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Social Capital of Women in Rural Areas and Their Participation in the Socio-political Life

Abstract: The basic research problem discussed in this article concerns two inextricably linked fundamental issues. The first of them is connected with a specific character of the social capital in the Polish rural women's environment, which in this paper is defined in terms of social participation and co-operation based on social trust, maintained networks of contacts, and on the system of their shared values and moral norms. Therefore, definite indices of social trust were adopted for this analysis. They are regarded as independent variables, which can determine the direction and the intensity of rural women' participation in the socio-political life. The other issue refers to establishing a set of determinants—as exhaustive as possible—of the present and potential participation of rural women in the socio-political life and defining the role played by their social capital as one of these determinants.

Keywords: social capital; social trust; rural women in Poland; participation of women in the socio-political life; women's organizations; the local authorities.

Introduction

The empirical research carried out among rural women in Poland in 2007 aimed not only at identifying factors determining rural women's participation in the socio-political life¹ but also their influence and measures which, according to rural women, need to be taken at the macro, meso and micro structural level to enhance their limited participation in the socio-political life.

The term *participation in the socio-political life* is understood to mean both the political dimension of this participation as well as its dimension referring to the social life encompassing its formalised and not formalised aspects as well as any other forms of participation, which are not of a strictly private nature. The term *local environment* is understood in this context as a village or a rural administrative district. The social category of *rural women* is understood as women in their working age, that is, between 18 and 59 years living in rural areas.

¹ The empirical data included in the paper come from module studies (module IV) focussed on determinants of rural women's participation in the socio-political life. The research project was co-ordinated by the author of this paper. The empirical data were presented in the final report of module IV, which constitutes one of four modules making up the project entitled *Diagnosis of the social and professional situation of rural women in Poland SPO RZL 1.6 (b)* carried out by Polish Society for Social Policy in co-operation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and financed by the European Social Fund. Jerzy Krzyszkowski was the project coordinator.

The determinants of rural women's socio-political participation were identified from the point of view of women themselves on the basis of their opinions, attitudes, stereotypes or expectations. This assumption is especially valid in relation to rural women's participation in various forms of the social and political life. Rural women are, on the one hand, exposed to the propagated set of values referring, among other things, to democracy, market rules, social solidarity or civil society and, on the other hand, they are confronted with definite possibilities of putting into practice the above mentioned model of a woman participating in the socio-political life. These possibilities are, to a smaller or bigger degree, created for women by the local authorities, that is, the local self-government or traditions prevailing in a given region. However, the degree of rural women's social trust and the social capital type prevailing in the rural environment are of an equal or even greater importance, as social trust constitutes a key element, alongside the network of contacts (network—*n*) and values and moral norms (values—*v*), which decides both about a dominant nature of the social capital (the bonding social capital or the bridging social capital) and about its potential (a different level of the social capital convergence or dispersal).

It has been assumed that a high degree of social trust is significant in terms of reinforcing democratic values in the rural environment. Social trust contributes to: enhancing the stability and permanence of the system, improving the potential connected with forming the civil society and, consequently, to increasing rural women's participation in the socio-political life.

The main question appearing here concerns opportunities, that would allow most rural local communities in Poland to come gradually closer to model criteria attributed to the civil society (taking into account, on the one hand, the level and differentiation of rural women's participation in the socio-political life and, on the other hand, institutional, social-psychological, mental and economic determinants, which—in the opinion of rural women—facilitate or hamper their increased participation). What is meant here is the civil society, which will be solving a number of local problems by itself better and faster than government agencies and the local self-government. It will be simultaneously a society treating its activity—both formal and non-formal—as a natural supplement of the political authorities activities. However, for this to happen, local rural communities and, particularly, rural women by virtue of their family and external roles should have favourable conditions allowing them to develop their participation in the socio-political life not only of their own local community but also on the macro-social scale.

Methodology

Empirical studies, on which this article is based, were carried out by means of quantitative and qualitative methods and techniques. The quantitative research included questionnaire surveys on a representative sample of 1,600 women living in rural areas

in all 16 administrative provinces of Poland.² The qualitative research³ was conducted in the form of four focus-group interviews in four different provinces and four detailed monographs of the surveyed administrative districts.⁴ The focus-group interviews aimed at an in-depth analysis (Babbie 2005: 335) of different areas and spheres of rural women's socio-political activity with a particular emphasis placed on factors, which hamper rural women's participation in some forms of socio-political activity⁵ or even make this participation impossible. These factors were identified during the focus-group interviews. It was assumed that women's participation in the socio-political life specified in research assumptions earlier on would be described in detail and evaluated by women in the course of focus interviews (in accordance with the focus interview scenario prepared earlier on). The places (administrative districts) and interview participants were selected according to several criteria. The research locations were chosen in such way that they would vary both with regard to a dominant participation type and characteristics of a local community. The main criteria were: geographical variations (different regions of Poland), historical variations (different historical traditions), spatial variations (distance from cities/big urban centres), economic variations (areas of prosperity and poverty), variations connected with a dominant type of professional activity, in which inhabitants of a given district were involved (a smaller or a bigger share of persons involved in agriculture). Participants of the focus interviews were chosen in such way that they would represent best typical socio-demographic characteristics of a given administrative district's female inhabitants. They varied with regard to their age, educational background, family and occupational situation and they included both female inhabitants of a given administrative province from their birth and women who had moved there a short time ago including women from towns. Having in mind the research focus, there were recruited mainly those women, who had a lot to say about rural women's participation in the socio-political life. They were: heads of villages, councilors, teachers, local activists.⁶ The qualitative analysis encompassed also conclusions from additional studies includ-

