

GOOD LIFE DEPENDS ON DETAILS

Female Activists in Rural Poland

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The article discusses the role of rural women in the development of civil society in socialist and postsocialist context. Focusing on the relation between gender and civil society, the article aims at bringing insights into two complementing issues: it demonstrates why the focus on rural women's activities enhances our understanding of the dynamics of (post)socialist civil society and, in turn, proves the relevance of the study of civil society's development for the understanding of women's civic engagement. Drawing on a long-term ethnographic study, the article engages critically with some widespread assumptions about the civil society in postsocialist countries and participation of rural inhabitants in the process of postsocialist transformation.

Key words: Women, civil society, rural Poland, postsocialism, transformation, Solidarity movement

Introduction

August 1980, the passers-by who walked by Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk could notice on one of the walls a peculiar banner, hung there by striking workers. Instead of addressing demands to the communist authorities, strikers asked: "Women, do not disturb us – we are fighting for Poland". This short call for non-action perfectly rendered the *malestream* representation of anticommunist opposition, which left little space for women in the men's fight against communism. Women were the ones who could bring food to the strikers, take care of children, and pray, and the only female representative who was given attention and was allowed to "help" was Virgin Mary of Częstochowa, whose image was placed above the main shipyard entrance.

Attempts to exclude women from participation in oppositional activities led to their (self-)exclusion from the discourse on and the reading of socio-political transformation in Poland. This process has been cogently analyzed by scholars such as Shana Penn (2006) and Padraic Kenney (1999), who proved the role of women in the democratic transformation to be of far-reaching significance. Revealing "Solidarity's secret", Penn depicts women as factual "brains" of underground activities. Kenney inquires into the "gender of resistance" and observes that "[t]he traditional focus on organized or published opposition has filtered out such opposition as (...) women's resistance, in which concerns from the nominally private sphere were thrust forward as points of conflict with the state" (Kenney 1999:425). The works of those authors encapsulate some of key-issues in the debate on postsocialist transformation: the emphasis on men's activities, the complex relation between private and public spheres, and the representation of Solidarity movement as *the* opposition which – as I argue further – led to the representation of Solidarity movement as *the* Polish civil society.

Departing from those reflections, I would like to discuss the development of civil society in Poland in the context of postsocialist transformation through the lenses of female activists.

However, contrary to the above quoted authors, I aim to draw attention to the experiences of rural women who, in my mind, have undergone a process of double exclusion – as women and as inhabitants of rural areas, which tend to be marginalized and misrepresented in the debate on postsocialist changes (cf. Bukraba-Rylska 2009; Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2010; Pasieka 2012, 2013). I shall argue that this fact needs to be analyzed in connection with an elitist perspective, which dominates the debates on civil society. Furthermore, by accounting the experiences of rural women I aim to complete the picture of transformation in yet another way, namely by demonstrating the limitations of equating civil society in the socialist period with resistance and anti-regime activities. What I shall strive to demonstrate is a vast range of female activities which, while not being (openly) directed against the state, undoubtedly contributed to the development of civil society.

My argument will proceed in the following way: first, I will shortly present the debate on civil society in the Polish context. Then, I will present research findings from an ethnographic research in a rural area in Southern Poland, focusing on female civic activities. I highlight the connection between women's activities in the socialist and postsocialist period and I inquire into the nature of relation between private and public sphere which their activities display. Besides, discussing women's role in the local public sphere, I reflect on the possible consequences of certain representations of women's activity. Specifically, I ask whether highlighting the gender aspect of social engagement leads to the empowerment of women's position or, on the contrary, results in the reproduction of social hierarchies and gender stereotypes. In conclusions, I summarize presented observations and I argue that a study of rural women activities exemplifies broader processes of postsocialist transformation and civil society's development.

Civil Society in Poland – Theory and Practice

Civil society and (post)socialism

The issue of civil society in Poland and other postsocialist countries has attracted much attention in the last two decades. The development of a “real” civil society and the functioning of non-governmental and non-profit organizations were seen as key elements of a successful socio-political transformation and “the return” to Europe.¹ Undoubtedly, the idea of civil society was an important tool in the process of changes and served many different purposes – from providing guidelines for social and public policies to attracting international funds (cf. Samson 1996). In the scholarly discourse, it was mainly used as a tool of measurement of postsocialist societies' “condition”, inter-state comparisons, and prediction of further developments (cf. Howard 2003). Notwithstanding the value of such studies, it can be argued that the concept was both overused and misused, leading to a certain “boredom” with the subject, reduction of the analytical value of the concept and a misrepresentation of postsocialist societies.

