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POLISH WOMEN FARMERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY – BETWEEN CONSERVATISM AND UNARTICULATED EMANCIPATION*

Summary

The aim of this article is to identify structural and cultural barriers in the process of empowering women in Polish agriculture, as well as the main systemic challenges faced by Polish female farmers. The methodological framework of the conducted research is built on the concept of Feminist Agri-food Systems Theory (FAST). Based on their own qualitative research and available secondary data, the authors reconstruct the process of transformation of the situation of women in agriculture in the 21st century. The changes that have occurred

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* This article is a translated version of the original Polish article available on the journal's website: <https://doi.org/10.26485/PS/2025/74.2/8>

The printed version of the article is only available in Polish.

during this time are characterised by a pursuit of equality and a high degree of dynamism; however, cultural conditions mean that traditional constraints still pose a barrier for female farmers in Poland.

Keywords: feminism, Polish women farmers, agriculture, rural areas

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO STUDY POLISH WOMEN FARMERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Women have always played an extremely important role in agriculture and food systems. However, their knowledge, skills, work and leadership are often invisible and undervalued. Today, Europe's agricultural sector is characterised by high levels of social and economic inequality that take on a gender dimension. Women remain under-represented in agricultural institutions and associations, and as a result their perspective is not reflected in regulations [Shortall et al. 2017]. Women's relatively low participation in decision-making in agricultural public institutions, professional organizations and on farms, coupled with imbalances over agricultural property rights, point to persistent structural inequalities in rural areas. The numerous barriers to gender equality in European agriculture are socio-cultural [Kluba, Szczepańska, Uss-Lik 2021], economic and political [EIGE 2016] and perpetuate women's inequality in the mutually constitutive "productive" sphere (agricultural activities) and "reproductive" sphere (unpaid and undervalued labour).

The situation of Polish women farmers was shaped under specific conditions. Our country went through the period of socialism without the nationalization of agricultural land, while with the narrative of women's equality in the professional sphere, common in all socialist countries, but without reducing the cultural pressure on their domestic and care work [Fidelis 2020]. An important element constructing the attitudes and behaviours of female farmers in Poland is the message about women's roles coming from conservative circles, the reception of which is stronger in rural than in urban areas. This historical burden, as Nobel laureates Elinor Ostrom and Claudia Goldin have proven, has a significant impact on the behaviour and attitudes of subsequent generations of women, especially when it comes to their professional activities and social activism [Goldin 2006; Lapniewska 2016].

The purpose of this article is to identify structural barriers in the process of women's empowerment in Polish agriculture/more feminisation of Polish agriculture and the main systemic challenges facing Polish female farmers. In particular,

we are interested in identifying the difficulties that may limit the realization of the interests of female farmers in their professional and social environment at the household, farm, community, regional and national levels. The methodological framework for our analysis is a methodology built on the concept of Feminist Agri-food Systems Theory (FAST), which allows us to capture the multidimensional situation of female farmers. Against the backdrop of the literature review and the available data, using our own qualitative research, which was conducted in 2023 among twelve women experts representing various groups related to farming (including: social activists, representatives of the administration, female farmers),¹ we would like to present how Polish female farmers' attitudes and behaviours are perceived, their approach to facing the dual challenges resulting from their involvement in farm work and the (still primarily female) responsibility for running the household. Is their situation significantly different from that of male farmers? With our article, we aim to supplement the small number of publications on contemporary Polish female farmers, in particular, to fill the gap in the scientific description of their social and economic functioning.

Areas of research on women farmers in 21st-century Poland

There is very little research devoted exclusively to women farmers. In the scientific literature, much more attention is paid to rural women in general, although this subject area is also not one of the well-recognised ones. It is impossible to make a clear distinction between the two groups, since female farmers are also predominantly rural women, and their daily experiences and the social reality in which they function are related. However, it should be noted that many rural women have nothing to do with farming. Our goal is to present female farmers as professionals performing a job traditionally considered male. The study of rural women will therefore be of contextual interest to us only as a framework that presents the cultural, social and economic conditions of women's functioning in the rural environment.