² An extensive pilot study as well as the main research itself were carried out by the Research Unit of the Polish Sociological Association in July 2007. The Research Unit also processed the collected empirical data creating databases for their further statistical analysis.

³ Qualitative studies were carried out by a team of sociologists headed by Iza Desperak.

⁴ There were selected administrative districts in four provinces of Poland for the focus-group interviews: in the Łódź Province—the Adrespol District—the town of Adrespol; in the Warmia-Mazury Province—the Jedwabno District—the town of Jedwabno; in the Kujawy-Pomorze Province—the Piotrków Kujawski District—the town of Zborowiec; in the Wielkopolska Province—the Kłecko District—the town of Działyń.

⁵ The determinants of women's participation in the socio-political life as well as the determinants of communication are, to a big extent, conditioned by gender (see, for example: Tanner 1997, Fuszara 2006). When discussing female matters women are likely to be more open in their own company; the presence of men who, according to the double standard of roles in terms of gender, assume or are encouraged to assume leading roles, could hamper the discursive activity of the participants. Therefore, the team which conducted interviews was composed exclusively of women; solely women played the role of the organizer and the moderator of the focus-group interviews.

⁶ Each group was composed of 12 to 15 persons. A detailed scenario of each interview was designed on the spot taking into account specific characteristics of a given place. Information about all female respondents was gathered in questionnaires filled in by the respondents during the first stage of research. Focus interviews lasted from 120 to 180 minutes according to the situation, group dynamics, and so on.

ing available documents concerning the administrative districts, in which the focused studies were carried out. It was connected with a general concept of the research project, which envisaged that problem-focussed monographs would be prepared as an integral part of the qualitative studies. Alongside occupational activity indices used in the analysis, researchers paid also attention to variations in factors being specific for an active socio-political involvement of rural women such as: specific local characteristics, traditions or historical determinants. An in-depth analysis of the interviews focused on a diagnosis of women's socio-political activity is based simultaneously on a broad definition of such activity making allowances for both a traditionally understood involvement in forms political organizations and their activity within formal and informal structures of the civil society, their socio-educational or religious activities benefiting a local community.

Variables Constituting Rural Women's Social Capital Resources

Three components of social capital were distinguished for purposes of empirical analyses. Each of these components was composed of three elements:⁷

- 1) trust component (t), which includes: a) trust bestowed on the people rural women know, that is, neighbours and other inhabitants of their village/town/district; b) social trust, which manifests itself in an affirmative answer to a general question: "Do you think that one can trust most people?;" c) trust bestowed on the local authorities. All these elements of the trust component constitute a synthetic index of the level of trust shown by rural women.⁸
- 2) network component (n) allowing to analyse: a) the network of informal contacts, that is, the number of friends and close acquaintances; b) the network of formal contacts understood as membership in organizations or associations; c) the network of virtual contacts involving the use of e-mail. The elements of the network component provide a synthetic index of the network of contacts maintained by the respondents.
- 3) values and moral norms component (v), which is made up of: a) trustworthiness manifesting itself in the belief that it is necessary to fulfil one's obligations; b) moral rigour understood as a belief that it is always possible to distinguish between good and evil (thus, it is an indicator of the lack of beliefs pertaining to anomie); c) local patriotism denoting a strong bond with the place of living. All these elements of

⁷ See: Maciej Frykowski (2005).

⁸ Average values of indices of particular components are arithmetic means for the whole community. They are estimated by adding up the values pertaining to three primary components (trust, values and moral norms, and networks of contacts) and dividing the total by three. Index value = 1 means that only one of these components relates to a given respondent (e.g., as regards the network of contacts—these contacts are usually informal), index value = 2 means that two components relate to a given respondent, and index value = 3 denotes that three components relate to a given respondent. Thus, an average index value for the whole community (a synthetic index) $t = 1.06$ means that the majority of respondents declared that they trusted one category of people mentioned within the framework of the trust component. The same procedure was applied when working out the network component and the values and moral norms component.

the values and moral norms component constitute a synthetic index characterising the attitude of the interviewed women towards the analysed values and norms.