Aware of those problems, many scholars attempted to break the deadlock by discussing new paradigms of societal analysis. Some began to speak about “post-civil society”, demon-

¹ The notion of “civil society” has been frequently depicted not only as a “European product” (cf. Hall 1996), but also as a historical formation, conditioned by modernity and market economy (Gellner 1996). That is why numerous states have become an object of teleological narrative that assumed the (awaited) emergence of civil society in the moment of transition to liberal democracy.

strating that the changing socio-political context demands a new approach that would be less focused on institutions and more on informal expressions and constructions of social capital and social ties (Marody 2004). Others made attempts to re-conceptualize the notion of civil society, striving to make it more “applicable” to postsocialist (and, more generally, non-Western) contexts. Basically, they opposed the “NGO-ization” of the debate on civil society, arguing that civic engagement could not be assessed exclusively by the number of registered associations. Unsurprisingly, such observations came mainly from anthropologists, who highlighted manifold ways people engaged in and acted for the benefit of their communities (see, e.g., Parekh 2004). Ethnographic insights enabled them to “expand” the concept of civil society; they mapped a great variety of individual and group activities which could be labeled as civil society deeds, and they demonstrated the continuation between civil society in socialist and postsocialist times (see Buchowski 1996; Kubik 2000). Furthermore, the attempt to redefine the concept of civil society entailed the need to rethink the relation between the civil society, the state and the domestic sphere. As a result, the notion of civil society came to be understood as “a broad flow of social activity, the study of which has always been central to anthropology, between the domestic sphere on the one hand and the state on the other, but not sharply separable from either of these” (Hann 2002:9) or “the social structures occupying the space between the household and the state that enable people to co-ordinate their management of resources and activities” (Layton 2004:22).

All those observations match the findings presented by scholars studying rural areas, who depict present-day countryside as a realm of civic activities and communal actions. Explaining the readiness of rural inhabitants to act for their locality, they highlight the character of social ties, traditions of mutual help and organization, role of local leaders, and the sense of responsibility and influence on local matters (Mikiewicz and Szafraniec 2009; Herbst 2008). They emphasize that rural inhabitants participate in local elections and meetings and engage in the local community’s matters more eagerly than the urban ones (Herbst 2008; Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2006). However, that does not mean that scholars aim to turn the tide and idealize rural civil society. Rather, they emphasize different bases of civil society in urban and rural settings – associations in the first case and on local-neighborly bonds in the latter (Matysiak 2009:221) as well as different needs (and ways of addressing those needs) in urban and rural realms (Herbst 2008:159-160). Last but not least, they demonstrate the importance of historical experiences, which made rural inhabitants self-sufficient and reliant on broadly understood local resources. One of such formative experiences were the times of People’s Poland, when, as it was mentioned above, rural people engaged in a variety of civic activities, filling the gap left by the weak state.

Nevertheless, the idea of continuation between activities carried in socialist and postsocialist countries and the recognition of the potential of rural areas are still absent from the Polish mainstream discourse. In the mainstream, and even in the scholarly discourse, rural inhabitants tend to be presented as backwards, unable to actively participate in the process of changes and “unfitting” to the new system (cf. Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2010). Unsurprisingly, such accounts do not concede the idea of *rural* civil society. I outlined some of the causes of such an approach in my earlier works (Pasięka 2013). Here, I would like to pay attention to another important factor and that is the reproduction of the view of Solidarity movement as *the* Polish civil society.

Beyond Solidarity movement

Today, Solidarity is known as a mass movement, which united workers and intellectuals and played the fundamental role in bringing an end to the communist state. As David Ost rightly observed, for many people who supported and joined the movement it constituted an “idea” or a “myth”, rather than an institution or a trade union (Ost 1990:208). This observation is very important for the understanding why the idea of Solidarity continues to be very powerful despite many controversies and conflicts among former dissidents, many of whom occupy very different positions on the political scene today. What connects those different positions is the idea of resistance against the state and a conviction about the elites’ role in shaping the course of changes.² At the same time, sharp divisions among former dissidents reinforce the idea of “golden beginnings” of Solidarity and the abandonment of ideals in the period of transformation. An example of the latter were, supposedly, the union’s attitudes towards women – both the union’s female members and the general population of Polish women – which translated into women’s exclusion from power structures and conservative ideas in the domain of reproductive politics.

Such a view on Solidarity permits representatives of different political and intellectual milieus to refer to those elements of Solidarity’s heritage which best fit their present-day interests and ideas. However, yet another important outcome of this sort of narrative is the oversight of the fact that many of the problems, which are considered to be the results of divisions within or the corrosion of the movement, characterized it since its beginnings. It is rarely recognized that the majority of Solidarity’s demands³ aimed mainly at defending the working-class’ interests and did not pay much attention to the problem of other social classes and groups, such as farmers, pensioners or self-employed. In fact, many of Solidarity’s postulates entailed a preservation of status quo rather than a radical change.⁴ Correspondingly, despite a growing number of publications on female members of Solidarity (e.g. Kondratowicz 2001), the question of long-term discrimination of women within the movement did not receive much attention. Solidarity’s (male) members assigned women the role of the protector of “home”, which was supposed to constitute a free-of-state control sphere. Crucially, although the intention was to counter state’s influences, the discourse on gender roles often matched, or even reinforced, that of the state.⁵ For, as Joanna Goven cogently demonstrates, it is inapt to speak either about “pure” state discourses or unambiguously oppositional ones; anti-state discourses were built around the categories provided by the state, such as the distinction “public-private” (1993:443). Brought together, the contradictories inscribed into the idea of Solidarity movement evince the double exclusion of rural women from the discourse on civil society and, more broadly, political transformation.

