

Małgorzata Dziekanowska

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

Pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4, 20-031 Lublin, m.dziekanowska@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

ACTIVITY OF RURAL WOMEN AS A DRIVER OF LOCAL GROWTH

Abstract

The purpose of this is to address the social activities of women living in rural areas, and especially the degree to which such activities are innovative. Special attention is given to innovations designed to improve the quality of life in local communities, to identify their needs and social problems, and to make attempts to address these. Data for this study comes from in-depth interviews with women who are particularly involved in various areas of social life in their local communities.

Key words

rural women, local community, village, social involvement

Introduction

In the field of economics, entrepreneurship is defined as a form of work or as the fourth factor of production. When considered as a form of work, it is also associated with certain character traits of entrepreneurs. It is assumed that entrepreneurs should be active, venturesome and adaptable. It is equally important that they be innovative and able to recognise and seize opportunities.

According to the Polish Language Dictionary [1], if someone is enterprising they act on their own initiative, and are willing and able to undertake various projects and successfully bring them to completion. Based on this definition, entrepreneurship, as a term, can be used not only in economic contexts, but also in relation to efforts aimed at the achievement of financial gain or other objectives.

In sociological terms, entrepreneurship is understood as behaviour based on seeking and responding to change, and using it as an opportunity to introduce social or economic innovations [2]. Approached this way, it can be understood as an aspect of social involvement. It is characterised by the active involvement of the individual in making a difference in their natural and social environments. Understood as social work, it means participation in group work that goes beyond one's professional and family roles, and is aimed at the achievement of social values. Social involvement is voluntary, spontaneous, free, and altruistic in nature. Given its purpose, social involvement can be considered in terms of social innovation, understood as a purposeful and beneficial change.

Determinants of the entrepreneurship of rural women

The issue of social involvement of residents has been addressed in various sociological studies. Age, social milieu, and, less frequently, gender have been identified as differentiating variables for social involvement. Recently, this issue has been analysed in terms of social capital and institutional conditions. While more and more attention is being given to rural areas, the social and political activities of rural women are yet to be sufficiently explored. The situation of rural women is usually assessed in terms of their status within their families or professional roles.

The analysis of family roles shows that women receive insufficient support from institutions that provide care for children and older people. Moreover, in addition to their biological and production-related functions within their families, rural women serve many new roles associated with the increase in family requirements related to provisioning and cleaning, and modern attitudes toward children [3].

Studies on the professional careers of women more often address the issue of female entrepreneurship. A report prepared for the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) shows that "Polish women are among the most enterprising women in the European Union (with approx. 35% of women having their own

businesses). Still, there is a clear disproportion between entrepreneurship among males and females – both in terms of the proportion of males and females who run their own business, and their business experience and the size of their business. Data show that while the average number of people hired by men who are not sole traders is 9, for women this number is 5. In addition, there are very few women who own large companies, i.e., with more than 250 employees” [4].

Enterprising women who create jobs often receive recognition for their significant contribution to the economic growth of the country. Many institutions and other initiatives are being launched to support them in their efforts. Such projects are usually designed to benefit women living in cities. It was not until the 3rd Congress of Women, organised in 2011, that the issue of rural women’s empowerment and entrepreneurship was addressed. A year later, the Congress set out to make rural women realise their enormous potential and to encourage them to create growth opportunities for their communities. Participants in the Congress identified major psychological, mental, financial, legal and institutional barriers to female involvement. They expressed the need for the development of empowerment programmes to call more attention to women in rural areas. Moreover, it is crucial that a professional contact network be developed to facilitate project funding and improve industry education.

In rural communities, women are expected to assume traditional social roles associated with the family, such as raising children and providing support on the farm. This is reflected in their system of values, where family is at the core and other areas of life are subordinated. Values associated with social mission, independence, and individualism are lower in the hierarchy. Cooperation and relationships with other people, leadership, involvement in decision-making, professional work and development are also considered important. The least important values are associated with having fun and taking an easy-going attitude to life. Women working on farms usually struggle with finding a job outside the farm, or with developing the farm itself. Professional and social aspirations of rural women are determined by their age, farm size, marital status, and position of each woman on their farm. It is more difficult for married and older women to be socially active, so they are less likely to have such aspirations [5].

There are no data on the participation of women in NGOs, and they do not have many representatives in local governments. They account for 25.4% of councillors in rural communes and 24.9% in rural/urban ones [6]. However, rural women are becoming more active in the areas of social and citizen involvement. As research shows, women are usually involved in informal social activities for the benefit of their local communities. They more often serve as village heads, which is a form of unpaid social work and does not entail any real authority [7].