Theoretical Context of the Research

The characteristics of rural women's social capital and their participation in the socio-political life (both real and declared) were put in a broader research and theoretical context pertaining to:

- a) Forming and/or supporting the identity of local communities. A sense of separateness from other communities, pride resulting from the fact of being a member of a given community, awareness on the part of a given local community of being firmly rooted in traditions presently observed and preserved—these are basic indicators of the so-called strong communities (Kurzewska, Kempny, Bojar 1998). Strong communities are those whose specific character results from their peculiar economic and civilization infrastructure, their specific social patterns, individual attitudes, orientations or political preferences, a distinct cultural identity (specific character of “little homelands”) or a peculiar social character (comprising various factors such as social mobility, occupational mobility, length of stay in a given community, degree of homogeneity including religious homogeneity, etc.), and also communities characterised by a higher degree of social trust. Due to general globalisation processes and the European Union's main guidelines and strategies for multifunctional development of rural areas, the problem of local communities' identity in Poland represents one of the most important, long-term problems of the state policy and especially the social policy.
- b) The predominant type of social bonds, in which the degree of social trust and social capital are regarded both as the measurements of the real potential of social participation and co-operation for the benefit of the local community and as fundamental variables in the process of forming and supporting social bonds.

Social trust, in accordance with assumptions accepted in the literature (among other authors, Inglehart 1999; Putnam 2000; Sztompka 2002, 2007) denotes a generalized trust bestowed on other people. Trust is related to three areas of social reality, which at the same time constitute its three aspects. It is a characteristic of relationships based on an exchange between people. It constitutes the basis for co-operation between these people and it is a cultural norm.

It can be also assumed, in the same way as Francis F. Fukuyama (1995) and other authors did, that social trust constitutes the main source of social capital. Therefore, the question concerning the degree of trust and the kind of social capital pertaining to the environment of rural women was particularly interesting. The answer to this question will not perform a solely cognitive function but it will also play a distinct application-related function connected with implementing the guidelines of the social policy pursued by the state and the civil social policy with regard to rural milieus and, particularly, with regard to women from these milieus, who perform basic socialization functions with regard to the younger generation.

A few sets of circumstances underlie the adoption of such theoretical perspective in the research project. The first set of circumstances refers to a broader context connected with the functioning of the existing social world, which is subject to the complex process of globalization. This process leads to the emergence of “the global neighbourhood,” where complex, multilevel and interrelated processes of interpretation, translation, mutation and adaptation of the global content take place. It is related to the concept of “dynamic traditions,” where local recipients of the global content and values impose local meanings on them.

This leads to a growing role of local leaders or, to put it in more general terms, of the people who are very active in various formalised and non-formalised kinds of social and political activity. The postulate introduced by R. Robertson (1992; 1995) to the anthropological and social perspective, according to which the only reasonable perspective for description and evaluation of globalization progress and effects should be considered the local perspective most frequently called “g-localization,” abolishes in principle the old interpretative model based on the core-periphery principle.

Thus, on the one hand, new, broader meanings and interpretative alternatives can be attributed to the rural milieu and, on the other hand, the rural milieu becomes an increasingly important frame of reference for developing various strategies at the level of modernization projects including projects related to comprehensive activities aimed at rural women’s active involvement in the field of public life.

The second set of circumstances, which is inextricably linked with the previous one, refers to the potential possessed by women who are socially and politically active in the rural milieu and who can effectively contribute to suppressing the process of “de-identification” of local communities under the influence exerted by globalization processes and to accelerating the civil society formation process. Owing to this fact, in the framework of measures taken by the State, which employs various instruments pertaining to the social policy, and the framework of measures taken by the third sector, which employs various instruments pertaining to the civil social policy, an emphasis should be laid on the activities and the social categories (women) which naturally contribute to supporting and reinforcing the community in the rural milieu. Rural women are still the ones who “foster the human nature,” as they prepare the younger generation to become a part of the modern social life governed by the rules based on liberal and democratic values and the logic of the market. However, rural women’s performance of this role, to a great extent, depends on whether they can count on understanding and support for their socio-political activity on the part of the local authorities and other institutions operating in their local milieu and to what extent rural women themselves are willing to reconstruct their current social roles.

Therefore, when embarking on the research on rural women’s participation in the socio-political life it was assumed that traditions constitute the main value on which the attempt at developing and/or reinforcing local communities’ identity by means of trust and social capital can be based. When undertaking this attempt instruments and mechanisms included in the canons of social policy measures should be applied. It is worth stressing that the tradition defined as the process of forming the social reality from the grass-roots may at times be a factor which can inhibit the expected

social change. Usually it is the tradition which determines the level of community orientation, civil activity, and decides whether local communities undergo modernization or not. It is also dependent, to a great extent, on the local community type. Multiplicity and significance, which characterise processes taking place in modern rural local communities and the role played by women in these communities, were the reason for placing the empirical research in the theoretical context discussed in this article.