The last major cross-sectional study addressing the question of rural women's identity, values, aspirations and plans was conducted in 2012 on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. A report¹ with its findings [Focus Group et al. 2012] confirmed intuitions about the traditional role of women,

¹ The research was carried out as part of the SWIFT – Supporting Women-Led Innovations in Farming Territories – project funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme (grant agreement identifier: 101084561). Project website: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084561/pl>.

the persistence of the institution of marriage, the greater number of multi-person households and the lower labour-force participation of women in rural areas while showing a relatively high rate of life satisfaction among women living in these areas.

An interesting conclusion from the aforementioned research, from the point of view of our considerations, is the one concerning rural women's attitudes towards employment in agriculture. The participants in the study mostly aspired to work outside of agriculture, and when asked about their career dreams, they mainly mentioned developing their own non-farm business and even founding a social organization. In contrast, women saw the greatest opportunity for self-development primarily in moving to the city [Focus Group et al. 2012: 88].

Women's reluctance to engage in work in the agricultural sector can be linked to the dominant position of men in the sector, the widespread belief in Polish society that farm work requires physical strength that exceeds women's capabilities, and the division into male and female occupations that is ingrained in the collective consciousness [Dobrowolski 1958; Szykiewicz 1976]. In addition, the reasons for this are also psychological barriers, related to the rural environment's entrenched perception of the agricultural managerial function as typically male, and the lack of role models of women who have achieved success in this area [Pięta, Skierska-Badura, Skierska-Pięta 2013: 244]. One can even encounter statements that women working on farms are not real farmers, but only farmers' wives. The patrilineal nature of the transfer of farms (and the associated need to compete with brothers to receive a farm) means that the most common route of entry into agriculture for women is not inheritance, but marriage [Gorlach, Drąg 2019]. At the same time, referring to the theory of social structure, the low propensity of rural women to become farmers is interpreted through the prism of their desire to achieve social advance and take up non-agricultural educational and professional activities, especially in situations of origin from small farms, where work was often hard and associated with a low income.

Women can therefore often begin to take on management roles on the farm, and thus be recognised as authentic farmers, only after there is a lack of "naturally" predisposed men to do so. Hence the frequent appearance in statistics of widows who, after the death of their husbands, have taken over management of the farm and thus became its rightful owners [Drąg, Gorlach 2019: 132] or women whose husbands found permanent employment outside agriculture [Tryfan 1987: 16; Tryfan, Rosner, Pięcek 2003]. The above trend for family farms to be handed down mainly to male descendants additionally means that women are not treated as fully-fledged successors to farms. If, on the other hand, they already receive

inherited family property, studies show that it is much smaller and less mechanised [Drąg, Gorlach 2019].

Surveys of rural women's attitudes clearly show that family – its well-being, permanence, secure material situation and emotional ties connecting loved ones – comes first among values. In contrast, values commonly associated with modern women's aspirations, such as independence, individualism and leadership noticeably recede into the background [Focus Group et al. 2012: 62]. This distribution of aspirations and dreams confirms the persistence of the traditional division of responsibilities, assigning women responsibility for the private, domestic sphere [Kuźma 2003].

A factor that entrenches the traditional value system – not only in rural areas – is the Catholic Church, whose influence on traditional perceptions of gender roles in rural areas remains significant. A 2018 GUS study shows that about 60% of rural residents attend church at least once a week, and as many as 78% feel a connection to the religious community and their parish [GUS 2018]. One of the leading researchers on the lifestyles and attitudes of rural residents, Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska even believes that “faithfulness to the Church and faith in the farming community seems to be a uniquely enduring element of their identity” [Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2020: 69]. Catholic circles have always rejected the demand for women's emancipation as immoral and incompatible with Christian values. Representatives of the Church have also expressed a negative attitude towards women's participation in a labour market [Stegner 2003: 111]. However, the Church played an ambivalent role in the process of women's emancipation – on the one hand, reinforcing the old order and traditional division of roles in the family, and on the other, providing the only sphere of public life to which women had access without the mediation of husbands and fathers [Stegner 2003: 115].