The purpose of this analysis is to address the social activities of women living in rural areas, and especially the degree to which such activities are innovative. This refers to innovations designed to improve the quality of life (well-being, safety) in local communities. Such innovations are based on the identification of social problems and needs in a given community and constitute attempts to address these.

Data for this study comes from in-depth interviews with women who are particularly involved in various areas of social life, acting as local cultural and educational managers, or serving various local government functions. To investigate and win the trust of the study group, and to identify local leaders, I started from conversations with members of farmers’ wives associations (FWAs). The associations were selected based on The Best Farmers’ Wives Association in the Lubelskie Province, a contest organised in August 2016 by *Dziennik Wschodni*, a regional daily. The contest attracted 47 associations, which presented themselves in one of *Dziennik Wschodni*’s issues (Year XXII No. 151 of 5-7 August 2016). Having analysed the short descriptions of each association, I selected 15 associations for the study. What I focused on in those descriptions were features that made them stand out, such as village theme projects, efforts to improve the social situation of rural women and their families, the protection of women’s and family rights. There were also some interesting sentences in their self-presentations, like “In our society, there have always been charismatic women, activists and involved female citizens who could unite others around their ideas” (FWA Marynin), and “We are a group of cheerful, happy and active women who wish to support our local community” (FWA Kęblów).

This article is based on the assessment of 20 in-depth interviews. As the research project has only recently entered the implementation stage and has only one investigator, the sample is currently small. Nonetheless, the findings constitute a preliminary assessment of the issue at hand. Most respondents are members of FWAs

from the villages Czółna and Leśce. The in-depth interviews also helped me identify local leaders who were not directly involved in the associations' operations – the Head of the Communal Culture, Sport and Leisure Centre, the Deputy Head of Commune, the President of the Active Women Association, and a retired teacher, a greatly respected manager of cultural life, whose long-term commitment produced some objective successes.

Both towns investigated are part of rural communes located in the immediate vicinity of Lublin. Despite the short distance from the largest city in the region, both towns are located far from major transport routes, which, in a way, isolates them in spatial and social terms. In addition, both towns are agricultural in nature.

Social involvement as part of FWAs is driven mainly by the organisations' tradition and a desire to continue their operations. In both cases, this involves generational replacement within the organisation. But the ties between the generations are maintained only in symbolical terms and through continued operations. However, the forms of such operations are so different that this does not support actual cooperation. Furthermore, not wanting to provoke conflicts within the group, the older generation withdraws from active participation.

In their activities, respondents saw opportunities to put various ideas into practice. Moreover, they often emphasised aspects related to self-improvement. Membership of such organisations constitutes an incentive to leave one's comfort zone and overcome fatigue and inactivity. It provides motivation for making an effort, and helps maintain discipline in the achievement of goals. Women support one another in their efforts. This cooperation helps them learn from each other. Joint action is the opportunity to manifest and/or express various personalities – both leaders and contributors. Associations are a place to express oneself and often help tap latent talent.

What is also important is the pleasure provided by the opportunities to meet other people, get away from everyday responsibilities, and make enough room for oneself and for the satisfaction of one's needs – “When I'm fed up with everything, I want to get away from it all” (R2). “Work is work. I do it for financial reasons. You need to earn your crust some way. And there are household chores and the family, but I also need some space for myself. I need to meet my female friends. I need to go somewhere with them, see something, have a laugh, talk about some girly stuff that one of us wants to talk about that day. Share our experiences” (R3).

Women also provide support for each other – “(..) there are many women who joined (a painting workshop – author's note) while being in really bad shape psychologically, and their memory of it is positive”. They emphasise the importance of this connection, friendship, and joy derived from cooperation – “Being only for yourself, living for yourself, it bores me (...) I am the kind of person who loves teamwork. I like discussing, designing, and putting things into action together with other people. I am a gregarious type of person” (R18).

Often the motivation behind such involvement is altruistic – “For the benefit of other people. I think this is where it all started. Simply to organise this for those people. In autumn, when all the work in the fields is finished, we have more free time to prepare something, such as dinner. There's always a dinner, some treat, a cake or something” (R2).