Rural Women's Social Trust, their Networks of Contacts, accepted Norms and Values, and Sense of Membership in a Local Community

One of the main objectives of the research project was an attempt of diagnosing comprehensive determinants of rural women's socio-political activity including determinants resulting from the level of social trust and the predominant social capital type. It would be impossible to achieve that objective without referring to interrelationships between the members of local communities, in which these women live. The first category of phenomena which became the target of analysis was rural women's trust in the people surrounding them, who are close or more distant to them. The findings of the analysis were not surprising as they indicated that most rural women show their trust for the people who are the closest to them, who they are most familiar with. As the degree of closeness to a given category of people decreases, the number of women who trust them drops. While over 95% of rural women trust the members of their closest family and almost 70% trust their more distant relatives, only one in two rural women trust neighbours and one in three women trust colleagues.

It is a natural consequence of the phenomenon described above that only 18.6% of rural women are ready to trust strangers, whom they meet in various situations in their life and only slightly less than a quarter (22.8%—see Table 1) of women display social trust understood as a belief that one can trust most people. In the case of every third rural woman the trust index is the lowest, which means that she trusts neither of the categories of people the trust component is made up of (neighbours, the local authorities, other people) and only every eleventh woman is characterized by the highest index value, which means that she trusts people from every category mentioned in the trust component.

The situation is similar as regards trust women are eager to show for representatives of different institutions and these institutions themselves. While two thirds of women trust their Church, only one third of them trust the local authorities and almost a quarter of the respondents place trust in the media. Non-governmental organizations enjoy the trust of slightly more than one in eight women, whereas an even smaller number of rural women trust the two other institutions mentioned above, that is, the government (score of 7.7%) and political parties (score of 3.7%). In the case of every third rural woman the trust index is the lowest, which means that she trusts neither of the categories of people the trust component is made up of (neighbours, the local authorities, other people), and only every eleventh woman is characterized by

Table 1

Trust Shown for Different Categories of People and Institutions in Rural Women's Milieu

1	Trust in people known to rural women	Number of responses	Percentage of responses N = 1600	Percentage of significant responses
1.1	Members of the closest family	1525	95.3	95.3
1.2	Members of the more distant family	1109	69.3	69.4
1.3	Neighbours	829	51.8	52.0
1.4	Trust in colleagues	515	32.2	33.3
2	Social trust	Number of responses	Percentage of responses N = 1600	Percentage of significant responses
2.1	Belief that one can trust most people	362	22.6	22.8
2.2	Trust placed in strangers met in different situations in life	297	18.6	18.6
3	Trust shown for institutions	Number of responses	Percentage of responses N = 1600	Percentage of significant responses
3.1	Church	1063	66.4	66.4
3.2	Local authorities	494	30.9	30.9
3.3	The media	354	22.1	22.1
3.4	Non-governmental organizations	207	12.9	13.0
3.5	Government	123	7.7	7.7
3.6	Political parties	59	3.7	3.7

the highest value of the index, which means that she trusts people from every category in the trust component.

The network of contacts which rural women maintain with other people is another factor describing the situation of rural women in their local milieu. Almost 95% of women claim to have in their surroundings some people who are close to them, friends whom they regularly meet, while more than a half of these women maintain an extended network of informal contacts, i.e., they have more than five people close to them. A markedly smaller group of women establish contacts of formal nature as well. Almost 16% of rural women are members of a formal organization, 65% of whom are members of only one organization. A relatively small number of rural women maintains virtual contacts with their acquaintances (use the Internet). Only one in four use e-mail and/or instant communicators on a regular basis. Half of the respondents from this group maintain an extended network of virtual contacts (encompassing more than 5 participants).

In the case of almost 60% of rural women, the index value of the network component equalled one, which indicates that they maintained only one of the types of contacts the network component encompasses (usually these are informal contacts); 32% of women maintained two of the three types of contacts specified in the network component. The share of women, who scored the lowest index value being synonymous

with the lack of any close relations (amounting to almost 5%), was very similar to the share of women who scored the highest index value, which means that they maintained contacts of all three types of the network component (amounting to exactly 4%).

Other determinants of the way in which rural women function in their communities are the system of values and moral norms they follow, their feeling of membership in the local community, and degree of attachment to the place of living. Almost two thirds of the respondents are characterized by a high degree of moral rigour manifesting itself in a belief that there exist clearly laid out rules, which make it always possible to distinguish between good and evil. Two thirds of women believe that it is necessary to carry out the obligations undertaken by them regardless of circumstances. A relatively big number of women (as compared with the trust component and the network component mentioned above) scored a high value of the indicator of values and norms built in this way. Over 28% of rural women scored the maximum index value and in the case of 39% of women the value scored indicated that two out of three constituents of the component found reference to these women.

