

HANNA BOJAR
Polish Academy of Sciences

Women in the Civic Sphere of Small Local Communities Reflections on the Margin of “Family Stories” Analyses

Abstract: In the article prepared on the basis of the analysis of “family stories” various forms of women’s presence in the public sphere of small local communities are discussed. Principal conclusions of those analyses concern: 1) culturally conditioned tendencies to masculinize the “public” family history; 2) a necessity to take into account different forms of non formalized activities when researching women’s activity in the public sphere; 3) a need to modify research tools applied for the analysis of women’s civic activity; 4) the postulate to take into account the concept of endogenous development in social programmes concerning the activation of women.

Keywords: local communities; public sphere; social activity; participation of women.

Introductory Remarks

In recent years several publications have appeared which were devoted to women’s place in the Polish public sphere. These publications concern both the past, especially the period of the formation of the independent Polish Second Republic, but also the changes taking place at present. They often point out that for dozens of years women’s participation in the building of social institutions in the public sphere was poorly accounted for and they try to change that picture by showing different aspects of women’s presence in the public sphere (Abram, 1999; Renz 2008; Fuszara 2006).

My reflections concerning women’s role in the civic space of small local communities are an attempt to supplement that picture. My conclusions come from the analysis of the materials gathered during field research carried out within the framework of research projects devoted to Polish local communities.¹ The analysis of two dimensions constituted an important part in that research. Firstly—looking for social and cultural conditioning of diverse models of local activity, in connection with local traditions and the history of *long durée*.² Secondly—an important element of these analyses was the identification in the local space of social subjects that have an important influence

¹ I have in mind first of all a research project “Tradycja jako sposób radzenia sobie z nową rzeczywistością: studia porównawcze działań wzorotwórczych rodzin i autorytetów lokalnych” [Tradition as a Way of Dealing with a New Reality: A Comparative Studies on Imitation Impact on Families and Local Authorities] (Września, Cieszyn, Węgrów 1996–1998; updated in subsequent years).

² Results of the research are presented in Kurczewska 2004.

on the character of that activity. Such search for conditionings and different manifestations of civic attitudes in specific local communities from different regions helped the researchers to conceptualize the idea of “local civic community,” understood as organized voluntary co-operation between unrelated members of a local community in their own, other people’s, or general interest (Kurczewski 2003).

In this project, in the centre of the researchers’ attention were local communities in small towns, characterized by a strong connection between the rules governing the sphere of activity of institutions and organizations and the social worlds of the individuals which are to a large degree saturated with the contents of private life. For this reason, in the reconstruction of models of those communities’ participation in the public sphere a special place was taken by the analysis of such social groups. Within the frames of those social groups the basic processes of socialization of individuals take place in order to participate in broader socio-cultural circles. Also, the principles of moving from the private to public sphere are shaped. One of such basic social institutions is the family (Kurczewska, Kempny, Bojar 1998). One of the vital elements of building characteristics of “local civil society” in small local communities was thus a reconstruction of the past and contemporary sources of particular models of activity and civic commitment from the perspective of the family (Bojar 2003; Bojar 2005).

“Stories” about the family, created by our interlocutors—inhabitants of the local communities under study³—became a source of particularly interesting data on the subject. They show in what way the family memory is oriented not only “into” but also “outside” the family structure, which is both closer and more distant towards its social environment. This is proved not only by material mementoes (Chmielewska 2004), and the present ways of participating in the local environment, often anchored in the past, but also by the structure of the tale about the old and more recent history of the family members.

Narratives about the family disclose not only “a sense of belonging to the family ‘here and now’ and the assigning of hierarchy to different present forms of the family members’ participation in other social groups and communities, but also the ways of its former and present members’ participation in communities broader than the family, most of all in the local community, the nation and the state” (Szacka, Sawisz 1990; Kwiatkowski 2008).

In the present article I should like to concentrate on such analysis of those family “stories” in which the main protagonist will be the woman. As it seems, her role in the public space of the local community has not been sufficiently appreciated and has even been ignored until now either by the inhabitants of the community or by

³ It has to be clarified in what sense I use the word “stories.” The principal object of the research to which I refer was not family and its history and the interview was not a narrative or biographical one. Family was treated there as an element of a broader social setup (local community), and accounts concerning the family, evoked by the researcher’s questions, turned into extensive narratives about family history only sometimes. Nevertheless I use the term “stories,” because in those accounts numerous references appear both to the family’s past and its present situation. Moreover, the loosely structured form of the interview and the questions of the kind “Please tell me generally about yourself and your family. What, in your opinion, should we know about your family when starting this interview” left the interviewees considerable freedom to choose both the way of talking about their family and the contents conveyed in those “stories.”

the researchers. I shall endeavour to show, on the basis of these materials, that the woman's presence in this space appears as an important element of the family stories, although often it is not an obvious and common element which causes problems or requires a justification.

