

AUGUST 2002



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EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON AGRICULTURE (ECA)

**ELEVENTH SESSION OF THE WORKING PARTY ON WOMEN
AND THE FAMILY IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Fribourg, Switzerland, 14-17 October 2002

**THE ROLE RURAL WOMEN PLAY IN SUSTAINABLE
AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
IN POLAND**

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I. OVERVIEW OF RURAL WOMEN'S SITUATION IN POLAND

1. The transformation of the Polish economy during the 1990s has had a negative and strenuous impact on rural areas and their residents, particularly where agriculture is the primary source of income. On a national scale, it is estimated that 26% of the total labour force is employed in the agricultural sector (of which only 18% are full-time workers). Half of them are women. 66% of women living in rural areas are dependent upon agriculture. It is assumed, that this percentage will decline as a result of modernisation and specialisation of agricultural production and the consolidation of holdings in a smaller number of farms, as well as the growth of private enterprise.

2. Poland is still a country where the rural population represents a high percentage of the entire population and farm families predominate in many rural areas. The rural households are becoming more and more regrouped in terms of production and use of labour. As a result of the specialization of agricultural production, farming activities have been divided into plant and animal production holdings. The duties assigned to the family members have changed accordingly. Though Poland differs from the West European countries because of the stronger dependence of its population upon agriculture, there are numerous similarities as far as specific features of farm and rural households and the role of women therein are concerned: for example the division of labour between men and women, both on the farm and in the household, the conflicts between domestic and occupational duties.

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3. There are tendencies to combine farm and non-agricultural incomes. Several shifts are noticed: for example, people moving from agriculture to services, from public sector to private sector, from full time job to temporary or seasonal job. As a result of agrarian transformations foreseen in the nearest future, the smallest farms will disappear and the new labour force released from agriculture should find employment in the agricultural environment, in the agribusiness and social services where small and medium enterprises play a significant role. However, the high unemployment rate of 19% in 2002, makes it difficult to find work outside agriculture for the rural population, both for men and women released from farms. Nowadays, the hidden unemployment, is growing among agricultural population. Progress in farm mechanization allows women, who have been mainly or partly working on the farm, to undertake new activities outside the farm. In the situation of growing unemployment, men and women are using the available resources and looking for "income niches" (i.e. processing agricultural products on the farm, organizing agro-tourism, small commerce or providing care services for children or elderly). Non-agricultural activities related to trade, services, handicraft and small production of goods in the rural areas are emerging rapidly.

4. According to 1996 Population Census, out of the total number of 8,244,700 persons, who live on the private farms, 49.4% were women (Main Statistical Office). In total, 66.1% of women living in the rural areas were associated with agriculture. While two thirds of women who live in the rural areas still work in agriculture there is a growing percentage of rural women who undertake work in the non-agricultural sectors, including small and medium enterprises. Compared to the previous period, a decline in the farmers' income and off-farm employment opportunities, including of women in the agricultural sector is a specific feature of the nineties.

5. Generally, women's involvement in professional activity is lower, as compared to that of men, though there are certain exceptions with regard to the place of residence, age and educational level of women. The women's employment rate is also lower (Table 1).

Table 1: Rural women on the labour market (as of August and November 2001)

Specification		Economic Activity (%)		Employment Rate (%)		Unemployment Rate (%)	
		August	November	August	November	August	November
Population of Poland	Total	56,7	56,6	46,3	46,5	18,4	17,9
	Men	63,8	63,9	53,0	53,5	17,0	16,3
	Women	50,2	49,9	40,1	40,1	20,0	19,7
Rural farming population	Total	57,8	58,4	48,3	49,2	16,5	15,7
	Men	65,6	66,2	55,5	56,8	15,4	14,2
	Women	50,2	50,8	41,3	41,8	17,8	17,7
Rural population due to destitute farmland	Total	66,4	67,6	60,0	61,5	9,6	9,0
	Men	72,8	74,2	66,1	68,3	9,1	7,9
	Women	59,9	60,9	53,8	54,6	10,3	10,2
Rural population that does not own farm	Total	47,0	46,8	33,6	33,7	28,5	28,0
	Men	56,0	55,6	41,3	41,6	26,4	25,2
	Women	38,8	38,7	26,7	26,4	31,5	31,7

Source: Main Statistical Office (GUS), 2001

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

7. Weaker economic activity of women is a consequence of their deeper concern about household work and children care. The maximum professional involvement of women occurs between 35 and 49 years of age, i.e. when the procreative function becomes less important and children go to school. In this age group, the difference between employment rates for men and women is the lowest. The specific feature of employment in the rural areas consists in higher economic activity of the rural population in general and that of women in particular, as compared with towns. This is reflected in a high employment rate within the farm population. Amongst the farm women the employment rate is high for the group over 55 years-old, being the result of later and less formalized retirement procedure for private farmers than in case of other jobs. The retirement age for men and women differ in Polish insurance system. Women are in average living longer and, for this reason, after the age of 65, there is only one man for 15 women. The situation of old rural people, mainly women, is difficult: higher poverty rate, lack of social assistance and health services.

