processing of farm produce on the farm, organise agro-tourism, small trade or providing payable care for children or elder people. Non-agricultural activities related to trade, services, handicraft and small production in the rural areas are becoming more and more intense.

In 1996 (The last population census, Main Statistical Office) out of the total number of 8245 thousand persons, who kept household in the individual farms, over 49% were women. In total, 66% of women living in the rural areas were associated with agriculture. Most of the women who live in the rural areas still work in agriculture, though there is a growing percentage of rural women who undertake work in the non-agricultural sectors, including small and medium enterprises. As compared with the previous period, a decrease in the economic activity, including women, is a specific feature of the nineties. Generally, women's economic activity is lower as compared with that of men though there are certain modifications with regard to the place of residence, age and education level of women. The women employment rate is also lower ([Table 1](#)).

**Table 1. Rural women on the labour market (as in August and November 2001)**

Specification		Economic Activity (%)		Employment Rate (%)		Unemployment Rate (%)	
		August	November	August	November	August	November
Population of Poland	Total	56.7	56.6	46.3	46.5	18.4	17.9
	Men	63.8	63.9	53.0	53.5	17.0	16.3
	Women	50.2	49.9	40.1	40.1	20.0	19.7
Rural farming population	Total	57.8	58.4	48.3	49.2	16.5	15.7
	Men	65.6	66.2	55.5	56.8	15.4	14.2
	Women	50.2	50.8	41.3	41.8	17.8	17.7
Rural population destitute of farmland	Total	66.4	67.6	60.0	61.5	9.6	9.0
	Men	72.8	74.2	66.1	68.3	9.1	7.9
	Women	59.9	60.9	53.8	54.6	10.3	10.2
Rural population who do not own any farm	Total	47.0	46.8	33.6	33.7	28.5	28.0
	Men	56.0	55.6	41.3	41.6	26.4	25.2
	Women	38.8	38.7	26.7	26.4	31.5	31.7

**Source: Statistical Information and papers "Economic Activity of Polish Population" – 2001) GUS (Main Statistical Office) Warszawa 2001.**

As for women the drop in economic activity mainly occurs in two age groups: youngest women up to 20 year old and the oldest women over 50. The reasons are the following: extension of the educational period for young people, and earlier retirement in case of older people.

Weaker economic activity of women is a consequence of their deeper involvement in household work and children care. The maximum professional involvement of women occurs between 35 and 49 years of age, i.e. when the procreative function becomes less important and children go to school. In this age group the difference between employment rates for men and women is the least. The specific feature of employment in the rural areas consists in higher economic activity of the rural population in general and that of women in particular, as compared with towns. This is reflected by a high employment within the rural farming population. Amongst the rural women the employment rate is high for the group over 55 year old, being the result of later and less formalised procedure of retirement for individual farmers than in case of other jobs.

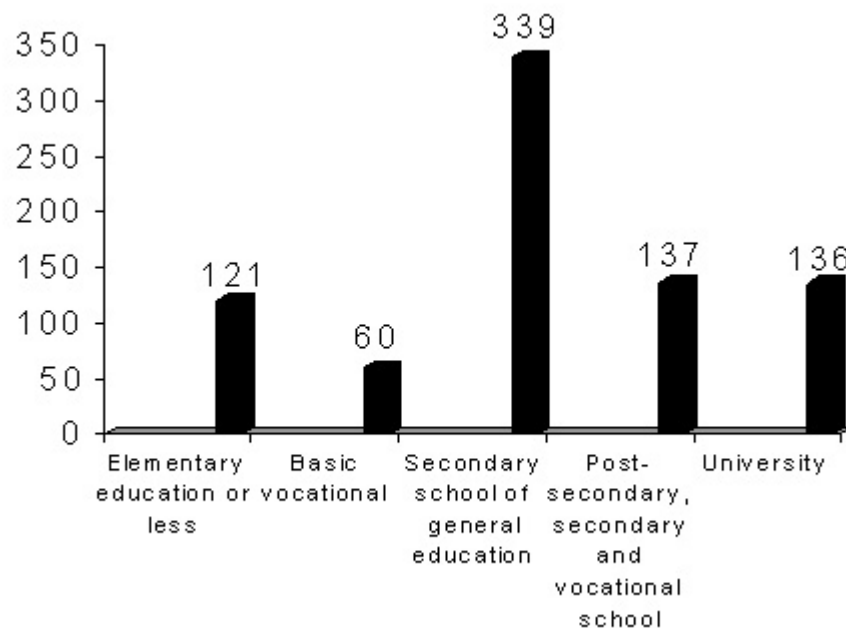
### **UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG RURAL WOMEN IN POLAND**

The labour market was also affected during the economic transformation period in that a permanent excess of labour supply with respect to the labour demand has been established. The consequences of this situation weigh on all demographic and professional groups, however, not all of them pay the same price for the transformation results. In the new

situation problems relating to the women work require special concern because of the existing differences in their economic activity, employment and unemployment nature.