In short, while presenting the main features of the “Solidarity narrative” and its impact on the debate on Polish civil society, it is important to recognize that not only is the myth of Solidarity alive but also the idea of social order it put forward. First of all, the “Solidarity narrative” carries the image of a powerful (in the main male) dissidents’ activity and their role

² It is also worth noting that the prominence of dissidents’ perspective in the debate on civil society characterize other postsocialist contexts (cf. Eihorn and Sever 2003).

³ I mean here first of all so-called 21 demands of MKS from the summer 1980.

⁴ Solidarity’s demands concerned the rights of state-employees and, as such, maintained the division into privileged working class and the rest of population. I owe this observation to Łukasz Borowiecki.

⁵ As demonstrated by many researchers, the socialist state’s ideology promoted both the idea of women’s emancipation and their importance as workers and the beliefs about women’s natural or inclined roles and dispositions (see, e.g., Eihorn 1993; Heinen 1997).

in reshaping the society. Notwithstanding a profound importance of the movement, it needs to be stressed that due to the dominance of dissident perspective other forms of civil society under socialism were simply disregarded; it was maintained there was no civil society before Solidarity (see, e.g., Pełczyński 1998). As a matter of fact, in many publications the idea of “Polish civil society” was automatically connected with Solidarity (see, e.g., Wnuk-Lipiński 2007). Unsurprisingly, such an approach has had serious implication on the evaluation of the transformation process, resulting in dramatic accounts on the weakness of the post-1989 civil society and intellectuals’ discontent with the “disobedient” society which do not follow elites’ guidelines (cf. Marody 2004).

Second, drawing on the approach of Hegel, Marx and Gramsci, the dissident perspective on civil society implies a juxtaposition of the civil society and state.⁶ The adoption of such a view is obviously not surprising in the context of an authoritarian, non-democratic state. However, its persistence and influence make it hard to recognize abovementioned connections between different spheres of human activities or to acknowledge different degrees of their “politicization”. In other words, it makes it difficult to concede that both in socialist and postsocialist systems state-society relations may have taken different forms in different local contexts and that state organizations may have been *state* to a smaller or bigger extent (Buchowski 1996). Strictly connected to that is the third problem, namely a unilateral reading of ideas of resistance and conformism, in which resistance denotes a civil act and conformism – its lack. Again, this approach precludes the recognition of those people activities which situate somewhere between resistance and conformism precisely because such attitudes serve best the needs of a local community. This problem has been widely recognized by scholars studying socialist societies (e.g. Creed 1998) and rural communities in general (e.g. Reed-Danahay 1993).

And third, as mentioned in my introductory remarks, the “Solidarity narrative” has influenced the perception of women, promoting a traditional gender role division and suggesting that women were politically inactive (Eihorn and Sever 2003:165). On one hand, such claims are a result of men-centered view on dissident activities which undermined the role of women or, in Penn’s words (1996), kept them “secret”. As Katarzyna Kubisiowska observes, the history of Solidarity was written with men’s pen. Female members were excluded by both Polish and foreign authors, such as Timothy Garton Ash, Neal Ascherson, David Ost or Lawrence Weschler who went so far as to compare Solidarity’s male activists with “Founding Fathers of United States”, passing over the role of “mothers” (Kubisiowska 2010). On the other hand, the male-centered narrative was an outcome of the very definition of “political” and of what was to be considered a “civil act”. Referring to Kenney’s work (1999), I have observed that question of women’s resistance is being diminished although those were women protests during which they marched with prams, demanded food for their children and proper health care to constitute a threat for the authorities. Strictly connected to this was also the problem of an extremely uniform picture of the opposition. A more thorough investigation of women’s activities may help to make up for this shortcoming: the studies on

⁶ It is possible to distinguish two main currents in the debate on civil society. As mentioned above, one draws on Hegelian and Marxian tradition and juxtaposes the civil society and the state. The other interprets it as a sphere of civic virtues, highlights importance of associating and collective consciousness confirming the values of society, building on the works of Rousseau, de Tocqueville or Durkheim. While the first understanding influenced the dissidents’ movements in communist countries, the second one was addressed by the theorists of “public sphere” (Habermas), “social capital” (Fukuyama), “spirit of associativeness” (Putnam). Interestingly enough, both currents have tended to “meet” in the postsocialist transforming realities; as argued above, the focus on the dissidents’ movements as *the* civil society and the rapid process of “NGO-ization” dominated the debate, leaving aside variety of grassroots organizations and informal activities.

Solidarity's female activities demonstrate evince a wide variety of motivations behind their civic activities (see Kondratowicz 2001).

Bringing Kenney's observations further, it is worth inquiring whether a more thorough analysis of women's "concerns from the nominally private sphere" may shed light on other forms of civic activities and civic mobilization under socialism. What I mean here is a vast range of activities which did not necessarily mean an open "protest", but which were situated somewhere between resistance and conformism and were a result of skillful use of available resources. Pursuing such acts, women often drew on the role that were assigned them; they used their identities as "mothers", "caregivers", "helpers" to achieve concrete goals. As argued below, an example of such activities is the work of circles of rural housewives and other female organizations under socialism. Albeit their official aim was to promote communist ideology, they played a very important – and far from officially designed – function at the grassroots level. Yet another example is the work of female representatives in local governments. In her study of councilors working in People's Poland, Mazurek demonstrates (2009) that despite the fact that women were discriminated against male councilors, their big advantage was a deep knowledge of inhabitants' needs and concrete problems (such as local infrastructure or shops' supply). Thanks to both the network of informal relations and to strategic self-presentation as helpers and caretakers, female councilors strove to put pressure on the authorities and address basic inhabitants' concerns. Other scholars corroborate that women's emphasis on importance of direct, concrete actions and their preoccupation with socio-economic problems have persisted throughout the transformation and have characterized their activities in postsocialist context (Szelągowska 2009; Choluż 2009).