The interpretation of the results of such analyses should be preceded by a more general reflection on the public sphere in both the classical and the contemporary sense (Mill 1989, Rawls 2005, Habermas 1984), but because of the problem indicated in the title I shall address only selected concepts, starting by emphasizing that traditionally women were allotted a place first of all in the private sphere. Old intellectual sources (philosophical, politological and also sociological) of this approach to women's role are rooted in the attempts to understand the old and still older bases and models of building societies. The philosophical and politological ones concentrate on the rise of the public sphere in historically defined conditions (e.g. the Greek roots of democracy) and analyse its subsequent transformations. The sociological ones, on the other hand, concentrate on the attempts to find universal models of political structuralization,⁴ supported and fixed by cultural models of social roles and the socializing training. However, in each of those approaches, irrespective of the way in which the notions of "private" and "public" were defined, it is visible that women were allotted space in the private sphere unlike men whose domain was to be the public sphere. Nevertheless, it is worth underlining that usually the concepts of women's activity in the public sphere were not limited to the question of reproduction and support of life in the biological sense. They were also assigned an active part in reproduction and the support of models and principles of the ethnic and national community (Walby 1997).

The contemporary debate on the public sphere and its relation to the private sphere⁵ shows both a multitude of ways in which to define the notion of the public sphere and the transformations it undergoes. On the one hand these are liberal concepts which concentrate on the private-public opposition and oppose the state domain to the domain of the (civic) society and the free individual; on the other—concepts of post-Modernists for whom the category of "public"—means both what is political and what is social as opposed to what is private, i.e. personal. Family and home space have a particularly unclear/"fluid" place in these concepts. It is a space which in those different concepts is rated either as an "oppressive" public sphere (when in the centre of attention is an individual with his/her needs for self-fulfilment and self-expression), or, just the opposite—as a private sphere (when the attention is concentrated on the essence of the political which is meant to be the feature of the public sphere). It was noticed by the feminists who stated that effectively, women's role and place, both as rightful participants in public life and as individuals was marginalized in both those concepts (Kymlicka 1998).

⁴ I have in mind first of all Parson's concept of society and the functional approach with the "division of roles, natural order of things and the assumption of the necessity different and unequal social roles," comp. Ewa Ślęzak, 2004. *Przemiany w rolach społecznych kobiet i mężczyzn*, Euro-Limes, 1(4), p. 1.

⁵ I have in mind first of all debates of postmodernists and representatives of neo-liberalism.

As Maria Rogaczewska observes, “Possibly feminism’s most important contribution to political theory is the radical questioning of the division into private and public spheres as condemning women to silence and complete invisibility” (Rogaczewska 2002: 60). Looking for intellectual aspirations to work out a concept which would allow the overcoming of the “exclusion” of women and of the home sphere from the public space, feminists “rediscovered” and reinterpreted Hannah Arendt’s concept of the human condition and the political.⁶ Seyla Benhabib’s analysis (1993) of Hannah Arendt’s concept of public space (Arendt 1989) seems particularly important. In her analysis Seyla Benhabib builds two models of public space: agonistic and associative, whose legitimacy is to be based on actual transformations of the public sphere of modern societies. Characteristics of the associative model become for her a ground for the recognition that the size of the *public* keeps growing while the emancipation of women means that the family and the so called “private sphere” have become a political issue (Benhabib 1993). Benhabib’s proposal to differentiate between two models of public space seems inspiring for the attempts to understand the characteristics of the contemporary public space. However, one can agree with Włodzimierz Heller, a critic of Hannah Arendt’s too broad concepts when he states that “we encounter a distortion of Arendt’s thought when we try (...) to freely broaden the “public” sphere, including in it property, family and the whole so called “public sphere” whereas the “private/public life dichotomy has for Arendt the value of an unquestionable axiom (Heller 1999: 225).

Arendt identifies private sphere with the sphere of property and family, marking a clear borderline between what is individualistic, directed towards satisfying the basic needs through work and production and what is public. Private space—according to her—is governed by necessity, while public space is governed by freedom. Thus the characteristic of public space is not its physical aspect in the topographical or institutional sense—it is the sphere in which people who are active are geared to voluntary cooperation in the name of shared values, according to agreed rules of acting (Kowalczyk 1997).

