

## EXPLORING RURAL COMMUNITY ACTIVISM: RURAL WOMEN'S CIRCLES IN POLAND

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### Abstract

There is currently a debate in academic research and in the EU forum about the role of social entrepreneurship in rural development. The Rural Women's Circles has been emphasized for its contribution to positive change in the countryside and for preserving the customs and traditions of regions in Poland and Europe for more than 100 years. These organizations work for the benefit of local communities by providing various services, engaging in reintegration, and creating jobs for excluded people. Many of these organizations are active in promoting culture, tradition, tourism, and other social activities in rural areas. A new area of research is emerging, covering social and economic issues, including entrepreneurship and management. This article aims to highlight the significance of Rural Women's Circles in Poland and Europe and to analyze the changes in the number of these entities. The research was conducted in Poland in 2024 using an online survey method (CAWI) and a total of 304 respondents were obtained. They were women (100%), members of rural woman circles. The survey was anonymous and focused on activities undertaken by women in villages and their motivations. The article presents the most important areas of activities of these entities. The activities of village women's circles are usually dictated by an internal need and their action is usually “bottom-up”. Self-motivation, friendship, and the desire to help the neighborhood are the main drivers for the establishment of rural women's circles in Poland (and Europe). Today's rural women's circles are formed by young women who are active and united by common goals. This is not only to cultivate traditions but also to develop the region and self-career. KGWs apply for various projects, thus acquiring funds for the realization of various goals. Directions for further research and research hypotheses formulated based on the literature analysis are also presented. The conclusions presented in this thesis can also become a guideline for other European countries where the rural women's movement is still in its infancy.

**Key words:** rural women, entrepreneurship, social activities, rural areas

**JEL code:** P25, P32

### Introduction

Rural Women's Circles (KGWs) in Poland have a very long tradition dating back to the 19th century. These organizations primarily bring together women residing in rural areas, although it is not uncommon to find men among their ranks. KGWs undertake social, cultural, and educational initiatives. The first organizations of this type were established as early as 1877, initiated by Maria Konopnicka, a Polish novelist, social activist, and an important figure in Polish literature. The goal of these organizations was to improve living standards in the countryside, educate

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women, and preserve folk traditions and culture. After World War I, KGWs expanded their activities, organizing courses in cooking, sewing, and housekeeping, and engaging in cultural and social activities. Despite being subordinated to the communist system after World War II, KGWs continued to play a significant role in rural life, organizing cultural events, competitions, and festivals. In the 1960s and 1970s, the number of circles increased significantly and their educational and social activities continued, albeit under strict supervision by the authorities. After the fall of communism in 1989, KGWs regained their independence and started to operate under new rules. However, in the 1990s, their activities faced a crisis due to social and economic changes (Chmielewska, 2021).

Since 2018, there has been a resurgence in the activities of rural women, following the amendment of the Act on Rural Women's Circles on 9 November 2018. This amendment established a formal legal framework for the operation of KGWs, enabling them to register and access various forms of financial support from the government and the EU (*Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture*, [www.arimr.gov.pl](http://www.arimr.gov.pl)). It can be said that 2018 marked a significant turning point in Poland.

Overall, it is evident that the Rural Women's Circles in Poland are actively engaged in a variety of initiatives. These include the promotion of local traditions and cuisine, the organization of festivals, fairs, and educational courses. The KGWs play a crucial role in uniting rural communities, supporting local traditions, and education (Lis 2022). They also serve as a hub for people to come together and share experiences, thus enhancing the quality of life in rural areas. Through their activities, the Rural Women's Circles strengthen interpersonal connections and help preserve folk culture in Poland (Parzonko, Sieczko 2024).