The level of local patriotism of rural women is high and it manifests itself in several basic forms: attachment (of almost three-fourths of women) to their place of living (their village or the nearest neighbourhood), satisfaction arising from the fact of living there (over 80% of women), reluctance shown for any potential change of the place of living (over 60% of women), familiarity with the history of their place of living or with local rites and customs (over 55% of women).

The sum of the nine constituents discussed in the article constitutes the variable of social capital resources in the rural milieu, which is significant from the perspective of socio-political activity undertaken by women living in this milieu (see: Table 2).

Table 2

Average Index Values Pertaining to Rural Women's Social Capital

No.	Social capital components	Constituents of social trust components	Percentage of respondents	Average index value
1	Trust component (t)	Trust placed in people known to rural women Trust in the local authorities Social trust	52.0 30.9 22.8	1.06
2	Network component (n)	Informal contacts Virtual contacts Formal contacts	94.4 25.1 15.6	1.35
3	Values and norms component (v)	Trustworthiness Local patriotism Moral rigour	66.6 61.9 60.3	1.89
Social capital potential		Cs = t + n + v		4.29

The biggest shares of women score medium values of the synthetic index pertaining to values and norms. When analysing the values which tend to be more

extreme it can be noted that the number of women who score such values gradually decreases.⁹

The Social Capital Potential of Women in the Rural Milieu

Making a diagnosis of the social capital potential in the rural women's milieu researchers cannot limit themselves to describing particular components determining the size of this potential but they also have to describe mutual relations that exist between them. The fact that there exist correlations between particular components points to the cohesion of this capital (and, thus, to its real strength). The lack of such correlations indicates that the capital is dispersed and, therefore, it is more difficult to activate.

The performed analyses show that: most of statistically significant correlations existing between the constituents of various social capital components are related to social trust (weak but statistically significant correlations exist between social trust and the network of virtual contacts; between social trust and trustworthiness; between social trust and moral rigour and between social trust and local patriotism). A small number of statistically significant correlations can be observed between the remaining components of the social capital. This makes it impossible to determine coherent, homogeneous types of the capital specific of particular categories of rural women and leads to a conclusion that the social capital in the rural milieu tends to vary and it is dispersed. Relations between different constituents of the components of rural women's social capital are either very weak or not strong enough, which might pose a quite serious obstacle from the perspective of undertaking measures aimed at enhancing rural women's participation in the socio-political life.

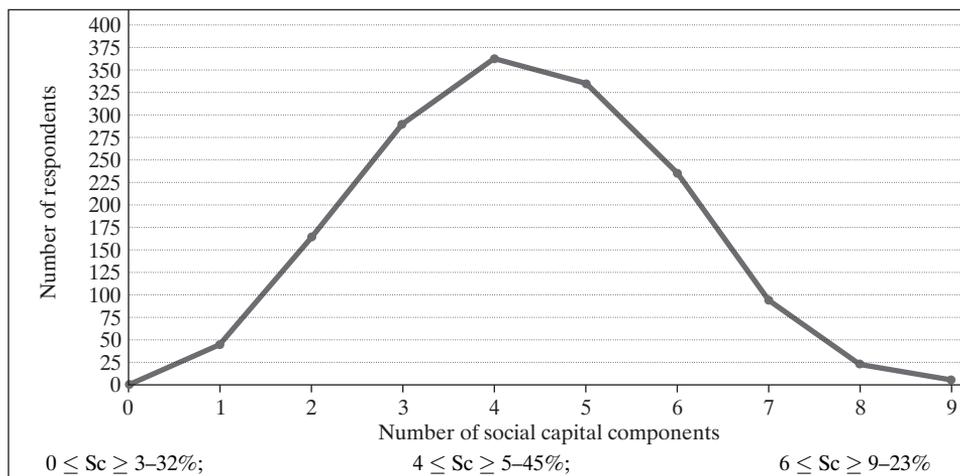
Rural women's social capital is not only dispersed but it does not have any distinct characteristics of the bonding capital or of the bridging capital. The potential of rural women's social capital itself should be rated as average (see Figure 1).

The already mentioned varied character of the social capital is also noticeable. These variations are dependent on some socio-demographic features. The youngest women (aged 18 to 30 years) more often than women in other age groups score low or very low values of the social capital index. The highest values of the social capital index are recorded among the oldest women (aged 50 and more years). The older the women, the more of them trust their neighbours and the local authorities. It also seems that they fit into the opinion that one can trust most people, although no statistically significant correlation exists here. In this oldest age group there are also more women who are members of socio-political organizations and who feel strongly attached to their place of living.

As regards the last of the components mentioned above, that is, the network of virtual contacts a relatively strong reverse correlation has been discovered here. The younger the women, the higher the percentage of those, who maintain virtual contacts,

⁹ In the case of only two women the index value amounted to 0 and only 4 women scored the maximum value.