Arendt’s concept concerning the differentiation between public and private spheres is of a universal character, it treats the existence of those spheres as an inalienable feature of the “human condition,” “human fate,” and “human existence” and not as a characteristic of the condition of a “man” or a “woman.” She does not propose a feminine or a masculine point of view, or experience as essential for the individuals’ need to enter the public space. She does not specify if one of them is more “valuable,” more meaningful. As Rogaczewska observes—Arendt’s model of the public sphere gives hope to find such type of political action which allows the acting person to initiate the maximum of diverse experiences and types of behaviour, the whole or the majority of his or her unique properties” (Rogaczewska 2002: 53). The domain of public matters is not by its nature a masculine sphere, nor is the effort proper to the sphere of necessity essentially a domain of women—the point is to question this gender marking (Dietz 1999). Having in mind the above theoretical

⁶ These interpretations are the object of critical analyses both within the feminist discourse itself and by representatives of other currents of contemporary political philosophy, comp. Mary Dietz, 1991.

inspirations I shall use the expression “women in the public space” in this article and not “women’s public space.”

Women in the Local Public Space—Conclusions from Field Research

In the analyses devoted to the civil society in Poland attention is often brought to its weakness and the basis for such diagnosis are the data concerning the so called third sector, and specifically—a relatively low, in comparison with other countries, number of NGOs and a low level of Poles’ participation in organizations of different types (Matysiak 2009). However, voices of researchers who concentrate on rural communities are heard increasingly often—they stress their specific character and point out the different models of social integration and civic activity. Evaluation of that activity by means of indicators referring to registered NGOs leaves a considerable number of more informal activities outside the scope of the analysis. Various kinds of organizations and initiatives linked to the church, social committees, communal organizations, e.g. those whose goal is to improve material, technical or institutional infrastructure are pointed out (Herbst 2008). In order to explain those essential differences—both the quantitative and the qualitative ones—the introduction of different models of social integration as an important basis for interpretation is proposed. Rural community would be best described by a community model built on the basis of traditional local and neighbour ties, whereas for urban communities an association model, based on non-governmental institutions and organizations would be characteristic (Lewenstein 1999).

In the analysed materials I was interested in women’s participation in the public space of small towns, as presented in family “stories.” The starting point for those analyses will be the observation that—as research shows—a small town milieu is a particular example of the local community. It is a community in which a peculiar synthesis takes place—of the community and the association model. Along with formalized, registered non governmental organizations of a local character or functioning as branches of national organizations, it is activities of a non formalized character which play an important part in those communities. In the present article I should like to concentrate first of all on this “informal” dimension of the public space, generally passed over by researchers of the civic activity in local Poland who, reducing their studies to the analyses of NGOs, concentrate their attention on the organizational dimension of that participation. Therefore, the dimension of women’s activity in the public space in which I am interested will be the area of non formalized activity and of spontaneous initiatives.

I should like to precede the conclusions from the analyses with one more general reflection, concerning a certain phenomenon clearly revealing itself in these materials. In the collected “family stories”—irrespective of whether their author is a man or a woman—one is struck by several characteristic motives. First of all, the interlocutors’ direct association which the researcher’s question about ancestors evokes is usually linked to the men in the family. It is well illustrated by the following reaction (from

a woman) to this question: we should like you to tell us about your family, what should we know first according to you? The woman answers:

—Does that go back to my family, you mean my father?

In general the interlocutors start the family characteristic from their male ancestors and have considerably better knowledge of their biographies—place of origin, subsequent places of residence; often also their knowledge about their male ancestor goes more deeply into the past than the memory of the events in the lives of the women in the family. This disproportion diminishes visibly in the case of the stories of those interlocutors whose families have lived in a given local community for many generations. Then in the story about the ancestors, women's and men's fate interweave much more often into a harmonious and well balanced whole.

In the characteristics of male ancestors, especially in the initial phase of the interview, whose aim is to introduce the ancestor and during the attempt to show one's ancestors' achievements two variants appear alternately or together: the military-heroic and the community minded and professional one. The military-heroic variant appears in two forms. It appears in the event-descriptive form when the interlocutors, talking about their ancestors, place them against the background of specific historic events connected with the defence or regaining of Poland's freedom (participation in national uprisings, the 1920 war, the First and Second War and the experience of the occupation and liberation).

And as for the war, the Second and the First World War, he took part in those wars. We were, as it is known, under the Russian rule, so father was called up already in 1914, as a young boy, he was in the Russian-German war and there he was taken prisoner by the Germans. And he talked somewhere about wandering through Italy, to Italy through Hungary, through Romania, because he escaped a few times from imprisonment, so he wandered. His brother was killed in that very war. Father returned through Austria. The liberation, when it came in 1918, father went to work for the police.(...). And when 1920 came he was called up again from the police to the war. They got as far as Kiev; he was wounded at Kiev... And at Kiev, as father always said, it was the "Miracle on the Vistula," and father always said that there had been two miracles, because we drove those poor, miserable Bolsheviks, their rifles were tied to pieces of string, because after the revolution, as is known, there was awful poverty there. We reached Kiev and then, at Kiev father said that some two kilometres away from Kiev a huge hurricane arose, a storm and a retreat. And as fast as we had come to Kiev, so we escaped even faster. [WZ5]

The author of this story is a woman, so it is worth pointing out the interesting identification with her soldier father's fate through the "we" formula used in relation to the events which not only were not the narrator's direct experience but are also far removed from women's experiences during the war.