## **Methods and results**

The paper presents an overview of research analyzing the increase in the number of registered rural women's circles in Poland and the factors that may have contributed to this growth. The research utilized desk research and a literature review, incorporating governmental data from the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture and the Central Statistical Office in Poland, as well as findings from scientific publications based on research conducted in Poland. The primary aim of the study is to assess the impact of rural women's circles on the development of micro-regions. Empirical data was collected through an online survey featuring open and closed questions, as well as questions with a Likert scale. The survey was distributed in 2024 to representatives of rural housewives' circles in Poland, with 304 responses obtained, all from women. The results presented in this article are part of a larger research project focusing on the influence of women on the development of micro-regions in Poland.

The term “rural women's circle” (short KGWs), refers to an independent and self-governing social organization, as defined by the Polish Act on Rural Women's Circles of 2018 (*Journal of Laws 2018*, item 2212). KGWs bring together women (and sometimes men) from rural areas, particularly those who are active and enterprising, such as businesswomen or women involved in local government. The specific activities of each KGW are decided by its members and typically reflect the needs of the local community. KGWs are empowered to undertake economic and social initiatives in rural areas, and they receive financial and organizational support from the state budget ([www.prezydent.pl](http://www.prezydent.pl), *Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland*).

The number of Rural Women's Circles (KGWs) in Poland has significantly increased in the last 10 years due to key legal changes and financial support. Prior to 2018, the number of KGWs in Poland was small and stable, with no dynamic growth recorded at the time. The 2018 amendment to the Act on Rural Women's Circles provided financial support for registered KGWs, leading to increased activity in many regions (Kuczma 2019). This resulted in the creation of numerous new organizations of this type, and allowed existing informal rural women's circles to legalize their activities. Before 2018, rural housewives' circles mainly operated informally, sometimes with the support of local governments and NGOs. The lack of a uniform register made it difficult to accurately track the number of active KGWs (Szymańska 2022).

After the changes in 2018, there was a significant increase in the number of KGWs in Poland. In that year alone, several thousand new circles were registered. Due to the availability of subsidies and support programs, more and more women decided to establish new KGWs or formalize existing groups. Currently (2020 – 2024), there is a steady growth in the number of KGWs. It is projected that by June 2024, there will be nearly 16,000 registered farmers' circles in Poland. It is estimated that each circle has between a dozen and a few dozen actively participating women. Assuming an average of 10 – 30 members per circle, it can be estimated that the number of women actively engaged in these rural circles in Poland ranges from 300,000 to 800,000 (Table 1). The data presented in Table 1 is approximate. The number of active women may be higher or lower depending on the size and activity of individual groups. Table 1 shows the current number of registered KGWs in Poland, along with an estimate of the number of members. This estimate considers an average of 10 – 20 active persons in one rural women's circle. It's important to note that in many circles, the number of active members exceeds 20 people, and in some cases, even reaches up to 70 members. However, there are also KGWs where the number of active members is as low as 5 – 6.

*Table 1. Number of registered Rural Women's Circles in Poland with estimated number of members (access 26.06.2024)*

<b>Polish Provinces</b>	<b>Number of registered farmers' clubs</b>	<b>Estimated number of members</b>
Dolnośląskie	669	13380
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	937	18740
Lubelskie	1714	34280
Lubuskie	274	5480
Łódzkie	1340	26800
Małopolskie	1062	21240
Mazowieckie	2144	42880
Opolskie	266	5320
Podkarpackie	1038	20760
Podlaskie	587	11740
Pomorskie	564	11280
Śląskie	471	9420
Świętokrzyskie	937	18740
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	670	13400
Wielkopolskie	2031	40620
Zachodniopomorskie	667	13340
<b>Total</b>	<b>15371</b>	<b>307420</b>

*Source: own elaboration based on National Register of Rural Women's Circles in Poland, Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture, [www.krkgw.arimr.gov.pl](http://www.krkgw.arimr.gov.pl), 1 access 26.06.2024*