During the transformation period particular problem has originated in the unemployment the level of which still exceeds in Poland that of the other European countries, and these are women who are particularly threatened by the unemployment.

**Fig. 1. Number of women against 100 men in the group of rural population according to the education level**



**Source: Own calculation based on data provided by GUS in: "Economic Activity of Polish Population – May 1997".**

More difficult situation of women on the labour market is generally known and is connected with the fact that for women it is hard to find and to keep a job. As compared to the men, women receive lower wages and their promotion is slower.

Under the formally adopted legal regulations in Poland the problem of inequality and discrimination on the labour market with regard to women does not generally exist. On the contrary, there are many regulations, which protect women's work, mainly to allow them for family responsibilities and the availability at work. These "privileges" often turn against women, particularly with the expansion of private business sector, as the employers are more willing to employ men towards whom they do not need to observe the special regulations, while women, afraid to loose their job, are not eager to vindicate their rights in the face of strong competition and high unemployment.

The analysis of unemployment in the 16 regions (voyevodship) confirms the difficult situation on the labour market resulting from the transformation of ownership structures in agriculture. Unemployment in the regions where state property dominated is still high. In consequence of a decline in the industrial employment a considerable number of persons, formerly part-time workers, came back to their farms. Young people and uneducated persons are liable to suffer unemployment in the most dramatic manner.

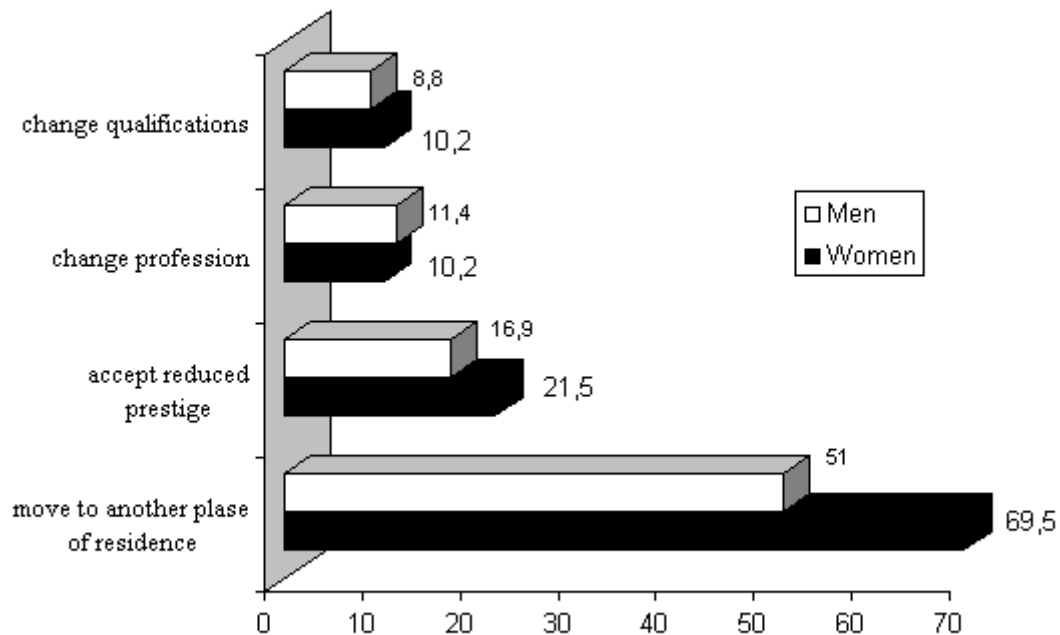
It should be noted that there is a high unemployment among those members of rural population who do not own of any farm. This group displays the highest rate of total unemployment -28%, including 32% for women (Table 1). This confirms the fact that for persons who live in the rural areas but not of agriculture, women in particular, finding an employment is very difficult.

A relatively low unemployment rate amongst the farming population, i.e. 5.5%, and amongst women 9%, may result from the fact that these people have little chance to find a job outside agriculture because of work shortage. A farm, even a small one, constitutes a material guarantee for its owners, and, in consequence, the rate of hidden unemployment in the group of small farms is the highest.