The military-heroic variant appears in the axiological form when the participation in those events confirms making certain axiological choices, proves the ancestors' patriotic attitudes:

Father was a great patriot, constantly... although he was later also aggrieved by it. Oh, here is my father's photograph when he was in Piłsudski's Rifles Regiment; father's sitting here (...). Here I have also a photograph of the member's of father's family. Here is the uncle who was killed during the First War. [WZ6]

"Daddy fought for a free, democratic Poland, very much so, and because of that by the way he was victimized in his most beautiful years."

In this type of stories concerning important historic events women in principle do not appear. This strong, subconscious conviction that participation in important historic events is obviously men's and not women's experience is sometimes revealed in the form of such statements as the one below which seem to be an awkward attempt to preserve the "natural" state of affairs:

My granny was one of the participants of the Września Children's Strike (...) and then on my father's side, D., he was also in that strike, and as he was there he also fought a bit there, so to speak (...) and also a great grandfather—he too ... was ... this ... wheelwright ...and possibly he made ... that Drzymała's wagon ... he did something there. [WRZ11]

In the community minded variant the interlocutors concentrate on their grandfathers' and fathers' or cousins' public activity, often pointing out what concrete benefits it brought to the local community in the shape of all kinds of organizations or institutions which were created thanks to that activity and have often lasted until today.

My grandfather was distinguished, it even says so on the plaque "a distinguished citizen of Węgrów," he had a shop, yes, my grandfather. And this one, my mother's uncle, that is, so to say, my grandfather founded a secondary school... [WZ8]

The same community minded variant appears also in the case of building images of women. However, it then concentrates much more often not so much on the presentation of specific achievements but on the idea of community involvement which Joanna Kurczewska calls the idealist version,

when family members, mentioning their ancestors' charity activity and social organizational skills stress that they have learnt from them the ideals of solidarity with others and under their influence have changed for the better (Kurczewska 2006).

I think that above all the tradition which was cultivated in our family for generations, the fact that practically almost everybody in our family has been a teacher, practically from my father's and mother's generation—through brothers-in-law, sisters, me, everyone either had episodes or are teachers even until today. I think that to a large extent precisely cultivating the tradition—first of all, that is passing certain principles on from generation to generation, actions—actions which are helpful to the people in the town. I am also very involved in community work, my father was, grandfather, great-grandfather; so that this is what has been passed on, so to speak, in the genes, that I can do something somewhere—and voluntarily. [WRZ5]

The essential difference between the presentation of a man's and a woman's activity in this community minded variant is contained in the context in which the information about the parents' and relatives' public activity is placed. In the case of men, public activity often becomes the leading motive, organizing the ancestor's image.

What I have already said... the theatre and the fire brigade and the secret teaching. Father was the engine (...) As for father... it was him and another professor's initiative. They both created that secret teaching. [WZ11]

Women's images are usually built differently. The most important is their role in the family—that of wives and mothers, their professional or social roles appear only in the background.

Well—well, mother reared the four of us, she was mostly busy with the housework. At some point she had been a teacher but she gave that up to bring us up. [WRZ5]

Mummy... when she had me, stopped working in the community council and simply took care of the house. [WZ9]

Women's political activity, in the majority of stories built by men, but at times also by women, appears "in the margin" as it were, sometimes on the occasion of a different narrative.

"Grandfather started a theatre and uncle and mother also did some acting." [WZ11]

These are such services ... in fact such community work, let's say a quiet one. Wherever it was needed, somehow mum was always there, she was involved in something. [WZ9]

I forgot about my aunts, they were active in education. Because one was a headmistress of a secondary school in Poznań to tell the truth, but to a large extent also a pedagogue here, in Września. The other one was also a pedagogue in a secondary school here, in Września. [WRZ5]

My parents led a social life (...). The carnival was busy (...). The whole so called cream of the society participated [...] Each housewife, each lady of the house from the family would bring something... There were specialities, this lady does this best, that one will bring bigos, that one will cook something else, this one will cook a hare. That was their contribution [...] free of charge and the income was for the community. [WZ8]

The above quotations seem to confirm "empirically" the conclusions from numerous historical analyses and from literary studies that biographic narratives are very often "his-stories" in which even on the level of the history of a family it is the men's life which is most often known and their participation in the past events is presented as the most important key event for the whole family memory; moreover, it is the male perspective that dominates in the characteristic of those events and their evaluation. It leads at times to belittling of the importance of women's participation in them, even if it was their participation and not men's that was of key importance.⁷

I would like now to take a closer look at "stories" concentrated on women's activity. Several motives stand out in them which match the tendency, presented above, to link women's activity with the family sphere rather than with the public one.