It is important to understand that each Rural Circle is unique. They have different names, and objectives, operate in different areas and bring together inhabitants of specific villages. In recent years, Poland has introduced additional financial support programs for KGWs, encouraging more groups of women to establish new circles. These programs include subsidies for cultural and educational activities, as well as the promotion of local traditions and products. In 2024, the Polish government has allocated PLN 120 million to support the activities of these social organizations (Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture, [www.arimr.gov.pl](http://www.arimr.gov.pl)). The amount of support depends on the number of circle members: circles with up to 30 members can receive PLN 8,000, those with 31 to 75 members can apply for PLN 9,000, and the largest circles, with over 75 members, can receive PLN 10,000. These funds are used for various purposes, such as socio-educational, educational

and cultural activities, the development of women's entrepreneurship, and the improvement of living and working conditions in the countryside (Zajda 2019).

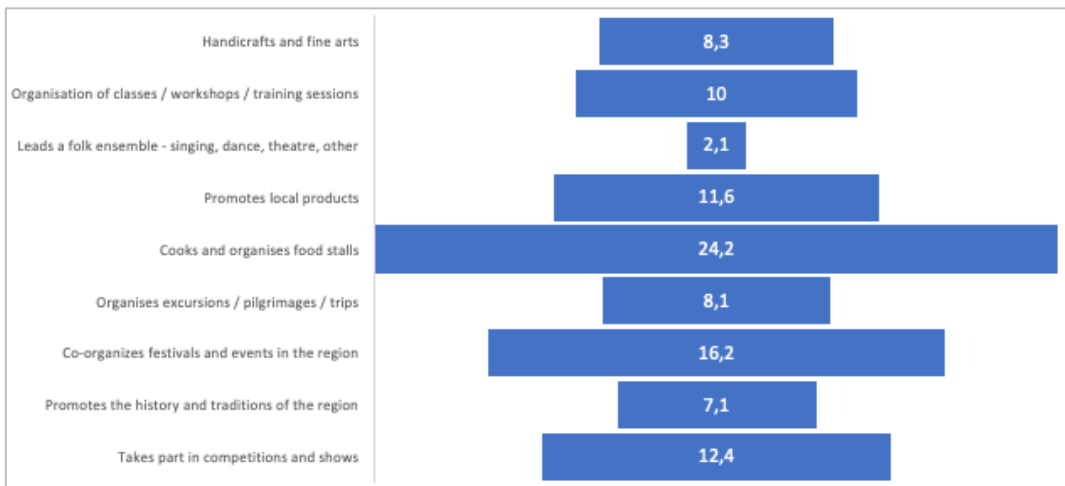
There is still a lack of reliable data on the subject in other EU countries. Accurate figures on women's organizations in individual EU countries are difficult to obtain because this information is not consistently collected and reported at the EU level. Different countries have different approaches to registering and supporting women's organizations in villages. Some EU countries, like Poland, have a formal registration and subsidy system, while in others, these activities are more informal and supported by local initiatives (*Gender in Agriculture and...*2016). However, it is possible to see general trends and visible effects of the activities undertaken in different countries by such organizations. In Western European countries, such as Italy, Portugal, Spain and Greece, for example, there is a strong tradition of rural women's organizations. In these countries, rural women are often very involved in agriculture, although their numbers are declining due to migration to cities and changes in the structure of agriculture. In Central and Eastern Europe, the role of women in agriculture and the countryside is also becoming more prominent. In countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, rural women are beginning to play an increasingly important role in local communities, including in agribusiness and entrepreneurship. In general, it can be hypothesized that stronger institutional and financial support for this type of initiative across Europe is helping to make rural women more active and promote their role in local communities. Social organizations of this type are gaining importance, especially in rural areas, and should be supported, both financially, organizationally and legally (Johansson, Korkeaoja 1997).

As part of their activities, KGWs engage in economic, commercial, and cultural initiatives. They are involved in handicrafts, cultivation of regional traditions, building regional brands, tourism and agro-tourism, small-scale catering and agri-food processing, and promoting regional traditions and culture. KGWs often operate rentals of household equipment and household help points. They also organize after-school day care centers and offer help with childcare (Zajda 2021). Women from KGWs actively collaborate with other organizations operating in rural areas, such as local governments, voluntary fire brigades, church parishes, schools and kindergartens, agricultural advisory centers, restaurants, community centers, and many others (Olejniczak 2021).