All these reflections guide the following discussion of female activities in rural Poland, which starts with a short description of my fieldwork.

Civil Society in Polish Countryside

In the period of 2008-2009 I carried out a year-long fieldwork in religiously and ethnically diverse rural commune⁷ in Southern Poland. The commune I studied was composed of twenty villages, which were closely connected due to the small size of the villages, family ties, and the specificity of the local job market (big villages functioning as job providers). As a result, I had to focus on several villages and I present below findings from different localities. In the course of fieldwork, I applied a variety of research methods. I conducted participant observation, collected life stories, individual and group interviews, organized workshops with local schools' students, and consulted local archives. First and foremost, however, I gained insight into inhabitants' everyday lives through frequent, informal visits to their houses.

Given the subject matter of this article, I wanted to emphasize that particularly important were for me encounters and talks with local women. Not only did they provide me with the knowledge and information I was looking for, but they helped me to understand what ethnography was about. Undoubtedly, gender was an important factor in developing close ties with my female informants. This does not mean that I did not interact with men, but that their attitude towards me differed. Male inhabitants were the ones to ask – in more or less direct way – questions about my family situation, class background or material status. I often had a feeling that they asked me such questions because my (presumed) answers would

⁷ "Commune" refers here to the administrative unit.

permit them to enter into the role of local “mentors”. Thus, having heard that I was born in a big city and that, instead of having a “real” job, I was pursuing yet another academic degree, they would state that I knew nothing about “real life” and provide me with explanation with what was socialism, what does it mean to have a cow or what the Polish government actually does. Local women also wanted to get to know me, but they were much more interested into where I wanted to make my home or ideas about having a family and combining it with my professional life. Fundamentally, such questions would lead them to speaking about their experiences and opinions and reflecting (often in a humorous way) on women’s lot.

Although the main focus of my attention was the dynamics of religious pluralism in the studied area, the subject of life under socialism, experience of transformation and civic activities came up frequently in the course of my research. For all these issues are closely related to the realm of religious life; civic activities are connected with religious practices and religious institutions, while the memories from socialist times serve as a means of assessing current development and changes (see Pasięka 2012). Besides, a majority of the people I encountered eagerly engaged in the conversation on these topics, what, in my view, accounts for their attempt to counter mainstream representation of rural areas (*ibid.*).

The area under consideration has always been a poor and marginalized region. The bad quality of soil prevented the development of agriculture, in the main the cultivation of crops on a larger scale. For centuries, inhabitants combined work on small farms with other kinds of jobs – in the 19th century and early 20th century they would work seasonally in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg empire; in the period of People’s Poland they could find employment in the state-owned farms; while today they look for jobs in service sector, developing tourist industry or look for seasonal jobs in big cities. People’s assessment of life conditions was quite contradictory. For example, they would admit benefits drawn from Poland’s accession to the EU but at the same time complain for new regulations regarding food quotas or ecological farming. Likewise, they would be proud of improvements in terms of infrastructure in their villages or accessibility of goods and services, yet simultaneously expressed nostalgia for socialist times.

The emphasis on changes should not obscure the manifold continuations between the socialist and postsocialist period. I have argued elsewhere that while adapting to the new conditions people drew on their experiences and skills gained in the previous system (Pasięka 2013). Here, I want to develop this argument by focusing on the experiences of female inhabitants and ask what these tell us about the functioning of civil society in Poland. In order to do that, in the following paragraphs, I present life under socialism, the experience of transformation and recent developments from women’s perspective, which, at the same time, constituted a history of their activities and their engagement with “local matters”.

On getting by and getting ahead

A majority of my female informants were the women between 40 and 60 years old. In case of older women, the socialist period overlapped with a crucial phase in their lives; it was the time they set up their own homes, became wives and mothers, and began to work. While in case of younger ones, the very same experiences occurred at the time of the socialist state’s collapse. However, despite this generational difference, women’s accounts on socialist times were surprisingly similar, what may suggest that some aspects of community’s life and com-

mon experiences were of big importance in shaping the individual ones. As a result, it was possible to distinguish a few central tropes which characterize women's narratives of People's Poland.

First and foremost, women's remembrances of communism displayed their preoccupation with "getting by" and "making things work" by means of a communal effort. They highlight the fact that in the context of hardship and general lack their biggest concern was making the life under socialism more bearable. Their comments echoed Gerald Creed's (1998) observation on the domestication of socialism in rural Bulgaria, understood as a process of negotiations which aimed at making the new political system more "tolerable."

