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On the other hand, it is worth asking whether the rural women's organizations could develop any other type of activity. We could also ask whether the potential of the rural women's organizations, as still the most popular and numerous structures associating women living in rural areas, is fully taken advantage of. In the survey of 2005, the female village representatives examined (N=100) were asked whether the rural women's organizations were needed in the modern rural communities—93 percent of them answered positively. The respondents pointed out that apart from addressing needs associated with integration of rural residents, organization of free time, and cultural life, the rural women's organizations were needed for their contributions to solving social problems, such as alcoholism, domestic violence, and poverty (17 percent), it was noted that they also integrate and activate rural women (16 percent) (Matysiak 2005: 148).

In the quantitative research conducted in 2006 for the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy on the representative sample of 1,500 rural women, 64.8 percent of the respondents stated that female organizations in the rural areas should in the future deal with counteracting domestic violence; 38.2 percent stated that they should deal with counteracting discrimination of women in the labor market; 32.4 percent, supporting the professional activity of women; 26.8 percent, supporting the access of rural women to education; 24.4 percent, counteracting sexual abuse of women; and 24.0 percent, supporting entrepreneurship among rural women (Walczak-Duraj 2008: 152). It seems that rural women's organizations could have a much wider range of activities and deal much more with the interests and the needs of women themselves.

## Conclusions

First, rural women's organizations seem to be particularly important as the space of female collective actions and as tools of social activation for the elderly, particularly women. The "vitality" of these organizations is clear proof of the needs of rural women, who want to meet and cooperate on behalf of their communities. Such activity is also encouraged by growing interest in local traditions, cuisine, and folk music.

On the other hand, it seems that the potential of rural women's organizations, which are widely accepted in rural communities, is not fully used. Their activities are focused mostly on issues associated with traditional female roles. The growing interest in folklore and regional cuisine feeds demand for rural women's organizations, but, at the same time, might relegate them to providers of free catering services during local events and celebrations. The presented data shows that more feminist women's organizations are also needed in the Polish rural areas—the organizations, which could seriously deal with the problems of domestic violence, discrimination of women in the labor market, and under-representation of women in local politics, not only acting as service providers but also lobbying local authorities to influence political decisions, e.g., concerning budgets. It is worth considering whether the activities of rural women's organizations could be broadened and diversified if more young women and female "newcomers" from the cities engaged, as they may be more eager to combine traditions with new ideas.

This case shows also institutional constraints that some groups of activists face and the ways they overcome them. The present regulations, unchanged since the early 1980s, create a situation in which rural women's organizations are still a part of a structure that cannot provide them with sufficient support and acts mainly on behalf of farmers. Under these circumstances, the rural women's organizations are not independent legal persons. Therefore, depending on the age and experience of the leaders, the period in which they were established, the local traditions and available networks of institutions, rural women's organizations adapt various strategies. Some of them act as informal groups, operating on a small scale mainly to fulfill their own needs or those of selected groups. Others try to look for "institutional umbrellas" among other local organizations and institutions. The third group consists of "young" organizations—reactivated or established in the recent years, led by younger women—registered as associations. However, only the rural women's organizations that adopt the latter strategy can fully and independently participate in the current system of support for third-sector organizations in Poland.

Finally, it should be noted that rural women's organizations are based on long-lasting model that can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, they often implement different modes of working depending on the local context. Many of them can be described as located between a formal structure and an informal group or shifting from one category to the other. The analysis presented in this chapter shows that it is necessary to adopt a theoretical and practical perspective depicting Polish civil society as complex and "recombining" new and old organizational forms and types of civic engagement. The dominating "universalist" model of civil society focused on nongovernmental organizations registered after 1989 leads to the marginalization of grassroots groups such as the rural women's

organizations. The integration of the variety of their forms and promising potential could open up new perspectives in the study of civil society in Poland. First, the case of rural women's organizations is inspiring in terms of the process of transforming their tradition according to changing (and unfavorable) structural conditions. Second, the studied organizations indicate the significance of the locality dimension. Especially in case of strongly diversified rural communities in Poland, local factors, such as historical traditions, attitudes of local authorities, available human capital, and specific needs expressed by the residents, to a large extent shape the "profiles" of civic organizations and other entities. Therefore, the emphasis in researching civic activism should be put on extensive exploring of "rural civil communities" rather than "adjusting" the reality to the universal model of civil society imported from the Western context. Last but not least, the study presented in this chapter shows that it is necessary to develop more diversified and "sensitive" indicators that would enable analysis of the informal civic engagement in a more efficient and precise way.

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## Notes

1. The data on the rural women's organizations come from my doctoral thesis, which has been recently published in the form of a book (Matysiak 2014) and other own research. See also Matysiak (2009).
2. In general, the function of a village representative (*sołtys*) in Poland is as liaison between the residents of a rural subcommune (*sołectwo*) and the local authorities at the superior levels.
3. Research was conducted within the frame of a project financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (N N116 433 237).
4. For instance, the approach proposed by Putnam, who believed voluntary associations to be of key significance for the process of building social capital in a given community—trust, norms that contribute to cooperation, and horizontal networks of civic engagement (Putnam 1994).
5. According to Eurostat, rural areas are those with population density below 100 inhabitants per 1 km<sup>2</sup>, and according to OECD, rural areas are those with population density below 150 inhabitants per 1 km<sup>2</sup>.

6. Retrieved 24 October 2014 from <http://kolkarolnicze.eu/O-nas/Kola-Gospodyn-Wiejskich>.
7. Retrieved 24 October 2014 from <http://kolkarolnicze.eu/O-nas/Struktura-KZRKiOR>.
8. The available estimates on farmers' organizations indicate that out of thirty thousand in 1989/1990, only slightly above three thousand were left in 2008 (Marczakiewicz et al. 1992: 27; Halamska 2008: 109).
9. Information provided by Mrs. Bernardetta Niemczyk, chairwoman of the National Council of Women's Rural Organizations, during the conference "Conditions of Living and Activity of Women in the Rural Areas in Poland," held on 15 October 2014 at the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences. It should be underlined that the Association of Farmers has not finished the process of officially verifying the number of rural women's organizations "belonging" to its structures.
10. In 2009, I found in the National Court Register (Krajowy Rejestr Sądowy) 165 non-governmental organizations with names referring to the tradition of the rural women's organizations (Matysiak 2009: 226).
11. To explain the marking of interviews conducted in 2005: the first letter refers to the province (M—mazowieckie, P—pomorskie, Pd—podkarpackie, Z—zachodniopomorskie), the second letter refers to the first letter of the name of the village, and the number refers to the number of the interview.
12. To explain the marking of interviews conducted in 2008–2010: the first letter refers to the province (Z—zachodniopomorskie, M—mazowieckie, L—lubelskie, W—wielkopolskie, P—podkarpackie), the second letter refers to the first letter(s) of the name of the commune, the letter "f" or "m" refers to the respondent being female or male, and the final letters indicate the category of the respondent—"v" means "village representative," "l" means "local leader," "c" means "commune councilor," and "o" means "public official" or a representative of another local institution.
13. To be more specific, these women's rural organizations receive small donations in exchange for their dishes, cakes, etc. According to the legal regulations, an organization that is not a legal person cannot run any business.
14. Since 2009 the communal councils in Poland can earmark funds from their budgets to financially support the initiatives or projects that are collectively chosen by the residents of villages located within their administrative area.
15. For instance, in Poland, EU funds designated for financing of grassroots local initiatives within the framework of the Human Capital Operational Programme were used to a greater extent by the local authorities and administration than by the local social organizations, which prompts the question of whether they are really funding "grassroots" initiatives.

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