A Rural Women's Circle can be established by a group of at least 10 adults (mainly woman) who permanently reside in a specific village, and the activities of the circle will be focused on that area. To start, the group needs to create a founding committee and operate according to their rules and regulations. The founding committee is responsible for registering the circle in the National Register of Rural

Women's Circles, which is managed by the Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture. Once registered, the circle gains legal recognition (*National Register of Rural Circles*, [www.krkgw.arimr.gov.pl](http://www.krkgw.arimr.gov.pl)).

In a recent research study, 304 women from rural women's circles provided information about their activities through an anonymous online questionnaire. According to Figure 1, cooking, including the cultivation of traditional cuisine and regional recipes, was the most popular activity, with 24.2% of the women's circles being involved. Additionally, 16.2% were engaged in organizing festivals and events in the region, and 12.4% participated in various activities during competitions, festivals, and shows in rural areas (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Types of activities carried out by the rural women`s associations participating in the survey (%)*

*Source: own research conducted in 2024 (n = 304)*

In Figure 1, it is evident that the Rural Women's Circles surveyed in Poland are actively engaged in a wide range of activities. These include promoting local products, organizing workshops and training sessions for children, young people, and adults, as well as arranging excursions and study visits for various groups. Additionally, some circles form small theatre groups, run book clubs, and provide support to municipalities with various activities. The strong involvement of women from these circles in village life is apparent, as they not only implement their own initiatives but also support municipal projects.

## Conclusions

The number of Rural Women's Circles (KGWs) in Poland has significantly increased over the last five to seven years. Currently, there are more than 15,000 registered KGWs, eager to utilize financial support to enhance social capital in villages. Due to amendments in the Act on Rural Women's Circles and financial support, activities aimed at integrating local communities, fostering entrepreneurial attitudes, and acquiring new skills have become possible. This indicates that the support measures have catalyzed action. It's worth noting that the support amounts are relatively small, but even such a modest boost can inspire significant action, motivating people to take initiative and develop their projects using their knowledge, skills, and entrepreneurship. These initiatives operate on a “snowball” principle – starting with small support and culminating in substantial and lasting changes in the communities where they are implemented. They help integrate the community, provide motivation, and even introduce an element of competition, which encourages people to act.

After conducting research and analyzing foundational data, several factors contributing to the emergence of many rural women's circles in Poland in recent years have been identified:

- KGWs (Cultural and Educational Associations) have always played an important role in integrating rural communities, serving as a place for meetings, exchange of experiences, joint activities, and mutual assistance. Their activities have always focused on strengthening social ties and fostering a sense of community,
- The KGWs have played a crucial role in preserving and promoting folk traditions through organizing and running various cultural events, festivals, exhibitions, and competitions. These activities aim to nurture local customs, handicrafts, music, and folk dance, ensuring that these traditions are passed on from generation to generation.

The necessity to rejuvenate rural areas is underscored by the lack of social integration in villages. The quality of life in these areas is evolving, largely due to the proactive efforts of the younger, educated generation, who are adept in foreign languages. Their engagement in writing projects, acquiring new skills, and traveling within Poland and abroad is contributing to the enhancement of rural life. The 2018 legal amendment has facilitated these groups in obtaining financial support and legal assistance, thus enabling them to pursue their initiatives and projects more effectively.

In conclusion, the rural women's movement in Poland is on the brink of growth. This is fueled by a new, younger, and educated generation who wish to travel, bond with others, and make a positive impact on their surroundings. Additionally, there is a strong determination to uphold regional traditions among both the older and

younger generations. Increased financial support and promotion of such initiatives in rural areas will be vital in accomplishing these objectives.

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