Figure 1
 Potential of Rural Women's Social Capital



which seems quite obvious. The rural women who completed higher education score the highest values of the social capital index more frequently than women belonging to other categories, whereas the women who completed only primary education more frequently than other women score the lowest values. Statistically significant correlations occur between the level of education of women and the network of formal and virtual contacts they maintain as well as between the level of education of women and the attachment to the place of living which they declare and which is regarded as an indicator of local patriotism. Relatively the strongest correlation occurs between the respondents' level of education and their maintenance of virtual contacts (Cramer's $V=0.364$, $p=0.001$). As many as 64% of the respondents who completed higher education maintain contacts of this nature, whereas in the case of the respondents who completed secondary education the number of women who maintain such contacts is lower by almost 50% and as regards the respondents who have an even lower educational background this number is six times smaller. The higher the level of education of women, the larger the number of those who are members of organizations (thus, maintaining formal contacts) and those who use the Internet (thus, maintaining virtual contacts) and the smaller the number of those who are strongly attached to their place of living.

A job performed by rural women turned out to be a significant factor contributing to variations in the scored value of the synthetic index of the social capital. There occurs a statistically significant although weak correlation (Cramer's $V=0.132$, $p=0.001$) between the categories of jobs performed by rural women and the value of social capital index, which they scored, since statistically significant correlations occur between the categories of jobs performed by the respondents and the networks of formal and virtual contacts maintained by them. The biggest share of women being members of socio-political organizations (which is reflected in maintaining formal contacts) was found among highly-qualified experts and women in executive positions. In the same group there was the biggest share of women who use the Internet

(thus, maintaining virtual contacts). It is worth pointing out that relatively high shares of rural women maintaining virtual contacts were found among the representatives of such job categories in which using the Internet seems to be a prerequisite: officials and representatives of uniformed services (over 44% of women in this category) and company owners (slightly over 43% of women in this group).

A subjective sense of affluence of the respondents' families was the last component in the case of which there were observed marked variations in the scored value of the synthetic index of the social capital. A statistically significant but weak correlation (Cramer's $V=0.108$, $p=0.001$) could be seen between a subjective assessment of the financial situation of the respondents' families and the value of social potential index. Relatively the highest percentage shares of women scoring low index values were found among the respondents who evaluated their family's situation as below average. Low index values did not occur in the category of women who described their families as affluent.

Thanks to these additional findings it can be said that the dispersed character of rural women's social capital results from a specific character of the local rural milieu (where life is harder than in the urban environment, but where a stronger sense of community spirit exists) but first and foremost from the way rural women perceive their social role, which is largely focused on the family and children. This perspective was noticeable in the focus group interviews.

Membership in Social and Political Organizations

Detailed analyses of the gathered empirical evidence indicate that rural women's formal membership in socio-political organizations is very low (only less than 16% of the respondents), which does not come as a surprise. Rural women belong to twenty kinds of socio-political organizations such as associations, foundations, unions, clubs and religious communities. The largest group of rural women declared that they were members of organizations, which foster education, and of organizations, which are designed typically for women (mainly the Rural Housewives Associations). The latter have long traditions among rural women, although they are less and less popular as the research findings indicate.¹⁰ Relatively the largest number of active women (being members of different kinds of organizations) were found among the respondents from the following administrative provinces of Poland: Wielkopolska, Podkarpacie and Podlasie, Lubusko, Silesia and Warmia-Mazury. Thus, a relatively high although internally diversified level of participation in the socio-political life is declared both by women who come from the regions traditionally regarded as being in the lead (the Wielkopolska Province) and from the regions where either the tradition of a considerable women's participation in the socio-political life did not exist or it was disrupted by the Second World War (the dominant share of non-indigenous population in the Warmia-Mazury Province or the Lubusko Province). The lowest percentage shares

¹⁰ Only 5 women declared their party or political association affiliation, which accounts for 0.3% of all respondents and 1.8% of the respondents declaring membership in socio-political organizations.

of women being members of socio-political organizations were found among the representatives of the Lower Silesia and the Święty Krzyż Provinces. The former constitutes an example of a disrupted historical continuity but the latter does not. The highest share of women who became active members of organizations was found among the respondents over 50 years of age. A statistically significant but weak correlation (Cramer's $V=0.181$) can be observed between rural women's age and their membership in socio-political organizations. As regards particular age categories, the number of women being members of women's organizations is the smallest among the youngest respondents and the largest among the oldest respondents.

The research findings indicate that the level of women's participation in the socio-political life is determined by many more factors than it is usually assumed. The presence of active female leaders in the rural milieu, who can not only voice successfully the rural public opinion but are also able to activate other women who until then remained passive, is of increasingly big importance. The findings of focus group interviews as well as the quantitative research show that active leaders are usually women who in their families underwent social activity training offered to them by their mothers. The following factors, among other things, encourage women to get involved in the activity of social and political organizations and support this activity: traditions of involvement in such activity in a particular village or district as well as such traditions cultivated at the home women grew up in combined with the support on the part of the family, neighbours, other inhabitants of the village or district; modernization and transformation processes consisting in reducing the distance between rural and urban areas, insight into the same patterns of behaviour, lifestyles, which has been made possible primarily thanks to the mass media.