The first of these motives concerns relations with neighbours. Women seem to play leading roles in the shaping of those relations. What is characteristic of those relations is their lack of formal character, but as the stories show, they are an important fragment of women's experience, situated on the borderline between the private and the public.

After the war there was a lady here whose husband died in a camp, her son died in a camp, she practically stayed in our garden all the time, because she lived close by, when the weather was good, and also in the house many times, besides we had good relations with our neighbours, so we would also meet in the garden. [SZ9]

Just here, in this street, well, no day passes without us coming to see one another. (...) If a neighbour happened to be ill, one would go there to visit him. Two days ago a neighbour's cat went missing; it was

⁷ See quotation concerning grandmother participating in Września children's strike.

9 p.m. already, and he came, because he was looking for his cat and I took a torch at once and went round the square [...] Well, he had enough courage to come to us in the evening, and I too, took a torch and so we went round the square, we rather live together here. [SZ10]

Yes, we tend to know what is going on at our neighbours, this one has a mother who is ill, over there a baby was born, so we tend to know that out there they have financial problems let's say, we know, it so happens that one has to help somewhere with something. [SZ8]

However, family stories about women reveal not only their involvement in neighbourly relations; they also point at their openness and sensitivity to other people's needs, not belonging to the family home sphere or its immediate neighbourhood.

In Kozienice at the time the door would not be locked, the entrance door there was open the whole night, the whole day, to tell the truth. And when we were there and mummy locked the door, granny would say, "don't lock it, some poor soul will come, he will want to get some sleep, to get warm, let him come in" and it was like that until the beginning of the war. [SZ13]

Here is my mom's funeral [talking about a picture]. Września was so small then and my mom was very much liked and the funeral went here from the hospital, there were crowds, incredible crowds (...) My daddy always said that when they were returning from church, it would take two hours, even though it was close by, my mum would talk to everyone, with each little old lady, she would comfort each of them, she had a subject to talk about with everybody, and he said that the worst about it taking so long to get home from church was that then it would take long before lunch was ready. [WRZ18]

Not always, however, sensitivity to injustice and other people's troubles stands for the features stereotypically ascribed to women, such as warmth and gentleness, nor is it always either a "simple" transfer of their way of functioning from private to out-of-the-house space. In one of the family narratives a tale appears about a grandmother, who despite being an invalid ran with "a hand of steel" a huge farm, with the skill of a competent manager, as we would say today. The story is so "dense" that it is worth quoting a bigger fragment:

Grandfather returned to Gozdów from Karkoszew, he already had two or three children there and a very ill wife because my granny at the age of, I suppose twenty eight, had contracted polio. She was paralyzed in fact; her limbs were paralyzed and in those times they managed to save her arms but her legs were disabled. Till the end of her life she sat all the time in bed. (...). That is to say, sitting in her bed she practically managed the whole house. It was huge house (...) Sitting on that bed, granny gave instructions; her window gave onto the courtyard, and she would say (...) "listen, a hen has not come out today from the henhouse, the motley one, you have to check, either it has laid an egg, or..." Granny had the keys at her disposal, when one of the workers had to get the feed, he would come to see her; looking out of the window she knew how many sacks or buckets of feed he is taking. (...) Grandfather would report to her on every moment of his day in fact, that is why she was very well informed and everything was up to her. Well, later, in the end, (...) father bought a TV set, grandfather contributed, granny had her window on the world. She was very well read and she knew literally everything that was going on, despite her disability. She was cold emotionally, she was cool, but then she had a big heart for those who had injustice done to them, she would always help, if somebody came and was in need, she would always help. Even though she was harsh with us—and that's how I remember contacts with granny. [WRZ19a]

The narratives quoted here prove that the actions described were not accidental events, but rather a certain fixed and repeatable way of those women's "being" in the public space (paradoxically, also the woman who never left her house).

Descriptions of women's other activities in the public sphere, revealed in family stories correspond with the ways of women's functioning in extra familial surroundings, presented above. I mean the kind of activities which are spontaneous, immediate,

not formalized and are clearly geared to meet a specific goal. (It is worth mentioning that they can be found both among uneducated and well educated women).