Unemployment among Rural Women in Poland

8. The labour market was also affected during the economic transformation period resulting in a permanent excess of labour supply as compared to the demand. The consequences of this situation have had a bearing on all demographic and professional groups; however, not all of them have paid the same price for the transformation results. In the new situation problems related to the women's work require special concern because of the existing differences in their economic activity and the type of employment and unemployment.

9. Women are facing more difficult situation on the labour market in view of the fact that for them it is hard to both find and keep a job. As compared to men, women receive lower wages and their promotion is slower. In addition, women remain out of work more often and for longer time than men (unpaid maternity leave, unpaid leave to care for the elderly and the sick). The unemployment amongst women is more pronounced, and they retire earlier. This occurs in spite of the fact that women are generally better educated (currently higher levels of formal education than that of men).

10. Under the formally adopted legal regulations in Poland the problem of inequality and discrimination on the labour market with regard to women does not generally exist. On the contrary, there are many regulations, which protect women's work, mainly to allow them to carry out family responsibilities. These "privileges" often turn against women, particularly with the expansion of the private business sector, as the employers are more willing to employ men for whom they do not need to apply the special regulations. Women are afraid to loose their job and are not eager to vindicate their rights in the face of strong competition and high unemployment. The research shows that rural women are more often eliminated from the labour market and therefore, they are the first to become unemployed or to carry out low paid and unskilled work.

11. The analysis of unemployment in the 16 regions (*voyevodship*) confirms the difficult situation on the labour market resulting from the transformation of ownership structures in agriculture. Unemployment rate is high in those regions where state-owned properties prevailed. As a consequence of the decline in the industrial employment a considerable number of people, formerly part-time workers, return to their farms. Young and uneducated people are liable to suffer unemployment in the most dramatic manner.

12. It should be noted that there is a high unemployment rate among the members of rural population who do not own a farm. This group displays the highest rate of total unemployment of 28%, which goes up to 32% for women (Table 1). This confirms the fact that for people who live in rural areas but are not farmers, women in particular, finding employment is very difficult.

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

14. High unemployment among women is often caused by the lack of a suitable education needed on the labour market. The comparison between the formal education of men and women living in the rural areas shows that there is a considerable predominance of women (several times more) in the groups of people with secondary and post secondary education (Main Statistical Office, 2001). This confirms the generally spread conviction that this type of education for young people does not provide sufficient professional qualifications and reduces their chances on the labour market.

15. Solving unemployment-related problems is also made more difficult in Poland because of the fact that economically active population, including unemployed, shows relatively limited mobility. The unemployed who are looking for an employment usually do not want a job, which would require them to change their place of residence. This is the opinion of two thirds of women and over fifty percent of men surveyed by Main Statistical Office (2001).

16. The general deterioration in the employment situation with simultaneous decrease in social benefits leads to the feminization of poverty and has a negative impact on the physical and psychological condition of women. Ill or handicapped women, single mothers or elderly women are the most affected. The weakest groups also include rural women in the less favourable areas. However, in Poland as in many other Central and Eastern European countries women are not very much aware of the need for equality rights in spite of perceivable discrimination and it will take time to raise the awareness level in this respect.

17. To counteract the unemployment status and improve their families' welfare, many rural women are taking initiatives to start small business that will bring additional income. In order to achieve this, they must acquire new qualifications, personal satisfaction while at the same time respect the tradition and family bonds, which are of vital importance.

Women as Entrepreneurs

18. A research carried out at the Warsaw Agricultural University (Sawicka, 1998) has shown that rural women are in search of sources of income other than agriculture, though to various degrees. Most of the small businesses are connected with launching and running commerce or different kind of services, small catering units, small fruit and vegetable processing plants, any form of domestic activities and handicraft, and seasonal work as well.