High unemployment among women is often caused by the lack of a suitable education sought after on the labour market. The comparison between the formal education of men and women living in the rural areas shows that there is a considerable superiority of women (several times more) in the groups of persons with secondary and post secondary (Fig.1). This confirms the generally spread conviction that this type of education for young people does not provide sufficient vocational qualifications and decreases their chances on the labour market.

Solving unemployment-related problems is also made more difficult in Polish situation because of the fact that economically active population, including unemployed, shows relatively small mobility. Unemployed who are looking for an employment usually do not want a job, which would require them to change their place of residence. This is the opinion of two thirds of women and over fifty percent of men surveyed by Main Statistical Office (GUS) (Fig. 2).

**Fig.2. Unemployed in rural areas**  
**Unemployed [%] who are not ready to undertake work which requires them to:**



**Source: Own calculation based on data provided by GUS in: “Economic Activity of Polish Population – February 1997 and May 1997”.**

## WOMEN AS AN ENTREPRENEURS

Enterprising attitudes have their source both in traditional factors, such as values associated with work and housekeeping, as well as by modern factors, the most important of which is the defence against new threats which were not previously known. Traditional factors which underlie the development of enterprising women are:

- diligence and respect for hard work: the change in values which has taken place among rural women in this respect means that younger women see diligent work as a potential source of income, instead of how older women perceive it to be a virtue, a value in and of itself,
- the orientation towards values, seen as a sense of stability, the source of advancement for the family and the generation,
- ambitions for modernisation, characteristic especially for the middle-aged and younger generations of rural inhabitants,
- self-satisfaction as motive for performing work, whereas for modern entrepreneurs it is equally important to gain financial satisfaction.

Women's initiatives for improving their situation are a response to problems requiring urgent solution. The most important commercial initiatives of women are almost exclusively limited to economic aspects. These concern improving the material situation of the family, counteracting unemployment, and even sometimes fighting poverty. These initiatives are realised through:

- agrotourism, involving the use of the accommodation resources already owned and the use of their own food products,
- small-scale enterprise in the fields of commerce, the food service industry, tailoring, and other everyday services,
- agricultural food processing,
- farming and changing its profile.

The actions of women are directed towards improving their living conditions through the rational and economic management of the household budget, increasing self-sufficiency in the field of services, providing caretaking services, organising summer recreation for children, improving aesthetics and safe working conditions on farms, and achieving professional qualifications (training, consulting).

Initiatives undertaken by rural women serve to activate the community through the multi-functional development of the village.

The modern rural woman, in order to be able to perform various functions, including traditional ones such as the role of mother, housewife, and farm worker, as well as modern ones such as the role of business organiser, should have the proper theoretical education as well as practical education gained through personal experience. This knowledge is necessary for women to be able to adopt more active attitudes and fully participate in making decisions on all levels of authority and administration, including decisions concerning matters of the family, the farm, and the household.

Rural women will not improve their situation without strengthening the role played by the institutions and organisation which represent their interests - for this reason it is such an

important issue what shape local government authorities take, how women are represented in them, and how the problems specific to this population group are understood on higher decision-making levels, both in central and local governments, and also in self-governmental organisations.

In the development of entrepreneurship among women, an ever-greater influence will be exerted by regional differences in the speed and nature of the economic development in Poland. The current development of entrepreneurship in rural areas should be considered as only the beginning phase. This is confirmed both by the level of intensity of the phenomenon, as well as by the type of activities undertaken by women.

I would like to refer to the outcome of the research carried out at the Warsaw Agricultural University, between 1996 and 1998 and related to the entrepreneurship of women in rural areas with particular focus on the "small business". The survey, covered 720 women who had small or medium scale production, trade or services businesses in the rural areas, in 96 gminas over the whole Polish territory.

The search for other than agriculture income sources, has been found in almost all rural villages, though to a various extent. Most of the small businesses was connected with launching and running trade or different kind of services, small catering units, small fruit and vegetable processing plants, any form of homework and handicraft, and seasonal work as well.

The unemployment is higher in the disadvantaged regions (north - eastern region of Poland) where they have the least opportunity to develop any entrepreneurship whatever. Exceedingly less women than men go for self-employment (on the average every fifth company is run by a woman; there is much more family companies).