So we often just get together and go round asking if anything needs to be done. We organize ourselves, a few neighbours and very gladly we go round the houses ... for instance if something is needed for the church, when we decorate an altar there or something. We organized more ladies. We organized it so, went round, collected money, and arranged everything, it worked out very nicely. We did accounts together, too. [WZ2]

Those parcels, those different donations from us go to Lithuania, they know some orphanage there. Those ladies, acquaintances of mine go there, we collect things, clothes, books and here, from our courtyard often as many as ten big parcels are taken by coach. These ladies organize such help on their own. (...) Our ladies also go there, they help, they bring those children here, from outside Lvov, those Polish children from Ukraine were brought here. And they were brought from Lithuania, they add variety to their lives, give them things there, take them there, visit Warsaw. They do voluntary work for the good of those children, not only our Polish ones, but also abroad. [WZ5]

Quite often my mother and I, we take some clothes, some necessary things to that charity team. My colleague also works there, by the way. And they organized summer camps for children from poor families, they even went somewhere abroad; to Lithuania... Together with the culture centre they organized Christmas parties for children, auctions. [WZ8]

In family stories attention is also brought to the activity in the sphere of children's care and education. They are similar to the activities described above. Women's activity in the school Parents' Council may serve as an example, although it has to be pointed out that this is not exclusively a women's domain. It is a formalized institution in the sense that its appointment and structure are regulated by specific rules, however, the character of the activities undertaken within the framework of Parents Councils, because of the diversification of tasks and the irregularity of actions is closer to an informal structure where the carrying out of specific projects is to a large extent characterized by spontaneous actions and relations with little hierarchy.

I was very active, from the first to the last grade, with my three children, there was no trip in which I wouldn't participate and which, let me boast, I wouldn't organize, from A to Z. (...) Preparing a cotillion, or baking layer cakes, because I always baked those cakes for each ball and I baked them simply for free because I believed that everyone should make a contribution. (...) Well, I am telling you, I was so happy at school with my work, which I had there, (...) I saw those children's joy and I think it was worth it (...) I had satisfaction from it. [SZ9]

Women in local communities—as our research shows—do not always place themselves in the space of “soft” not formalized ties. In family “stories” I also find presentations of women's activity in the institutionalized space of the NGOs. This activity is quite often correlated with education and professional competences and the place occupied in the public space. It seems that such connection favours women's reaching a stronger social position because of their competences and the strength of the institution they represent and also because of the professional ethos linked to the public institution in question.⁸

⁸ It is not an accident that among those women teachers, social welfare workers, doctors or lawyers often appear.

They put [lights] not only on the graves of their relatives but also on those of acquaintances or neighbours, or those who are forgotten (...) scouts and guides play a certain role here, school children, for example at school where I used to work, every year those graves were looked after, every year wreaths and flowers were put on them, and one of the colleagues was in charge of that (...), she was very active. [SZ12]

There are scouts and guides. They gather every year at the monument to the insurgents of 1863, on the day of one of the biggest battles of the January uprising. And always until now Mrs K. has been their instructor. And, moreover, she was in charge in difficult times [...]. This is also voluntary work and a patriotic gesture. [WZ9]

It is worth stressing that very often women, working within the framework of institutionalized structures, go beyond the frames set by those institutions and build around them a network of more or less formalized and at times entirely informal initiatives which broaden considerably the spectrum of possible activities of the institution in which they are employed or do voluntary work. In such situations one can talk about “women—institutions,” whose role is not limited only to fulfilling the tasks of the institution in which they work, but more often it involves organizing numerous more or less formalized activities in the public sphere around it. In the analyzed family stories such women appear several times, not only in relation with the organizations which they represent officially but also with many other local initiatives.

Well, Mrs P. No there are no state subsidies, one has to look for sponsors or somehow... Well, there are some, but not too big and somehow she [Mrs P] manages to keep things going, she organizes many additional events, exhibitions and such like, previews of the art young talent and she looks for those talented young people. [WZ6]

There is this Brother Albert organization. It is... interested in this charity activity, this collecting for the poorest people (...) Besides... it takes care of handicapped children, organizes some camps for them, some entertainment, pleasures. Mrs P. is very involved in those things. [WZ7]

In the margin of remarks on women’s non-formalized activities in the public space, it is impossible not to mention diverse forms of their participation in the local sphere of strictly political activities. Some family stories disperse the myths about women’s lack of interest in politics⁹ or that the sphere of political activities remains beyond the sphere of their activity. Those stories show that the larger knowledge and interest in the matters of one’s own local community, the bigger probability of women’s active attitude towards politics and their involvement in it. Conversations in a circle of acquaintances and co-workers as well as the press are an important source of that knowledge.

I read the *Gazeta Skoczowska* rather regularly, also the *Głos Ziemi Cieszyńskiej* I read regularly, I read the *Gazeta Wyborcza* a lot and the *Tygodnik Powszechny*, also the *Gość Niedzielny*, I read that too. What do I pay attention to?—Skoczów, because I’m interested in it (...) apart from that I am also interested to know if something will be repaired there, those things connected with the management of Skoczów, I’d say, let’s say that they refurbished a school, (...) I have a certain interest in politics all the same, although at times politics may get on one’s nerves, but still one has a backbone and knows that one cannot turn around like a weather cock. [SZ3]

⁹ Of course, the qualitative character of the analysis does not allow us to determine the level of women’s political involvement on the local political scene; still, it reveals that the political sphere is one of women’s important life spaces and their political participation takes very diverse forms.