19. Entrepreneurial attitudes have their source both from traditional factors, such as values associated with work and looking after the household, as well as from modern factors, the most important being having to face new threats. Traditional factors underlying the development of women entrepreneurs are:

- diligence and respect for hard work: the change in values which has taken place among rural women in this respect means that younger women see diligent work as a potential source of income, whereas older women see it to be a virtue, a value in itself;

- self-initiative, seen as a source of advancement for the family and the generation;
- aspirations for modernization, which characterizes especially the middle-aged and younger generations of rural populations;
- self-satisfaction as a motive for performing work, whereas for modern entrepreneurs it is equally important to gain financial satisfaction.

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

- agro-tourism, using already owned accommodation resources and of locally produced food;
- small-scale enterprise in the fields of commerce, catering service, cloth-making, and other daily services;
- agricultural food processing; and
- farming.

21. The actions of women are directed towards improving their living conditions through several activities: rational and economic management of the household budget, increasing self-sufficiency in the field of services, providing care services, organizing summer recreation for children, improving premises and safe working conditions on farms, and achieving professional qualifications (training, consulting). Initiatives undertaken by rural women also serve to activate the community through the multi-functional development of the village.

22. On average, rural women are less involved in setting up small businesses (only about 10 % of rural women are running a small business). Regional differences in the speed and nature of the economic development in Poland will have an ever-greater influence in the development of entrepreneurship among women. The current development of entrepreneurship in rural areas should be considered as only the beginning phase. This is confirmed both by the level of intensity of the phenomenon, as well as by the type of activities undertaken by women.

23. In the disadvantaged regions (North-Eastern region of Poland) where they have the least opportunity to develop any enterprises, less women than men go for self-employment (on the average one out of every five companies is run by a woman. The majority are family run companies, because women are less self confident, have less and more limited resources to start the business.

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

25. Amongst 720 enterprises included into the survey, which were run by women on their own or in which women played an operators' role, the largest number, i.e. some 49% (out of which shops constitute 32%) dealt with commerce. This includes shops, wholesale warehouses, and the so-called "door-to-door" selling. The predominance of commerce was connected to the fact that this was felt to be the simplest way of launching a private business, rather than dealing with a greater demand for consumers' goods. This type of activity neither requires large financial

expenditure nor particular qualifications. Usually, in small localities there is one general store where food products and articles of primary use are available. In localities where *gmina* offices have their headquarters, or in small towns, there are usually a few shops with a rather limited products offer (Table 2).

Table 2: Types of women's non-agricultural activity

	Types of activity	No of enterprises	[%]
1	Commerce	367	51,0
	Including shops	(246)	(34,2)
2	Services	279	38,8
	Catering	57	7,9
	Agro-tourism	52	7,2
	Hair dressing	37	5,1
	Cloth-making	35	4,9
	Bakers and confectionery trade	16	2,2
	Medical and veterinary services	14	1,9
	Overhaul and construction work	14	1,9
	Financial advice	13	1,8
	Transportation services	11	1,5
	Forestry services	9	1,3
	Vehicle repair services	7	1,0
	Other services	14	1,9
3	Handicraft	10	1,4
4	Production of various goods	12	1,7
5	Non-agricultural activity	29	4,0
6	Agro-food processing	23	3,2
Total		720	100

Source: Sawicka (1998)

Two “vignettes” on women entrepreneurs at local level

26. Below are presented two vignettes from the *commune* (the smallest administrative unit in Poland) of Żukowo to illustrate how the transformation processes in Polish countryside are influencing the situation and roles of rural women and how these women are taking initiatives to improve their family life.

27. The families of the two women presented in this paper continue to run the farms, but had also looked into alternative income and employment generating activities (i.e. processing of raw materials produced on the farm, providing agro-tourism services and similar). In the two families women play multiple roles, working in agricultural production, and farm related businesses as well as in the running of the households.

28. Żukowo is considered primarily as an agricultural area with 67.2% of arable lands and 20.4% of forests. It benefits from better than average conditions (in comparison to other Polish communes) for the development of agriculture and farming-related business on account of its geographical location and its proximity to a major urban area. Local authorities have been pursuing policies to attract investors and to facilitate the opening of businesses and initiation of projects. As a result of these policies, the number of non-agricultural businesses operating within the *commune*, for example, has doubled in the past ten years.

29. There are 1131 farms in the area. The majority of these farms are prevented from developing further as farmers have relatively low levels of education and share a general fear against introducing "novelties". Many of the farms continue to produce crops and breed animals using traditional technologies and methods.

Vignette I: Marija and Tomazs, Farmers

30. Marija and Tomazs own a farm of 20 hectares. They produce crops and livestock (horses, cattle, pig, and poultry). Feeds come from products grown on the farm. Part of the products grown at the farm are for sale to the public. In 1997, Marija and Tomazs started agro-tourism including renting rooms, preparing meals, creating opportunities for recreation, and selling food and industrial products.