The purpose of such actions is also to foster team spirit within the local community, or to take responsibility for it and encourage all residents to act as hosts on their town. Usually, this takes place through giving them opportunities for spontaneous action – “When we set out to do something, we do it together” (R18). The women studied considered it essential to forge a shared identity among local residents. This goal is often expressed explicitly, but sometimes it is the underlying objective of many actions taken to make the town stand out. The place of residence is considered very important. The outfits worn by FWA members, not necessarily similar to the regional traditional costume, emphasise their distinctiveness and represent their town of origin. The projects implemented are perceived as showpieces for the town. This often leads to competition between towns and stems from the desire to make one's presence known – “We joined the contest to feel appreciated, and to let other people know that there was such an association in Czółna. We do not just sit around, but we make our presence felt” (R2). An example of such a competition is the harvest festival wreath contest, which might generate considerable excitement, both during preparations and later, when the jury announces its decisions.

What encourages women to become socially involved is the tradition of public-spirited acts within their families. However, it is often more about being open to others, curious, and willing to help others, or having a

family of origin whose members have an extensive network of social connections. Still, many respondents did not report any of the above-mentioned circumstances as the motivation behind their decision to become socially involved. Therefore, it can be assumed that their involvement is the result of specific personality traits or a spontaneous, personal need.

The actions undertaken are usually local in scope and aimed at the broader community (St. Andrew's Day Party, New Year's Eve Party, harvest festival, holiday fairs, family parties) or at selected groups, e.g., the Senior Citizen's Day. It is important to note that of all the groups of residents that constitute potential target groups of such actions, the elderly are special. Their limited mobility, resulting from their health or the local transport infrastructure, loneliness from being away from their children, or employment and low income, all make this rural group isolated. Therefore, it becomes particularly important to organise Senior Citizen's Day – "They always turn up happy, because they know that they will be able to meet and talk to someone. Because, you know, nowadays, older people, when they need to go somewhere, they are driven to and from that place, right? And later, they are reminiscing 'oh, she got old' and 'she got this' and 'she got that'. Because people from the opposite ends of the village do not see each other often, right?" (R2).

Involvement of the women studied follows the traditional gender role model. Projects implemented by FWAs focus on activities traditionally performed by women, such as the organisation of social life, cooking, baking, and satisfying the needs of the family and children (family parties), and the elderly (Senior Citizen's Day). Moreover, women are expected to keep tradition and culture alive (harvest festival wreath weaving, preparing drama performances), organise educational activities, and take care of the aesthetic aspects of the surroundings. Secondary, instrumental, goals involve for-profit activities such as lending utensils and selling tickets to drama performances. This clearly shows that FWA objectives have evolved. A study by Barbara Tryfan, conducted in 1995, identified the following areas where FWAs had had the most successful track record: rural counselling, agricultural production improvement, fight for equal participation in power structures, professional qualification attainment, organisation of summer holidays for children, and combating alcoholism [8]. In addition, FWAs were involved in efforts to improve social and technical infrastructure, create new jobs, protect the environment, and provide assistance to low-income families, single mothers and families with many children. To some extent, these differences show how women's value systems have changed. Indeed, now altruistic and individualistic motivations, with the latter involving the need for self-development and social interactions, seem equally important. The institutional development of rural areas is equally important, especially in relation to social work, which has, to a certain extent, fulfilled the needs of rural residents in this area, and in turn has affected FWAs' areas of operation.

The outcomes of the activities undertaken are perceived by respondents mainly in terms of fostering bonds and local networking. FWA members invite and encourage people they have known since childhood and who are believed to have the right skills or attitude. Length of residence plays an important role, contributing to the development of strong bonds and social trust. It is an important precondition for building and strengthening bonding social capital – "A very talented person, has many skills and artistic talent and is an eloquent speaker; I remember her from school; she was inconspicuous and we kind of helped her come forward" (R18).

This does not mean, however, that social activities of women are broadly endorsed by their social milieu. This study confirms a claim by Danuta Walczak-Duraj [9] that in rural areas, gender-related stereotypes are perpetuated and there is rigorous social scrutiny. Any non-standard behaviour is either frowned upon or not treated seriously. Such behaviour includes the social involvement of women, perceived by others as "extravagant". Men, in particular, tend to have a traditional perception of female roles and a stereotypical attitude to women. By describing women as "witches who shake up the whole village", men refer to the negative image of women as being excessively talkative, nosy and focusing not on their family-related responsibilities but on the affairs of others, which is often associated with inquisitiveness and gossiping. Women's activities tend to be approached with certain forbearance as "harmless female folly" – "Most people are against us. I mean, in the village. There is this general feeling that we are everywhere. That the same moms are room mothers, members of the FWA, members of parents' associations, members of the fire service. Apparently, we are shaking up the whole village. And when other people don't like it, they organise witch-hunts, accusing us of bossing around and sticking our noses into everything. And it is not like that, because we do what we feel like doing and do not force anyone to do anything" (R3).