Notwithstanding the strong presence of patriarchy in relations within the agricultural sector and the rural community, there has been a certain evolution of these arrangements. Although the very Polish language regulating administrative, legal and social issues relating to agriculture imposes and perpetuates masculine forms in it, in reality, the very notion of women running a farm is sometimes imprecise. Some run the farm independently, but formally the documents show a man [Olejarczyk 2022]. The model of cooperation on an equal footing in managing the farm is also becoming more common. This happens even when the declarations of both parties indicate a traditional management model [Krzyworzeka 2021]. Attitudes that promote progress and challenge the established order, called “emancipatory” in the literature [Szojda 2012: 124], which are sometimes identified with

feminism, are important in breaking the patterns established by tradition. This, in turn, forms the framework that shapes the social discourse around cultural gender, including in the countryside, even though it often turns out to be incompatible with non-urban reality [Neré 2022]. Feminism is currently present in cities, created primarily in the intelligentsia and activist circles, transferred unchanged to the countryside has the character of a “colonial mission” [Borys 2013]. One of the reasons for the incompatibility of metropolitan feminism in interpreting the problems of rural women and farmers is the language barrier: “the hermetic nature of the language of academic feminism prevents feminists from reaching people excluded from the cultural circuit” [Graff 2013, after Borys 2013: 42].

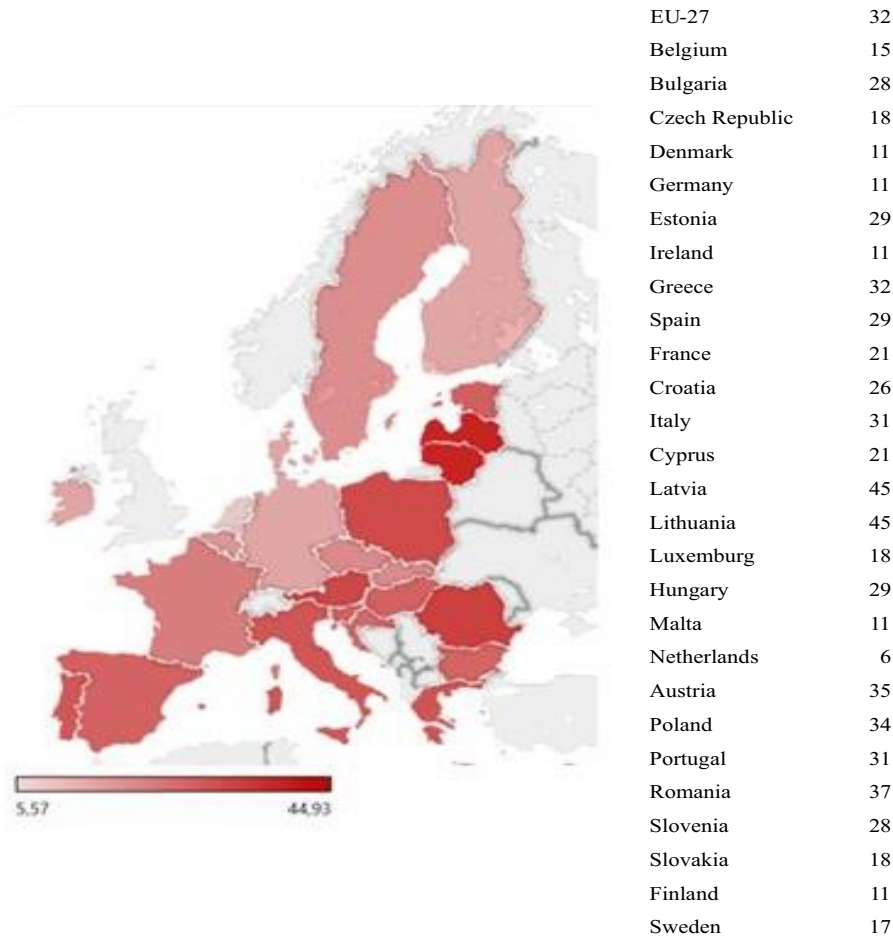
Perhaps it is because of this difference in experience and identity that feminism is mainly identified by rural women with the battle of the sexes. When asked about this ideology, women living in non-urban areas were unable to grasp its meaning, considering it “cold” and “artificial” [Szojda 2012:121].

