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**Socio-economic change and a matter of growing unemployment
among rural women in Poland.**

Words: 4008

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Women issues as a matter of sociological inquiry was not a common field of interest within decades in Poland. Janusz Mucha claims that the year of political transformation – 1989 in Poland – brought a new perspective into Polish sociology. From that time many groups such as mentally disabled people, homosexuals, women, etc. became noticed as social groups. Women issues is still a new matter of interest among Polish sociologists, though it can not be said that is not being developed. There are many perspectives from which this subject can be discussed. Baring in mind a very complex character of this problem I decided to focus on a category which sometimes seems to be forgotten during academic disputes. It is a matter of rural women in Poland. I decided to combine an issue of women and rural areas because of two reasons. Rural sociology is a kind of discipline which was very important for the development of Polish sociology and now, unfortunately, seems to have not so many scholars and researchers as it was several years ago. As Krzyszkowski says “issues connected with the life in the countryside and its inhabitants remain undoubtedly within the range of research fields and social categories that have been slightly neglected”. It is more worrying when we realize, according to the definition of rural areas of EU – that rural areas in Poland approximately constitute 83% of all areas (92% when the definition of OECD is being concerned)¹. On the other hand I must emphasize that the transformation process in Poland has not ended. Of course we are over the political transformation but Polish people still experience the socio-economic change. According to this perspective I decided to examine how (if so) the social and vocational situation of rural women differ from female city dwellers.

In 1990 Renata Siemieńska wrote that “Most of Polish research analyzing women’s situation has focused on the inhabitants of towns who took up jobs, mainly in the fields of industry or provision of services. Significantly less consideration has been given to a professional situation of rural women despite the fact that at a certain stage of the country’s industrialization those women formed an essential part of people running autonomous farms” (Siemieńska 1990). This statement

¹ 50.2% - this was the number of women among rural inhabitants on the 31st of December 2005. The share accounted for by rural population (including rural women) is regionally diversified (ranging from 21.4% in the Slaskie Voivodship to 59.6% in the Podkarpackie Voivodship) – within the framework of Rural Areas Development Scheme for the years 2007-2013.

was supported by the opinion of B. Gawrońska-Nowak, J. Jura and A. Zarzycka expressed in the unpublished report on the findings of research commissioned by the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Men and Women, who said that “The issue of rural women’s employment status is not distinguished in the statistics and the sociological literature hardly touches upon it and, if it does, there are only marginal references made to it in the context of broader research problems, such as the activity and inactivity of Polish women”.

As far as the matter of rural women in Poland is being considered I would like to report the latest results from the research which was conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Polish Society for Social Policy. The membership in the European Union enabled Polish researchers to conduct research in many fields. According to this a special project *Diagnosis of the social and professional situation of rural women in Poland* has been established (within the framework of SPO RZL 1.6 (b) – The Sectoral Operational Programme Humane Resources Development) in order to examine almost unknown situation of rural women after 1989.

Because of the fact that for many years rural areas have been perceived as an issue in Poland one can find nothing unusual when it is said that the countryside is *ex definitione* related to social exclusion in its structural dimension (Halamska 2007). Nothing can be said without the reference to the political transformation which happened in Poland. “Since 1989 Poland, together with other countries of our region (countries of Central-Eastern Europe), has undergone radical socio-economic transformations whose rate and range go beyond attempts at synthesis” (Krzyszowski 2008). Before 1989 patriarchy was very common among rural inhabitants. Men worked in the state-owned arable farms which were their solid source of income. In the same time women not only run households but they actually helped their husbands to work in the fields as well. Well-known cliché of mother and worker, who worked from the early morning till late hours, carrying out the simplest but heavy tasks, was a real picture of everyday life in rural areas². In this case women usually attended only primary school, while those who had graduated from vocational school did not have a chance to improve their skills or to reskill themselves because they did not have a time for it and, what is more significant, it was not socially required³. Lack of long-term thinking in the field of

² In majority work in the household had lower (than real employment) prestige, though it was always perceived as an indispensable activity among different societies because of the procreation and bringing up children.

³ It has to be emphasized that even though women were often unskilled they were always perceived as a working group.

own employment outside the agriculture was strongly noticeable. With attitudes like this towards everyday life rural inhabitants faced the new situation, definition of which was totally unknown for them.