The data gathered shows that women in small local communities get involved and can formulate their opinions on matters which are important to the local community and at the same time they know about democratic procedures of supervision and election of local authorities and about the possible spheres of public articulation of their own opinions.

Well, recently we've had a very unpleasant business, because they want to sack the headmaster and parents don't agree. (...) I also react emotionally, because I am involved in it, parents have stood up too. Well, these are simply things which outrage one. (...) Why, if he is such a good headmaster, why do they want to change him? This is what is being discussed. [SZ7]

Citizens here have considerable influence, because one of the councils is always open, the city council, one can go... And say what is wrong and make some... (...) Simply, one can express one's opinion on the open forum of the city council. [SZ11]

Women are convinced that participation in the elections constitutes an important tool to influence the affairs of one's local community. They appreciate both the chances offered by women running in the elections and by the very women who decide to participate actively in politics.

[I participate] in all of them, I didn't go once because I was ill, from the beginning I have participated in all elections and I vote for what I like, what I think is most right (...) if all citizens had the same approach to it, because here is the difference, sir, there is a group of people who will only go on complaining, but they did not participate in the elections and didn't select the people they thought would be the right ones, so I say, criticizing is the simplest thing to do and I think voting is literally a duty. [SZ4]

I tend to participate in the elections because I believe that if I don't go then precisely I have no influence on what is happening. And I always maintain that this single vote may change something. [WRZ13]

When there were elections, I always sat in the electoral committees. [WZ5]

Goška learned from a lady from the community that she would run as a candidate for a councillor, (...) If she gets pushed out, she will come in through the window; she cannot be just stopped. She simply knows how to do it. [SZ9]

It is worth finishing this motif with an anecdote depicting women's creativity and involvement—the story of how one of the protagonists of these stories handled an intruder who disturbed the inhabitants' peace—to see what the feminine “sword fighting” with men looks like in the public space in which women are active.

Yes, the market square has to be closed. The car traffic, that is, but it cannot take place. A sixteen-seventeen year old drives and he starts off and puts on the brakes and then starts off again with the brakes on. At noon, in the rush hour they checked that the number of decibels exceeds the traffic noise; it exceeds the resistance of the human ear. (...) She put loudspeakers in the window, for there was nothing else to do, because they commit no crime. In the end she put out loudspeakers with music entirely different from the one that fellow was playing (laughter) and he got so annoyed, it started disturbing him. First he hid in his car and then he drove off. She saw no more of him. He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword. [SZ1]

Women's ways of participating in the public sphere, emerging from the analyses, indicate a “feminine” specificity of those actions in two dimensions: the “form” and the “scope.” Characteristic of women's public activity in local communities under

research is a certain type of moral sensitivity, orientation to direct interpersonal relations and concentration on the concrete—solving concrete problems of defined social subjects (Tronto 1987). On the other hand, where the “scope” is concerned, a strong presence of women can be observed in certain spaces of civic activity, first of all those whose nature is tutelary (e.g. towards children, the elderly, the handicapped or those in difficult living conditions). In discussions on the specificity of women’s public activity arguments appear to support the thesis that this specificity is an artefact, a consequence of their long lasting, limited access to activity in the public space and of being left, instead only those forms of activity which were considered in accordance with the “feminine nature.” As Will Kymlicka observes,

one consequence of the public-domestic distinction, and of the relegation of women to the domestic sphere, is that men and women have become associated with different modes of thought and feeling (Kymlicka 1990: 262).

In the moral problem associated with women it was the idea of protectiveness and empathy, functional in relation to the sphere of home relations and family but threatening the rationality of public life, which was supposed to dominate. Without disregarding the political and social consequences of the long lasting domination of concepts which consolidated men’s supremacy in the public space, I should like to point out some interesting interpretations concerning “women’s specificity” which appear in the present feminist discussion. They are characterized not so much by an attempt to question the existence of these differences, as questioning the thesis that only one “masculine” moral project is proper and right for activities in the public space. Pointing out different “keys” of women’s and men’s reasoning and ascribing to women “tutelage ethics” they show at the same time that the tutelage ethics has equal rights with the masculine way of participating in the public space and its necessary complement (Gilligan 1982). The characteristic of women’s activity in the public space emerging from the present analysis of family stories seems to be a strong argument in favour of that thesis.

Conclusions

The above reconstructions of diverse forms and ways in which women are present in the local public space show that the description of the civic society in which first of all formalized NGOs are taken into consideration is not sufficient. In such description the less formal community activities of women are clearly underestimated. The smaller the local community, the more probability that the space of informal or little formalized activities and those directed first of all towards their closest environment will be particularly significant for women. Such is the character of self-defence initiatives, neighbour groups, church groups and committees supporting children’s education and development (Kurczewski 2003). It can be said that these analyses indicate that on the level of small local communities the model of a local citizen is shaped and brought into life as much through interactions in community organizations, in primal groups as through a specific series of events between them.