One of the means of achieving such aims was the establishment of circles of rural housewives, which came into being in several different villages. The first one was set up in the 1960s. During my stay in the field the circle's members proudly presented me the chronicle documenting forty five years of work for the local community. The story of this circle well illustrates the character of women's activities. One of their first undertakings was the creation of an amateur folk ensemble. Having prepared a repertoire, female singers encouraged a few male musicians (harmonium players) to join them and the group began a "tournee" in neighboring localities. Thanks to performances, they managed to collect money and bought the first washing machine for the village. Each household had right to use it in and, as women proudly emphasize, that one machine brought an enormous change into people's lives. In the following years, the circle continued to buy other devices and household items and to share knowledge about modern housekeeping. For example, women managed to complete a dinner service, which was lent to inhabitants for weddings, family gatherings and other festivities.

Explaining their motivations, my informants stressed that they simply refused to be passive and strove to do anything that would make people's everyday life easier. Besides, they admit that they love to work with and for people. This fact was always emphasized by the circle's head, Teresa. With a wide smile on her face, 65-years old Teresa would tell me about the times when she had to run the house, work outside home, take care of five little children, and despite the workload she would always join an evening meeting or a singing rehearsal. When we met for a coffee at her home, this cheerful and tireless woman would look at the album with family pictures and wonder how come she had so much energy. Answering her own question, she would remark that it was precisely the variety of activities and duties that made her act successfully in both private and public sphere. Her opinion is confirmed by statistical data on rural women's activities, which display a positive correlation between civic activities and different tasks' management, within and outside the household (Matysiak 2009). Besides, as Teresa emphasizes, "one needs to like that [social activity]. One needs to like that. Me, personally... I mean, I'm getting old, I don't have energy and health that I used to have... Nevertheless, it still appeals to me, I want to be among people, do something, act (...) There are doubts, but one knows: one needs to [go] further."

According to Teresa, yet another important function played by the circle was the organization of the local community's life. Women were in charge with the organization of various festivities and events: religious celebrations, dance parties, meetings for children and elderly people. Some of those were organized exclusively by women, while in case of others women cooperated with other local (state and non-state) actors. Since the beginning, the circle's undertakings were widely appreciated and supported by the village's inhabitants. One of such initiatives was the organization of summer camps for poor children, run by the school representatives and the circle's members; only thanks to a joint effort of local institutions and in-

dividuals it was possible to provide kids with a place to sleep, food and a variety of activities. As a matter of fact, it is not suffice to say that the cooperation between the school, the circle, parishes and the local administration *characterized* many of local undertakings; they strongly *depended* on such a cooperation.

Hence, on the one hand, above examples demonstrate that the role of local organizations in the socialist time was to “step in”: to fill the gap left by the weak state and to play a modernizing function. On the other hand, however, many of their activities were possible due to their cooperation with local state actors. What is worth emphasizing is the fact that these observations apply to the postsocialist context, too, and it is so not only due to the turmoil of socio-political transformation. The reason for that is, in my view, the aforementioned connection between state and civic activities; the fact that a great deal of the activities performed by the local government is not determined by the state’s regulations but depends on its members’ wish to act for the local community. This and the above examples account for the need to study civil society in connection with both the state and the domestic sphere.

The circle functions till today, proving an ability to adapt to new conditions and the requirements of contemporary world. The circle’s members continue to focus their attention on the organization of social life, charity and social support. The target of their activities are different groups: some of the activities and events are addressed to the entire village population and sometimes the beneficiaries of their work are children or elderly people. Worth mentioning is the care for the oldes women, many of which are former circle’s members. Besides, given the multireligious character of the area, it is important to mention the “ecumenical” role of the circle and women’s role in establishing the cooperation between different parishes (see Pasięka 2011).

At the same time, recent developments – above all Poland’s accession to EU – provided new spheres of activities. Two aspects seem to be particularly relevant here. The first is the European Union’s preoccupation with regions, which translates into initiatives promoting local traditions and customs, rural heritage and ecological food. The circle of rural housewives has become the main target – as well as the main performer – of such projects; the circle’s members dig up old recipes for the purpose of culinary books and TV shows, recreate traditional songs and dances and rule the roost during folk festivals. The second aspect are European Union’s policies which wed the promotion of communitarianism with an emphasis on leadership. Thanks to such policies, the circle’s members have an opportunity to participate in different trainings, improve their organization skills, and learn how to get funds for the circle’s activity.

One of local entities which closely cooperate with circles of rural housewives is the agritourist association, set up in the early 1990s. The head of the association, Irka, came up with the idea of the network of agritouristic farms in the first years of transformation, when the commune’s inhabitants had to face the problem of rising unemployment. The aim of the association was to provide inhabitants with work and improve their material situation as well as to promote the commune. In order to realize the project, she gathered a group of friends and neighbors. However, the activities of the association quickly spread, involving more and more inhabitants. On the occasions of touristic fairs and folk festivals, the association was supported by circles of rural housewives, folk ensembles and artists-artisans, who were jointly promoting the commune and whose performances were awarded with numerous prizes by regional authorities and competitions’ organizers. In the late 1990s, when Irka’s husband was elected village leader, she encouraged him to organize in the village a (first) ‘folkloristic fair’. The fair has been organized each summer since then, gathering local inhabitants and an

increasing number of tourists. Supported by the local government, the fair entered for good into the calendar of local events.