In the 1989 state-owned arable farms collapsed. The vocational situation of rural inhabitants has rapidly changed and it must be said that it is diverse while different regions of Poland are being considered. Those rural areas where the state was the only employer experienced a tragic situation because almost all men became unemployed. What were the results of this transformation? Fragmentation and low productivity of farms, bad financial situation of rural dwellers, high percentage of unemployed, low level of education and lack of practice (especially outside agriculture) have determined a lot of changes – both – in family life and work sphere. After a great unemployment which was an effect after state-owned arable farms had collapsed some men had a chance to get a job in urban areas (especially in constructions and mechanics). In this cases women were on their own. A lot of them had to combine running a household not only with helping their husbands in field works but they had to take care of the fields by themselves. In this way some of those women actually became small entrepreneurs. From this moment polish sociologist can observe a kind of new relation that is being built between men and women. The traditional one (which relied on patriarchy) was that women were excluded from the public sphere while their individual-private activity was determined by the biological difference between both sexes so that a functional division of social roles could be based on it (Fuszara 2002). The life situation of rural women – entrepreneurs – is very specific while they want to play role in shaping their own surroundings, even though traditional rural communities are far more traditional as far as a matter of woman's role is being considered⁴. Unfortunately this can be said only in reference to those regions which are mainly located closely to urban areas and main transport roads or when the size of farm is an indicate – in most of cases rural women run only those who are smaller than 5 hectares (it has to be noticed that those women who work in the farm like that usually work only to meet the needs of her family so it can not be said as it is entrepreneur activity). In places which are closely located to urban areas the role of agriculture often decreases (especially when traditional farming is considered)

⁴ Still in comparison to men rural inhabitants it has to be emphasized that women are more active in case of “crisis situation”, an example of with was the change in 1989. “Sociological research carried out in the environments stricken by the collapse of State-owned Agricultural Enterprises points to numerous cases where families of former employees of those closed down stat-owned farms were able to survive only thanks to determination displayed by women” (Pysk-Piotrowska 2004).

in order to the growth of non-agricultural activities such as service or trade⁵. There is no doubt that the vast majority of rural women entrepreneurs has a higher education than other women from rural families (Wrzochalska 2003).

Yet, researchers found a common – for Poland – regularity – rural women are usually not as good educated as those who live in urban areas and in comparison to them they are not as self-confident and do not have a high self-esteem. This factors affect in the smaller number of women among those who seize the entrepreneur initiative. Moreover, those women (even city dwellers) are not as vocationally active as men (it can be connected with still remaining traditional model of a family), on the other hand the situation is being more and more alarming - labour market research shows that professional activity of women is significantly lower than among men (48% to 62%) (Fuszara 2005) while the age median of the early nineties of the twentieth century for rural areas in Poland has increased: in 2005 for women it amounted to 39 years (in the nineties it was 34) and for men – 35 years (31 in the nineties) (Social Diagnosis 2007).

In Poland half of population which work in agriculture consists of women (one can easily observe the difference between the percentage of women employed in farms in Europe and in Poland – in Europe this number is much smaller because usually it is perceived as a part-time job while in Poland – full-time one). It is obvious that rural women “foster human nature” because in the opinion of majority they are responsible for preparing the younger generation to their social roles and their existence in the demanding labour market. However, they are still vocationally, socially and politically inactive. Socio-economic problems are especially seen among those rural women who inhabit the regions where modernization processes seem to take place more slowly. A strong connection with tradition can be still considered as a main barrier in the process of local development. We can often observe that rural women do not want or are afraid of being involved in social life as well as in vocational activity because in their opinion that kind of behavior can be easily discussed by local people.

In the research *Diagnosis of the Social and Professional Situation of Rural Women In Poland* we tried to describe different groups among female rural dwellers. According to the Universal Census of Inhabitants of Rural Areas from the 2002 38.2% of Polish population live in rural areas (which is 14.2 million of people – half of this amount are women).

⁵ This urbanization process leads to the change of function of rural areas –which became more residential.

From the research we can state the existence of three main groups of rural women:

- 1) The first group consists of rural women who are entrepreneurs. Statistically it is a small number of all rural entrepreneurs, because the biggest rural enterprises are usually run by men (the average size of the farm is 9,4 hectares). (1996 – only 1.7% of women entrepreneurs had higher education; in 2000 there were 4.5% of women with the university diploma)⁶.
- 2) The second group consists of women who are not entrepreneurs but they work in the farm (mainly or they work in the farm and outside it but the farm engrosses more time).
- 3) In the last group we can see unemployed women whose families does not own any farm or women who work outside rural areas because of the same reason (usually they work as physical employees).

In the third quarter of 2007 the level of employment reached 49.2% (approximately 56.9% for men and 42.2% for women, 48.5% for city dwellers and 50.4% for rural inhabitants) and the level of unemployment has decreased. However, it has to be noticed that the number of unemployed rural women in rural areas has increased from the 49.5% in 2002 to 52.5% in 2005 (in the cities from 52.3% to 54.4%). From the total amount of unemployed people registered in the Labour Administration in 2007 44.5% lived in rural areas. The level of unemployment is higher among women than among men. One can think that the employment situation among rural dwellers is better according to presented data. Nevertheless, their favorable – according to data from urban areas – proportions are simply the effect of the fact that the vast majority of male rural inhabitants is employed in their own individual farms. In accordance to men women more often tend to change their life situation (they want to improve their skills, complete educations) often by watching the process of education of their children (but this mainly happens in urban areas). It is not so hard to imagine that in this situation women should be playing an important role – a role of the catalyst of the social change in Poland, which could result in the economic change. For this moment it can not happen without the change of institutional conditions. Role which institutions of social policy and labour administration play to help with the socio-professional mobilization of rural women is

⁶ Even though the number of women who only finished primary school has decreased it still remains high – 1996: 53.2% and 43.7% in 2000).

strongly regulated by law, statutory tasks and over a decade of experience. Among all of this institutions rural women are not perceived or defined by this institutions as a category of beneficiaries to whom mobilization activity should be directed. From one hand there is a problem with lack of activity of any kind among female rural dwellers and from the other hand – not any particular activity can be done because there is no such category as “unemployed, socio-professionally inactive rural women”.