The performed analysis allowed to identify the following factors conducive to an active involvement of the respondents who took part in the focus group interviews:

- a) economic activity—undertaken, however, primarily outside the village—providing an adequate income, a higher degree of independence and a bigger mobility
- b) educational activity—studies including postgraduate studies, training courses, continuous education.

The respondents also mentioned barriers to the socio-political activity undertaken by rural women. The most significant factors hampering such activity, which were mentioned by rural women, encompassed: economic barriers, moral barriers, spatial isolation, remoteness from the core (the nearest district seat, town), local factors, technological progress (access to the mass media), transformations (closing down the state-owned farms); gender-related barriers, stereotypes and self images created by women.

The most important economic barriers include: lack of funds from which social activity could be financed, unavailability of jobs, low retirement and disability pensions, low welfare benefits, no jobs for mothers of infants.

The most important moral and environmental barriers tend to be: indifference on the part of most rural dwellers towards undertaking community-oriented activities, negative reaction of the local milieu to women's involvement in social or political activity, lack of youth organizations, which could disseminate the idea of such activity among young people and teach them how to undertake it, lack of support on the

part of these communities and at times on the part of rural women's families as well, jealousy and lack of the sense of solidarity among women.

The most important barriers related to spatial isolation and social communication are: no possibility of commuting, confinement within their own village, gradual closing down of public transport services and remoteness from the town. The carried out research does not indicate that the Internet can remove this barrier.

The most important barriers related to the attitude of the local authorities are: lack of support on the part of local institutions, hierarchy of priorities as the local authorities focus on developing infrastructure rather than stimulating local communities to action.

The most important barriers related to the technological progress and changes resulting from the transformation processes include: the mass media (especially the TV) regarded by rural women as time wasters and "killers" of local activity, closing down of local activity centres, abandoning the idea of community work, changes in life patterns—consumption-oriented lifestyle rather than one focused on the activity undertaken for the community benefit, migration, outflow of young people from rural areas.

The most important gender-related barriers prove to be: a small number of women in politics and lack of policies targeted at women, male players setting the rules in politics and employment, being a woman—gender discrimination.

There were a few factors mentioned by women which, on the one hand, stimulate women to get involved in the activity of social and political organisations and, on the other hand, discourage them from doing it. These factors include primarily: moral standards pertaining to rural areas which, on the one hand, enhance the sense of community belonging and, on the other hand, are characterised by a high level of social control and stigmatization of otherness. They can also influence women's participation in the social life and, particularly, in the political life. Other factors are the burden of family, household and farming duties. On the one hand, it forces women to better organize their lives and their families to cooperate and, on the other hand, an excessive burden hampers socio-political activity or sometimes makes it even impossible.

The determinants of rural women's participation in the socio-political life encompass both kinds of factors: of socio-moral nature or psychological nature and those which result from an accumulating civilisation and transformation impact discouraging rural women from undertaking the socio-political activity. They are not only of a complex nature as they imply duality (the same factor is, on the one hand, regarded as hampering the activity and, on the other hand, as conducive to undertaking this activity) but some of them are also of a confidential nature. The main reason for a relatively low level of socio-political activity seems to be an insufficient support on the part of institutions for rural milieus and, in particular, for rural women, who are not able to cope with the impact exerted by the systemic change overlapping civilisation changes. This support should, on the one hand, be provided by the third-sector organizations and, on the other hand, by the structures of the local authorities, which do not display sufficient understanding and sufficient activity (apart from some reported exceptions) in creating favourable conditions for implementing the civil social policy.

Rural women's socio-political activity is inextricably linked with their economic activity. Among the women who took part in the focus group interviews, those who had a job, including those who worked outside the village, turned out to be the most active. The quantitative research based on the representative sample also confirmed this trend. For many rural women having a job is favourable for their involvement in the socio-political activity. Such activity undertaken by economically active women is perceived in more favourable terms by their families and their local community. Rural women leading a professional life exclusively outside their family farms are characterized by the lowest level of participation in the socio-political life among all economically active women. It can be assumed that one of factors which account for their small involvement is a weaker bond with the local community and less free time available for such activity. As regards women not involved in a professional activity outside their farm, whose level of participation is equally low, it is presumably their unwillingness and a higher degree of life passivity in general which account for their small involvement.

The tradition appears to be a positive motivating factor as regards participation in the rural community life. This is the case, at least, in those rural areas where there is a continuity of a rich and diversified tradition and where the majority of women work, prevalently outside the farming sector (as in the case of, for example, the Andrespol District). Rural women's socio-political activity is not limited solely to their activity in formalized organizations and institutions. As the findings of research indicate, a lot of this activity is undertaken outside the framework of formal organizations. Among the most significant factors accounting for a low level of rural women's participation in the socio-political life, rural women first and foremost mention the lack of time (70% of responses). This factor is followed by the lack of need for associating, the lack of willingness to undertake collective activity, as well as the lack of knowledge about the field and the scope of activity undertaken by particular organizations. Every twenty fifth respondent thinks that rural women refrain from getting involved in an organization due to the fact that their activity would be accepted unfavourably by their family members and acquaintances.