During our conversations, Irka would always stress that being a social activist is something one needs to learn. In order to prove this fact she would show me a chronicle of the association's activities, which today constitutes a thick volume, filled with photos, diplomas, and newspaper articles. The gathered material illustrates well the development of the association and the richness of its agenda. Searching through the chronicle, she would compare different leaflets presenting the association. She laughed at her first attempt to promote agrotourism – scraps of paper containing a short list of agritouristic farms – and she was proud of the latest ones – beautiful, carefully prepared folders, containing detailed information and highlighting the specificity of each place. Hence, Irka stresses that her biography as a social activist is a process of getting skills, which went along with an increased zeal to work for the local community. Asked about the beginnings of her social activity, she mentions the membership in the Association of Rural Youth (*Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej*) in the 1970s. She observes that such associations are treated today at best with a pinch of salt, but most commonly in a critical and simplistic way – as a tool of communist indoctrination. Notwithstanding the fact that the official aim of such organizations was indeed the popularization of the communist state's ideals, Irka emphasizes that for her and her colleagues the membership in the youth association was a lesson of civic attitudes which spurred them to act for the local community. Her view corresponds with the observations of anthropologists who note that socialist associations and organizations were political “on the top” and non-political “on the bottom” (Buchowski 1996). Similar data are also presented in a comparative study of circles of rural housewives, which highlights a common pattern among female activists: a trajectory from the Association of Rural Youth to women's organizations (Matysiak 2009:230).

Already as the head of association, Irka strove to improve her skills by participating in diverse training courses, such as the training for local leaders or a series of classes aimed at the activization of rural women. She admits that she learnt a lot during those trainings and stresses that it was due to the constant process of learning that she got ahead in her work. Trainings gave her confidence and made her value her own work. As she told me: “*You need to respect yourself in order to respect others and do something for them*”. Besides, not only did she use new skills in her work, but she shared them with other members. Irka is today 60 years old and due to a severe illness she can no longer be as active as she would like to be. On the one hand, she finds it important to leave the space for younger members with a bit of get-up-and-go, yet on the other hand, she keeps following the announcements about competitions and fairs, she suggests to younger members of the association the ideas for new projects, and she supports them in building on the network of contacts and friendships which she has built over the years.

In her accounts of the agrotourism association, she also stressed the role of her husband, sons and sisters, who supported and co-created the association, and who, in one way or another, were all “infected” by the spirit of social activity. These facts account for the aforementioned contention that the civic realm should not be seen as separated from either the domestic sphere or the state one. I have made this observation describing the experiences of Teresa and other members of the circle. It is worth stopping at this point and asking what all these examples tell us about gender relations and civil society in (post)socialism.

In my earlier remarks on the discourse on the countryside in postsocialism, I have mentioned that rural inhabitants are often described as backward, narrow-minded and bearing ‘antiquated values’. This observation is also valid for the opinions regarding the gender as-

pect, in the main the feminist critique of rural women as “non revolutionary” and “(too) conservative” (see Dabrowska 2004; Pasięka 2011). Also in this case, however, the observed facts challenge some widespread assumptions on rural women, their presence in the public sphere and female-male relations. For due to a specific division of labor and duties in the rural households, they tend to be based on partnership and cooperation. Building on a survey of rural households, Maria Strykowska (2000) describes them as “democratic-equal households” (*demokratyczno-równościowe*) and stresses that rural women fulfill many different functions in the realm of household, which can be summarily presented as “cultural”, “educational”, and “social-protective” (2000:93-95). Similarly, presenting observations from a village in Podhale⁸ region, Frances Pine argues that rural realms, in which both women’s and men’s work is closely related to the maintenance of a farming household, are often characterized by a flexible work division. It is not rare for men to cook or take care of children and women’s work is visible and fully integrated in the local system (1998:117-8). In contrast to these findings, Elizabeth Dunn’s work on Alima factory’s employees brings the picture of households as specifically women’s – “mothers” and “homemakers” – realm (1993:134-137).

Hence, the partnership of relations and the multidimensionality of performed roles appear to be an incentive to undertake an activity in the public sphere – an activity in which women draw on the experiences and skills from the private one. Seen in this light, the activity in the public sphere is complementary to the one undertaken in the private one, or, to put it differently, the public sphere appears to be an extension of the private one. In this way, the activity in the public sphere does not need to be viewed as an “escape from home.” Notably, such an approach is commonly brought in the feminist discourse wherein “home” is presented as a domain of inequalities and unjust division of labor (see Budrowska 2008).

Certainly, my aim is not to turn the tide and to provide an idealized picture of rural homes. The idea behind the above discussion on the “public-private” is to show why and how certain social activities – in this case female ones – may be enhanced. First, the emphasis on the multidimensionality of women’s roles may help explain why in the postsocialist context these were often women to come up with adaptive, alternative strategies (cf. Pine 1993:240; Engel-Di Mauro 2006) in which they build on possessed skills, past experiences, and networks. Second, the focus on the entanglement of the private and the public sphere invites us not only to problematize this distinction but to view a civic activity as a product of this entanglement. More precisely, such an approach to civic activities invites us to recognize that the location of “private” and “public” is not fixed, nor is their understanding. Playing a part in the public sphere, yet not perceiving it as an opposition to or “suspension” of the private one, rural women question the very validity of the “public-private” distinction.