A serious obstacle women encounter while trying to achieve their objectives is the poor involvement of local communities and difficulty encouraging others to participate. Locals tend to show a passive attitude in that they are happy to participate in events organised by local associations but they do not help prepare them. Respondents say that local communities are not ready to become selflessly involved, they do not think of themselves as communities, and, consequently, do not feel responsible for the community. In many cases, the help provided is not selfless and people expect payment in return for completing some tasks.

Another obstacle is the lack of time, which results from the excessive workload that women have and all the household chores they are expected to carry out. In addition, they often care for their grandchildren and older family members. There is also the desire to have everything under control, an obstacle faced by women with particular personality traits or socialisation experiences – “I am unable to delegate responsibilities, so I accept all of them myself” (R1). It can be assumed that women socialised to serve the function of a family manager in relation to provisioning, health care, education and upbringing, free-time activities and household finances, tend to follow this pattern of behaviour also in their social activities.

The poor decisions of local authorities, who sometimes consider so-called “soft projects” as unnecessary, present a separate group of obstacles. Moreover, respondents mention competing regional interests of each town within the commune, and non-substantive reasons behind the decisions about the allocation of funds for projects implemented by local organisations. Since FWA projects rely on funding provided by commune offices, and the authorities are reluctant to support them, FWAs operate in an atmosphere of uncertainty.

One way to overcome those obstacles is to combine the membership of, and involvement in, many organisational forms. In that way, the same people are members of the association that runs a local school, FWA, and drama group. Depending on current needs, they focus on a particular organisation and devote special attention to it. As this approach involves a heavy additional workload, women delegate the implementation of individual tasks to ad hoc groups of residents and local partner organisations, such as schools, voluntary fire services, and community centres. Such cooperation involves spontaneous actions undertaken on an informal basis. Friendship, trust and a tradition of mutual help seem to be more important in this context. Extremely important resources are also provided by family and neighbours, as it is easier to obtain assistance from one’s immediate circle.

Schools play a special role in the empowerment of local communities. In a way, schools constitute a natural platform for the involvement of parents, which ultimately takes institutionalised forms – “Most of us started off when we were taking our children to primary school. And so we first started to meet at school, then became room mothers, members of [parents’ – MDz] associations, and so on. And then we decided that, you know, we could do something more somewhere...” (R3).

The scope of the institutionalised cooperation undertaken by the FWAs studied is not very wide. Such cooperation includes only District or Provincial harvest festivals and is established via Commune Offices. Such projects focus on the needs of local communities and are based on FWAs’ own resources. It seems that the FWAs studied are reluctant to go beyond their local context, and they are not likely to engage in cooperation with other entities or institutions from outside their commune.

To ensure their success, the studied organisations need leaders. While all respondents emphasised the democratic nature of decision-making when asked about the ways decisions are made in their groups, their subsequent answers clearly showed the presence of a dominant person in each group. Usually, that person was also chosen to be the formal leader. The leader is characterised by an above-average involvement and is the main initiator of projects undertaken by the group. Depending on the undertaking, leaders delegate responsibilities or assume full responsibility themselves.

Asked about the personality traits of enterprising women, interviewees mentioned enthusiasm, an action-oriented attitude, courage, determination and commitment. Other characteristics included creativity, an inquisitive mind, a sense of purpose in life and self-confidence. Important qualities also included effectiveness, ability to influence others, responsibility, and the ability to cope with failure and criticism. Traits supporting cooperation, such as having a conciliatory and understanding attitude, diplomacy and the ability to listen, were also considered important. Paradoxically, when asked whether they considered themselves to be enterprising women, respondents were not sure at first.

Summary

Grażyna Kaczor-Pańkow [10] and Józef Koziński [11] identified two psychological elements necessary for economic success, namely a desire to prove oneself to others and a desire to achieve common good. In the sphere of social involvement, it can be concluded that even though women do not mention competition explicitly, it is visible in their actions. Without doubt, they also apply the idea of common good. Therefore, they meet all the conditions for success. Their innovations tend to follow traditional paths and are related to the areas characteristic for traditional female roles. However, funding opportunities have increased their scope and the number of forms of operation. They reach out to a larger number of people, and their projects are more distinct. New methods of operation call for new skills. Women sign up for courses and training (e.g., on how to draw up project applications), which further translates into an increase in their capital and effectiveness.

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