As indicated by the research findings, rural women would be willing to get involved, first of all, in activities of the charities, which act for the benefit of children in need, elderly people, the poor, the sick, the victims of natural disasters and organizations whose operations are aimed at developing the education system. Rural women's socio-political activity, both the real and the prospective one, is focused on children. This pertains both to the sphere of social support as well as to developing the educational activity. Only one in three rural women are aware of the activity undertaken by women's organizations dealing with rural women's affairs, while almost 85% of rural women report the need for such organizations. The following objectives for women's organizations were mentioned by the respondents as the most important: family violence prevention, prevention of the discrimination of women in the labour market, supporting rural women's economic activity, supporting rural women's access to education, prevention of the sexual harassment of women, supporting entrepreneurial activity on the part of rural women, promoting the family model based on equal

partnership as well as supporting rural women's socio-civic activity and facilitating a bigger rural women's participation in the public life. A conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that women's organizations operating in rural areas, particularly the Rural Housewives Associations, will not be able to face up to these challenges on their own. They must be supported by other institutions and non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations operating on the territory of Poland, the local authorities and state agencies.

The biggest share of rural women who are members of socio-political organizations was found among those who completed higher education. Moreover, women with different levels of education prefer different organizations. The number of children rural women have does not directly affect their affiliation to socio-political organizations. Even the fact of having many children does not restrict rural women's participation in the socio-political life. It could be assumed that the concern for children makes it necessary for rural women to get more involved in social activities. Neither does the family model followed by rural women exert a significant influence on their affiliation to socio-political organizations. What is more, relatively the highest percentage of women who take an active part in different organizations was found among the respondents whose families adhered to the traditional division of roles and duties, according to which a man devotes his time solely or primarily to his professional life and a woman solely or primarily deals with household chores. Among the women who belong to socio-political organizations, the number of women whose mothers were active members of such organizations is almost twice as big as the number of women whose mothers did not belong to these organizations.

Only slightly more than one in three rural women (37.3%) claim that the local authorities of the administrative district in which they live represent primarily the needs and interests of the inhabitants of this district. Only one in six women reported that the local authorities implemented special projects or organized training courses oriented at rural women's participation in the socio-political life of the district. Two thirds of women reported that their local authorities organized special events aimed at preserving local traditions and customs. However, most rural women regard the activities aimed at modernizing rural areas and raising the standard of living of their inhabitants as more important than the activities mentioned above.

The problem of factors determining rural women's participation in the socio-political life is as important as the problem of making women more active in the social and professional sphere. This can be first and foremost attributed to the fact that, by means of this participation, women can contribute to removing old and new barriers preventing them from satisfying their growing ambitions.

Conclusions

The development of rural local communities consisting in, among other things, increasing rural women's participation in the socio-political life should be primarily based on the concept of endogenous development. However, in particular phases

of this development and in particular phases of the life of rural women's families it should be supported by solutions of exogenous nature.

Although rural women only to a small degree participate in the formal structures of the socio-political life they are not a "weak link" in the modernization process of the Polish rural areas and the formation of the civil society. They are an "overburdened link" of the Polish systemic change, which is not able to cope with excessive duties and which suffers from the lack of time.

Rural women's participation in the socio-political life is of an informal nature and it is based on a strong sense of responsibility as regards the education of rural women's own children and on their readiness to engage in activities aimed at aiding the people in need. However, rural women perceive this participation (in a potential sense) primarily as an activity for the benefit of the people in need undertaken within the framework of associations and foundations.

Therefore, in order to enhance rural women's participation in the socio-political life it is necessary to provide an institutional support. This support should be provided not only by the local authorities but also by the institutions which implement the civil social policy model. This process is not going to be quick due to the fact that non-governmental organizations are underdeveloped in the rural milieu and, as indicated by the research, the level of social trust of rural women in these organizations is relatively low.

No matter what the consequences of the social capital change in Poland are, on the basis of other studies carried out in Europe (e.g. in Italy or Germany) it can be asserted that it will markedly affect a successful implementation of reforms, the economic development and the development of a network of links between citizens and, thus, the stability of the social system. However, it is necessary to bear in mind the fact that diversification of social trust in terms of time and space and the social genesis of this trust fall outside the framework of systematic analyses and operationally defined basic notions referring to background-related variables (historical, structural or cultural context), independent variables (including attributive, relational, environmental, institutional or psychosocial variables) or dependent variables (the culture of trust as a collective quality and social trust as an individual quality).

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