In order to corroborate this argument, I would like to present one more domain of local activities, namely the work of female employees of one of state grammar schools. One of them is Irka’s sister-in-law, Ewa. She has been a music and art teacher for over twenty years and several years ago she became the school director. It would be hard to find a villager who would not admit the role of Ewa in improving the school’s functioning. Praising the director, pupils would show me a new football pitch and comfortable desks, teachers would tell me about rich schedule of cultural-educational activities, while parents would emphasize that the school became “a real center” of the village. For not only does Ewa act for the school but she skillfully draws others into joint endeavors. One of her first decisions was to include parents and students’ representatives in the sessions of the school’s board in order to decide to-

⁸ Podhale is a mountainous region in the Southern Poland.

gether on the school's program, discuss the most urgent problems, and to look at the school's needs from different perspectives. Another important decision was the introduction of various meetings and festivities in the school year calendar. Campfires, sport competitions and parties brought together teachers, children and their family members, becoming a platform of meetings of several generations of inhabitants. All this was possible thanks to Ewa's life philosophy: "People are simply wonderful... but one need to know how to use their energy, power, and engagement, one need to want to reach them".

Importantly, such meetings were not limited to socializing but gave birth to different common initiatives. One of those was the creation of a school journal which is edited by students. Although it was Ewa to come up with the idea of the journal, its realization was possible thanks to many other people. One of the parents donated paper, others paid for the toner and painting accessories. The director of one of holiday camps let children use the photocopier and the shop owners agreed to sell the newspaper. According to Ewa, the school journal is one of those "small things" the importance of which are not limited to "here and now". Thanks to the work on the journal, children learn cooperation and organization, they spend time in a creative way and gain skills which may result very useful in the future. Ewa firmly believes in the potential of broadly understood "local reserves" – local traditions, network of cooperation, neighborly bonds – as means of locality's development and well-functioning. Therefore, she strongly encourages her female colleagues⁹ to take part in management courses and gain additional qualifications, which prevent them from losing their job.¹⁰

As a matter of fact, vast majority of Ewa's acts regard "details" which result to be crucial for the local community's life. I became aware of it during our conversations, which were full of digressions and constantly interrupted. Sitting at Ewa's office, I could listen to her phone conversations with the commune's authorities in which she intervened in the case of a damaged pathway and demanded money for the repair. I would listen to her negotiations with another school's director in which she protested against charging children with fees for the use of a modern gym. And I had to get used to the fact that she would get up from the chair every five minutes in order to pick up the phone, peek at workers carrying out repairs outside the school, or let in a pupil who had to discuss with her a "terribly urgent" matter. Instead of summarizing everything I learnt about and *from* my female informants, I would like to conclude their story by quoting Michael Walzer's (1992) recognition that "civil society is a project of projects. It requires a new sensitivity for what is local, specific, contingent – and above all, a new recognition (to paraphrase a famous sentence) that the good life is in the details." Such an understanding of civil society undoubtedly resonates with rural women's ideas and endeavors. Yet, in order to complete the picture of their civic engagement, it is necessary to clarify one more issue.

Why female activism?

As the above examples show, the activities of female activists in rural areas are multidimensional. Circles of rural housewives, teachers and members of agritouristic association co-create the socio-cultural calendar of the village; they take care of the local infrastructure and strive to help the neediest inhabitants; they motivate others to act for the common good;

⁹ Women are the only full-time school employees.

¹⁰ This risk is a result of the educational reform (1996) which altered the school programs (in terms of subjects, amount of hours dedicated to respective subjects, and so on).

they are inspiring leaders and initiators. What is common for their activities is the combination of adaptation, novelty and continuation. Pursuing their projects and acting for the locality women search for new ideas and solutions, yet simultaneously draw on local traditions and locally worked out ways of doing. Arguably, this combination of old and new practices can be seen as characteristic for the civil society in rural areas (Pasięka 2013). Still, this observation is not sufficient to explain why these are women to play the role of the lead in the local realm? In other words, it is necessary to ask the question why, instead of describing the members of voluntary fire brigades and hunting clubs¹¹, I have focused my attention on female individuals and collectivities?

We must be careful in answering this question, for an analysis of female activists' "pre-dispositions" may easily turn into the essentialization of some characteristics – such as care, sensibility or resourcefulness – as "typically" female ones. In order to avoid this risk, it might be useful to analyze these qualities in reference to the studied context – to treat them not as cultural categories, but as both a product and a condition of a given social context. I mentioned above the findings from a study of rural households, which portrays them as a realm of partnership and cooperation and proves that work within and for the household demands from women undertaking a variety of different functions (Strykowska 2000). Referring to those observations, I suggested that women's activities in the public sphere need not to be perceived as opposite to those undertaken in the private realm, but rather as complementary ones. And thus, bearing these ideas in mind, it is possible to take a different stand towards the issues of women's "innate" qualities; to approach care, sensibility or resourcefulness as a sort of strategies which permit women to actively shape the local realm. Besides, the aforementioned complementarity of women's roles puts into question the public/private distinction, proving the line between the two to be flexible and, in some contexts, insignificant.¹²

Furthermore, yet another way to understand women's engagement is to focus on communal aspects of their work. In my earlier discussion, I emphasized that local women share their experiences and skills and strive to draw others into joint activities.¹³ The picture of their initiatives resembles the observations of Joanna Regulska (2009), who discusses women's formation of new political spaces by means of "active subjectivity". Explaining the idea of "active subjectivity", Regulska emphasizes (2009:306) a mutual dependency and influence between collective and individual activities, the potential of which is fully manifested in interactions. Once again then, it is possible to approach some women's practices – such as informal networks of communication and cooperation, sharing and transmitting skills – as creative ways of inhabiting the public sphere.