This type of activity seems characteristic of women's activity in small local environments (villages and small towns). They are characterised by a high degree of interest in public matters in their local rather than state dimension, less interest in being active in formal organizations, but higher involvement in direct, often spontaneous local initiatives. The analyses show also that, at least within the sphere of less formalized activities, women more often get involved in those initiatives which are close to their own life experience, both professional and family. One has to add that "inheriting models of activity" plays a vital part in women's involvement in the public sphere, but it is worth pointing out that these models come both from their mothers and fathers.

Important conclusions can be drawn from these analyses concerning methods and tools used in the study of local activity. Researchers dealing with analyses of social activity ought to take into account that specificity of women's presence in the public space in the ways of conceptualizing the issues of civic activity, and also in the building of such tools which will be adequate for the characteristics of women's activity in the public sphere of local communities pointed out in the present article.

To end these analyses I would like to refer once more to Seyla Benhabib's reinterpretation of the association model of the public space. Analyses of "family stories" have shown that including family and home in the public sphere in order to legitimize women's presence in it does not—in my opinion—find strong justifications in the analyses of family tales carried out here. The attempt to obliterate the border line between the public and the private, may paradoxically strengthen the tendency, revealed in the analysis, to perceive women as "guardians of the hearth and home" and to assume without giving it another thought that their activity outside the family is a certain "natural," automatic broadening of the private space rather than a conscious choice, a well thought out way of women's participating in the public space, their going beyond the space of domestic issues.¹⁰

It is precisely for those people that mama does more than she should be doing, that is apart from her life and her learning she takes care of those handicapped children. [WRZ13]

In my opinion, a more proper interpretation of this type of behaviour and attitudes would be consistent pointing out those activities by women which take place in the public space and underlining that these activities are well thought out and voluntary. Such potential is contained in Hannah Arendt's thought; she stresses the importance of the public aspect of human life and the role of participation in the public sphere as the proper way to recover women's rights of expression and freedom.

However, revealing various forms of women's non formalized activities and their role in the civic space may be helpful in explaining the orientation—which is taken note of in the studies on women's activity—towards defined domains of the public space, or the character of the social relations built in this space in which they use to some degree the "tools" and models of acting which can be considered "feminine."

¹⁰ A separate issue, requiring in-depth analysis, is the role of the family in the building of individuals' models of participation in the public space.

Women do various things differently from men which does not make their activities less valuable socially or less important to the life of the community.

Moreover, it is worth adding that from the point of view of the development of the local public space and legitimizing women's presence in it, particularly in small local communities, the concept of endogenous development seems interesting (Walczak-Duraj 2008). This concept, taking into account the fact that women's activity often takes place outside the frames of formal organizations, assumes supporting and appreciating local grass-roots initiatives created by women. Broader/all-Polish programmes of activity, often built by women's organizations of various kinds, directed towards the strengthening of women's activity and "visibility" in the public space should therefore—in my opinion—contain a more insightful diagnosis not only of formal but also of non formalized activities.¹¹ Such programmes should also take into account that in small local environments the building of social structures often rests, particularly in the initial stage, on the basis of informal ties and ad hoc mobilization. These activities may constitute a natural basis for increasing the amount of the "space of public activity" available to women. In this type of programmes important elements should be also, firstly, the activities aiming at making women aware that also not formalized activities are an important aspect of their public activity, secondly, supporting by women's organizations the development of social competences and women's sense of subjectivity and causativeness and, thirdly, pointing out the benefits from transforming the initiatives into formalized structures or entering into the structures already active in the local public space.

The "family stories," collected during the studies of small local communities can, in my opinion, help to build this type of programmes of strengthening women's role in the public space.

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¹¹ The analysis which was carried out seems to confirm how interesting and fruitful "tracking down" and describing women's already existing, often not institutional public, or—what is even more important—potentially political experiences can be.

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Biographical Note: Hanna Bojar, Ph.D., assistant professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology Polish Academy of Sciences. Her interests cover local societies, social minorities, and family. Main publications: *Mniejszości społeczne w państwie i społeczeństwie III Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* [Social Minorities in the

State and Society of the Third Polish Republic], 2002; with Wojciech Łukowski, Bohdan Jałowiecki (eds.) *Spoleczność na granicy. Zasoby mikroregionu Gołdap i mechanizmy ich wykorzystania*, 2009; with Joanna Kurczewska (eds.) *Wyciskanie Brukselki? O europeizacji pogranicznych społeczności lokalnych* [Milking the Brussels Sprout? On the Europeanization of Local Communities at the Borderlands], 2010.

Address: Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences; Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warsaw, Poland; E-mail: hbojar@ifispan.waw.pl