In years 1990-1997 Poland was characterized by the passive forms of support related to people who were unemployed. There were different attempts: shorten of the work time, pre-retirement benefits, early retirement, unemployment benefits with other supplementary benefits that tried to ease the effects of unemployment. From the one side they were to be a kind of support that should enable people to cope with the different living conditions, while from the other one it was suppose to be an incentive to take on tasks so that they would result in changing the status of unemployed into employed. Here I must emphasize that our respondents explained us that the majority of not working people does not work because they learnt how to take advantages of the system. According to them we can observe an aid paradox – a lot of unemployed are aware of law which refers to the welfare institutions so they are able to take advantages of unemployment benefits and become a “waiting room” for those who, after taking money, do not want to work because the salary would be similar to the unemployment benefit. As regards to unemployed women from the research, 43.2% of them declare economic inactivity, they are not considering taking up a job in the nearest future while 7% of women in this group are not interested in taking up a job. They said that being employed is fruitless because the income after subtracting costs of the travel to work or making use of crèches and kindergartens is not higher than received benefit. Lack of the social and vocational activity has resulted in the fact that gained skills become outdated and, what is more worrying, people have no skills in social communication and they hardly know what is the socio-economic situation of their state or even region they live in. These are characteristics that often refers to unemployed rural women. As they have been working only in the house or partly in the field of their family they have lost this abilities. The most noticeable factors responsible for they unemployment are: giving a birth to a child, taking care of the child and housekeeping (44% of our respondents), the collapse of employing establishment (13.6%), the expire of the fix-termed contract (10%) and ill health (10%). “The unemployed women who took part in focus group interviews reported that they are out of work primarily because of the reason related to their family, their not

being able to return to work after an unpaid child care leave or maternity leave, losing a job after establishing a family, low wages, which make it impossible to hire a child minder” (Psyk-Piotrowska 2008). The findings of our research support the hypothesis which was related to the reasons of inactivity – they think their situation is much worse than situation of men as far as the competition in the labour market is concerned, which constitutes barriers especially among those women with very low self-esteem (the majority of rural women). They do not perceive their chances on the labour market solely from the angle of their family situation.

Polish labour market, even though in last years we experience a noticeable change, is characterized by structural unemployment and stagnation. Among unemployed rural dwellers there are women whose definition of role was determined by the cultural context even few years ago. Today rural women are perceived by rural sociologists not only as a category which seeks for a job, but also as professionally passive individuals. They do not seek for the job and they are not ready to work, which can be explained in the relation to the traditional family model. The direct aim of the activity of social welfare institutions is to help them to become employed. The indirect aim, which, if so, becomes more and more important for mentioned institutions is the encouragement for the vocational activity through the prevention of passive attitude, helplessness and the feeling of being solitude in the labour market. It has to be emphasized that this kind of support can be a visible signal for reviving the local economy. Unfortunately, we can easily observe a problem with establishing such activities. The main reason of this situation is the fact that both- rural women and social welfare institutions’ employees do not want or are not even ready to attend/establish that kind of initiatives. Female rural dwellers do not want to attend different meetings/activities because of the problem with arriving at the place of meeting (communication infrastructure is very limited in the Polish countryside) – this barrier, however, could be easily overcome by the cooperation between district, county social welfare administration as well as non-governmental organizations. There is also a need to overcome the short-sightedness of mentioned institutions. The biggest problem is that they usually try to get the grant from European Union not knowing the real needs of potential beneficiaries. This includes a great problem in the recruitment process in potential programs.

In my opinion there is a dire need of gathering information on the characteristics of rural women who were able to overcome the impasse and return on the labour market. Due to the interviews with the representative of social welfare institutions I know that there are two cases in

Poland when women, who were unemployed for many years, decided to find the employment. Women of this two groups live in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship and they have established two separate social cooperatives. The social cooperative in □ wiecie is the case of 5 unemployed women who were beneficiaries of the Social Welfare Centre in □ wiecie. It was the turning point in the activity of this institution because, as I have already said it, social welfare institutions exclude those groups who are their direct beneficiaries. At the moment they are providing cleaning services for almost all the firms in □ wiecie. The other example is the social cooperative in Che□ mno. The women from this social cooperative have participated in the programme “Better tomorrow is in our hands” where they gained skills in handicraft. They decided to use the possibility and they product things which are connected with the region.

After having analyzed different kind of documents of social welfare institutions, labour administration and strategies for the development of rural areas what I know how important is to obtain the complex picture of rural woman as a social category, who in next ten or fifteen years will become at age of fifty and may be incapable of changing her social and professional situation. Without this kind of particular knowledge rural sociology in Poland, as well as policy makers, will still have problems with describing and building a supporting programs for unemployed women in rural areas.

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