¹¹ Male inhabitants form different associations, too, such as the above mentioned voluntary fire brigades and hunters' clubs. I have not taken part in their gatherings and thus I cannot say much about the character or frequency of their meetings. Yet, it can be stated that men's associations are less present in the public sphere do less than women's ones for the local community (beyond the officially assigned roles, such as extinguishing fires). To my surprise, men's associations – and not women's ones – were often mocked upon by women and men alike. For example, my questions regarding the voluntary fire brigades were often welcomed with a jocular comment: "Well, they *might* be able to extinguish a fire it ..."

¹² Certainly, I am aware that these observations cannot be generalized on different rural contexts for rural households may differ substantially. Consequently, rural women's situation and their activity in the public sphere result from many different factors; employment history, household production, land ownership, just to name some (cf. Engel-Di Mauro 2006). In the above quoted article, Pine (1998) compares different experiences of rural women in central and southern Poland, stressing the importance of local history, local economy, kin obligations, and attitudes towards the state authorities for the understanding of developed work patterns. As a result, the "complementarity" of women's roles may mean many different things; contrary to the findings presented in my article, it may mean that women's role in the public sphere is *limited* to the replication of their role in the private one.

¹³ This kind of work and cooperation is undoubtedly more likely and easier to achieve in rural areas.

Conclusions

I started my article with a vignette from a strikers' protest, stressing the influence of the "Solidarity narrative" on the perception of women's role in both socialist and postsocialist contexts. I recalled an "appeal" in which men ordered women to go home and warned them away from the national cause. Yet, while recalling it, I did not only aim to illustrate the male-centered idea of civic activities. As a matter of fact, observations and reflections presented in my article bring a double twist to the quoted slogan: not only do they question the image of passive women, but they demonstrate that home, private sphere and everyday concerns are a source of civic activities, forge solidarity and constitute a base for collective actions. In this way, they call for rethinking of idea of civil society under socialism and acknowledging a variety of civic activities which aimed at "getting by", making everyday life more tolerable and improving the situation of the local community. As I argued, the recognition of such activities demands going beyond a dichotomous view and stress, instead, the complex relation between private and public sphere, state and society actors, resistance and conformism. Furthermore, I argued that these features of local civic activities are characteristic for both socialist and postsocialist systems and that in both those contexts the local civil society should be seen as situated between – but not strictly separated from – the state and the domestic sphere.

Putting forward those arguments, I provided several examples of rural women's activities. Drawing on my ethnographic material, I described the functioning of a circle of rural housewives, an agritouristic association and a state school, all of them headed by women. I focused my attention on several issues. Firstly, I highlighted the interconnections and resemblances between women's activities in the socialist and postsocialist period and a combination of novelty and continuation that characterize their undertakings. Secondly, I inquired into the relationship between the public and private sphere that women's activities display. I suggested that not only is civic activity a product of the entanglement of the private and public sphere, but that women's activities in the public may challenge a sharp distinction between the two. Thirdly, I emphasized women's preoccupation with basic concerns and everyday matters – "details" which were of immense importance for the local community's well-being. And finally, I indicated the importance of the focus on both individual and collective endeavors – on the ways women interact and share skills and experiences – for it is the mutual influence of the two to shape the local civil society.

In so doing, I strove to demonstrate the meaningfulness of studying civil society through the lenses of female activists. Such an approach permits us to better understand the complexity of the notion of civil society and its manifold manifestations. At the same time, it enables us to comprehend the sources and forms of women's civic engagement. Still, such a focus should not lead to the interpretation of women's performance as "culturally" driven or resulting from "female" characteristics. Quite the contrary, it invites us to perceive women's presence in the public sphere and their importance in local communities as a result of creative, if not strategic, pursuit of roles that were "assigned" for them.

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Život je u detaljima. Aktivistkinje u ruralnoj Poljskoj

Sažetak

Članak analizira ulogu žena iz ruralnih područja u razvoju civilnog društva u socijalističkim i postsocijalističkim kontekstima. Polazeći od odnosa između roda i društva, članak pokazuje zašto istraživanja praksi žena u ruralnim područjima olakšava naše razumijevanje dinamike (post) socijalističkog civilnog društva, te dokazuje važnost istraživanja razvoja civilnog društva za razumijevanje ženskog civilnog aktivizma. Na temelju dugotrajnog etnografskog istraživanja, članak kritički propituje neke uobičajene stavove o civilnom društvu u postsocijalističkim zemljama i uloji ruralnog stanovništva u procesima postsocijalističke transformacije.

Ključne riječi: žene, civilno društvo, ruralna Poljska, postsocijalizam, transformacija, pokret Solidarnosti