31. They first worked together on modifying the general image of the farm. All investments were financed using resources generated from farming activities. The investments primarily consisted of adapting rooms and recreational areas for use by visitors. Marija and Tomazs followed the advice of benefited from the substantive assistance provided by advisors of the local Agricultural Extension Centre and the Agritourism-Tourism Chamber. Earlier, in 1994, Marija and Tomazs opened their retail shop, using also their own funds. A part of the basement of the farmhouse was refurbished as a store.

32. Marija and Tomazs were motivated to start agro-tourism as they were generating less than a satisfactory income through the farming activities. Tomazs discovered about the possibility of entering into the agro-tourism business from advisors at the local Agricultural Advisory Centre and from employees of the area Administrative Office. In addition to the main objective to generate additional income for the family, they were also looking for opportunities to enable the family to develop new contacts with interesting people from other parts of the country.

33. Both, Maria and Tomazs would like to participate in a training course which would allow them to visit a good example of agro-tourism farms and acquire a better knowledge of general business practices (legal issues, financial settlements with suppliers and customers, accounting).

34. As seen above, Marija is working in partnership with her husband. However, she has more responsibilities in the agro-tourism business than in the farming activities.

Vignette II: Sylvia, 35 yeas-old, Farm Woman

35. Sylvia and her family live on a small farm (1.93 ha). The farm produces agricultural products for its own use. Vegetables and flowers (for drying) are cultivated in (plastic) greenhouses.

36. In 1978, Sylvia was awarded the first prize for her decorative Easter Palms at the National Folk Art Exhibition in Łódź. Immediately thereafter, she began producing decorative palms for a folk art cooperative. After some time, her relationship with the cooperative ended and she was forced to find new customers and a new sales market for her products.

37. Today, Sylvia owns her own business and produces dried flowers and plant arrangements. The primary motivation for starting the business was the desire to generate additional family income exploiting a family tradition in drying flowers and making arrangements.

38. Sylvia makes the crafts in the farmhouse located on the premises. All activities (except producing baskets), including dying and weaving of arrangements are done by hand by five members of Sylvia's family. The products are sold at horticultural markets and to German clients. Sylvia does some promotion for her products also at local and regional exhibitions and harvest festivals.

39. Thinking of her future, Sylvia would like to take some handicraft courses and attend training seminars which would help her to develop new techniques and ways to meet ever increasing customer expectations. She also lacks marketing expertise and hopes to receive assistance in her search for additional clients, both in the country and abroad.

Women as Farm Managers

40. Farming women in the agricultural system are an example of the adjustment to be made by private family farms in Poland on the account of to the changing circumstances of families, agriculture and the general economy. On average one out of every five farms in Poland is run by a woman farmer. Women perform managerial functions in a variety of situations.

Three particular groups of women farmers were identified (Sawicka, 1993):

- a group where the wife has taken over the running of the farm as a result of the death, illness, or physical disability of her husband (66% of all the farms studied). These farms fulfil a social role rather than a productive one. For instance such situations are common among women above retirement age. These farms tend to be on average, economically weaker than the others;
- a group of women who run the farm because their husbands and sons worked off-farm (30 %). These farms are mainly used to provide an additional source of family income and to provide the household with home produced food; and
- a small group of farms professionally managed by women. Very often such women are young and have agricultural qualifications. These farms do not seem to be different from other progressive farms run by men.

41. The turn over of farms managed by women is particularly high. Within a ten year period nearly half of the women in the survey stopped farming. However, since new farms were taken over by women, at the end of the period, the percentage of farms managed by them remained unchanged, at about 20%.

II. CONCLUSION

42. This paper has shown that the modern rural woman, in order to be able to perform various functions and roles in sustainable agriculture and rural development, including traditional ones, as well as modern ones (such as being business organizer, manager, entrepreneur) should receive the relevant education and gain practical skills (such as mother, housewife and farm worker) through personal experiences. Knowledge is essential for women in order to adopt more active attitudes and fully participate in making decisions at all levels of authority and administration, including decisions concerning family matters, the farm, and the household.

43. Rural women will not improve their situation, if the institutions and organizations which represent their interests are not strengthened. Therefore, it is very important to know what measures the local government authorities will take and how women are represented in them. It is also important to know how the specific problems related to this group are understood at higher decision-making levels, both in central and local governments, and also in self-governmental organizations. In Poland, there is still lack of local partnership initiatives, self-government and non governmental organizations.

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