Most of the businesswomen investigated (74%), were young - between 19 and 45 years, as compared with women farm operators who have mostly retirement age (every fourth farm in Poland is still run by a woman). Business woman are also better educated as most of them are at least graduated from a secondary schools, while women in rural areas generally have received only primary education. The research findings confirm the general rule that small entrepreneurs are condemned to the use of their own financial sources. The macroeconomic situation is such that the bank loan can not be used more extensively (still interest rates are to high). The income in the smallest undertakings which are often family enterprises run by women are relatively low, as compare to other small businesses.

Amongst 720 investigated enterprises, which were run by women on their own or in which women played a operators' role, the largest number, i.e. some 49% (where shops constitute 32%) dealt with trade. The group include shops, wholesale warehouses, and so-called "door-to-door" selling. Predominance of trade was connected rather with the fact that this was the simplest way of launching a private business, than with a strong demand for consumers' goods. This type of activity neither requires large financial outlays or capital expenditure nor particular qualifications. In small localities usually one general store was run where food products and articles of common use were available. In the localities where gmina offices had their seat, or in small towns there were usually a few shops with a rather limited offer ([Table 2](#)).

**Table 2. Types of women's non-agricultural activity**

No	Types of activity	No of enterprises	[%]
1	Trade	367	51.0
	Including shops	246	34.2
2	Services	279	38.8
	Catering	57	7.9
	agro-turism	52	7.2
	hair dressing	37	5.1
	tailors trade	35	4.9
	bakers and confectionery trade	16	2.2
	medical and veterinary services	14	1.9
	overhaul and construction work	14	1.9
	financial advice	13	1.8
	Transportation services	11	1.5
	forestry services	9	1.3
	vehicle repair services	7	1.0
	other services	14	1.9
	3	Handicraft	10
4	Production	12	1.7
5	Non-agricultural activity	29	4.0
6	Agri-food processing	23	3.2
Total		720	100

Source: [2].

### **WOMEN AS A FARM MANAGERS**

Women's farming is an example of the adjustment of private family farms to the changing circumstances of families, agriculture and the general economy. Women undertake managerial functions in a variety of situations so that group is homogenous.

Three particular groups were identified [1]:

- First in 66% of cases a wife has taken over the running of the farm as a result of the death, illness, or physical disability of her husband. These farms fulfil a social role rather than a productive one. For instance such situations are common among women over retirement age. These farms tend to be on average, economically weaker than others.
- Second: in 30% of farms investigated women run the farm because their husbands and sons work off - farm. These farms are mainly used to provide an additional source of family income and to provide the household with home produced food.



- Third: only a few percent of farms are professionally managed by women. Very often such women are young and have agricultural qualifications. These farms do not seem to be different from other progressive farms.
- Farms managed by women represent a particularly mobile group. Within the 10-year period nearly half of the women in the survey stopped farming. However, new farms were taken over by women, so that, at the end of the period, the percentage of farms managed by women was unchanged at about 20 %.
- The majority of farms run by women were found to be declining rather than expanding. In a favourable economic climate, the productive resources of these declining farms could be released to aid the goals of structural policy.

## **EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND MEN ON THE LABOUR MARKET IN POLAND**

Many European countries have adopted some legal regulations as well as practical measures which are introducing the equal treatment principles to the social and economic politics: equal access for women and men to the employment and jobs, education and vocational training, as well as equal social security benefits.

Application and implementation of the equality principles in Poland need a long term process and require multidirectional proceedings. The official statistical data have to be desegregated according to the sex and a sufficiently strong women lobby, in the decision maker circles are needed to perceive and counteract the discrimination practices.

In Poland, there is an urgent need for better repatriation of statistical data according to the sex in the official Main Statistical Office (GUS) statistics, as this is known barrier for a complex evaluation of women situation, for instance, on the labour market in particular sectors' etc. Differences between the labour market conditions faced by women and men are very sharp. They appear, amongst others, in the feminisation, or in masculinisation of selected jobs and in the predominance of women when part time work is concerned. The differences are also observed with regard to sectors, jobs or professional status. The majority of women are employees – less women work on their own account or acts as employers as compared with men. As far as agriculture is concerned the situation is even worse.

Together with developing competition on the market and quickly changing needs, the education and professional qualification level becomes of importance, but in this area women are not equally treated. Providing women with easier access to permanent well paid job requires a continuous care for improvement of their educational and professional level.

Generally, the practise that wages of women are lower than those of men is also confirmed. The larger number of women is in lower wage sectors There are feminised jobs; in education, medical and other services. The considerably lower share of women is on decision makers' posts, including even feminised sectors. The term used to define this phenomenon is "glass ceiling" what means inaccessibility of higher positions for women is observed.

Thus, for Polish women the inspiration for changes in the existing legal regulations will be familiarising with the European Law and its implications in different spheres of social and economic life. This is another, important for women, area of adjusting Polish legislation to those in force in the EU.

Women remain beyond the paid work area more often and longer-than men (unpaid maternity leave, elder and sick people care unpaid leave. The unemployment amongst women is more pronounced, and they retire earlier. This occurs in spite of the fact that women are generally better educated (present higher levels of formal education than men). Similar situation exists in Poland (see [fig.1](#)).

In Poland, after the year 1989 the deterioration of women's situation on the labour market caused by decentralisation and greater freedom granted to the employers in respect of wage fixing.

In the group of Central-European countries women are not much aware of the need for equality rights in spite of perceivable discrimination and a lot of time may pass before the awareness level will be higher in this respect.

The initiatives of the women are to improve the family welfare by counteracting the unemployment, running an income providing business, acquirement of new qualifications. Personal satisfaction and maintenance of tradition and family bonds are also of importance. Unemployment and limitation of public expenses on social objectives in Poland during the nineties have impact on the level of rural family income and women's situation as well. The growing number of women resents deterioration of life standard. Rural women are more often eliminated from the labour market and therefore, they are the first to become unemployed or to carry out low paid and unskilled work. The general deterioration in the unemployment situation with simultaneous decrease in social benefits leads to the feminisation of poverty and has a negative impact on the physical and psychical condition of women. The persons the most affected are ill or handicapped women, lonely mothers or elderly women. The weakest groups also include rural women in the less favoured areas.

## CONCLUSIONS

Women's farming is an example of the adjustment of private family farms to the changing circumstances of families, agriculture and the general economy. Women undertake managerial functions in a variety of situations so that group is homogenous. In the empirical research conducted by author on women situation as a farm manager three particular groups were identified:

1. First in 66% of cases a wife has taken over the running of the farm as a result of the death, illness, or physical disability of her husband. These farms fulfil a social role rather than a productive one. For instance such situations are common among women over retirement age. These farms tend to be on average, economically weaker than others.
2. Second: in 30% of farms investigated women run the farm because their husbands and sons work off - farm. These farms are mainly used to provide an additional source of family income and to provide the household with home produced food.
3. Third: only a few percent of farms are professionally managed by women. Very often such women are young and have agricultural qualifications. These farms do not seem to be different from other progressive farms.
4. Farms managed by women represent a particularly mobile group. Within the 10-year period nearly half of the women in the survey stopped farming. However, new farms were taken over by women, so that, at the end of the period, the percentage of farms managed by women was unchanged at about 20 %.

5. The majority of farms run by women were found to be declining rather than expanding. In a favourable economic climate, the productive resources of these declining farms could be released to aid the goals of structural policy.

As the elected member of the Working Party on Women in Development of ECA –European Commission of Agriculture- FAO on the period 2000–2002, The author of the paper have a possibility to attend many international conferences, even the XIX th Congress of IFHE in Accra, where it was a chance to compare the rural women situation with other occupations in many different countries.

Thanks to the theoretical and empirical research it was possible to:

- study more comprehensively the woman’s situation and her role in the development of rural areas in Poland in the nineties;
- find out about the special situation of the woman running a small or a medium enterprise in rural areas;
- to identify the development tendencies for SME’s in rural areas and assess the chances of active, self-employed women;
- elaborate the training materials for extension services concerning the opportunities to generate non-farming income, including the launching of SME’s by rural men and women.

The research on the women,s entrepreneurship was conducted in 96 gminas (rural communes – in Poland, there were 2157 gminas or local administrative units) all over Poland. The data base on women’s entrepreneurship applied in the study covered 720 businesses identified in direct interviews. The collected empirical material was a landmark for the assessment and evaluation of development tendencies with regard to social and economic potential in a given region, and the identification of factors stimulating business growth. Basing on that, the activities aimed at the development of entrepreneurship in a local community were identified .

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Janina Sawicka  
Department of Agrarian Policy and Marketing  
Warsaw Agricultural University  
Nowoursynowska 166, 02-787 Warsaw, Poland  
tel. (48 22) 843 07 74  
e-mail: [sawicka@alpha.sggw.waw.pl](mailto:sawicka@alpha.sggw.waw.pl)

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