Although customs and worldview changes have accelerated in rural areas since accession to the European Union, as Sylwia Michalska outlines, “external constraints (lack of infrastructure to support families in their caregiving functions, communication, etc.) and internal constraints (acceptance of women’s traditional tasks, fear of being assessed and of failure) make it more difficult for rural women to go beyond traditionally defined roles” [Michalska 2019: 317].

Female farmers in Poland compared to women in agriculture in EU countries – an “incomplete” statistical picture?

In Poland and the EU, the agricultural sector is dominated by men. This fact generally reflects the low prevalence of farms run by women. According to data from the Farm Structure Survey conducted for Eurostat, in 2020 women managed less than one in three farms in the EU-27 (Figure 1). A similar percentage of female farms was also recorded in Poland. It is worth noting that over the past ten years (2010-2020) the share of female farmers among the total number of farm managers in the EU as a whole, as well as in Poland, has increased slightly (by three and five percentage points, respectively).

FIGURE 1. Share of female farmers among total farm managers in EU-27 member states in 2020. (in %)



Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat data (Farm Structure Survey).

Gender disparity in the EU was observed not only in terms of the scale of farm management but also in terms of the use of a key factor of production in agriculture – agricultural land. Available data indicated that in the EU-27 in 2020, female farmers used only one-fifth of the total agricultural land, managing one-third of all farms. In Poland, the values show less divergence: women cultivated 38% of all agricultural land and managed 34% of farms.

Women were a distinct minority among those in charge of farms. This situation was particularly true for the EU-15 countries, i.e. the so-called “old EU” (e.g. the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Ireland), where the agricultural sector underwent a fundamental transformation into an industrialised and highly integrated segment of the economy with other sectors. This is because, paradoxically, the modernization (including the mechanization of much farm work) and commercialization of agriculture in Western Europe have brought about an intensification of the masculinization of this activity [Brandth 2002]. A relatively larger scale of feminization was characterised by farms in the new EU member states (EU-12), where a large part of them were family, multifunctional and small farms, often poorly integrated with the agricultural market, and the overrepresentation of women there was due to demographic reasons (average longer life expectancy than men) and family and life situations (loneliness, migration of younger family members or partners) [Michalska 2013; Blumberg 2022]. In Poland, the feminization of the farming profession progressed together with the increase in the scale of farmers’ pluriactivity of men in the first phase of the industrialization of the economy, i.e., from the early 1960s, when farmers finding employment in industry handed over managerial responsibilities on the farm to their wives [Tryfan 1987: 16].

However, especially in the context of the scale of feminization of Polish agriculture, it should be borne in mind that public statistics, especially in terms of the number of farms and their agricultural function, do not reflect the real situation. The majority of farms in Poland (an estimated 700,000 out of a total of 1.3 million farms) do not engage in agricultural production for the market [Zegar 2019]. People who own agricultural real estate treat it most often as a way to supplement their income (leasing land to others, the possibility of obtaining financial support from the EU CAP), a residence, a hobby, a capital investment, an opportunity to access the social or health-insurance system on preferential terms [Sikorska 2013; Wojewodzic 2019]. At the same time, the difficulties concerning the indication of the actual number of male and female farmers in the country are undoubtedly due to the complicated and ambiguous regulations on agriculture in the national legislation, including, in particular, shortcomings in defining such concepts as an individual farmer [Blajer 2012].

In seeking the most up-to-date answer possible to the question of how many women are actually engaged in managing agricultural production in Poland, it is thus necessary to look at data other than those collected by the GUS or Eurostat, which could reflect the real scale of the phenomenon. Unpublished data from

the Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture (ARiMR)² show that in 2023, 310,000 women (30% of the total) and 713,000 men (70%) received direct payments under the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (EU CAP) (so-called basic income support). However, as we mentioned, the mere use of this support does not determine being actively engaged in agricultural production. In the absence of conclusive data, the approximate scale of the presence of women-led farms in the country could be reflected by the number of individual farms run by women, where the main source of income (more than 50% of total income) of the farms was from agriculture. According to GUS data, such a situation applied to 29% of the 454,000 individual farms managed by women, i.e. about 116,000 farms [GUS 2022]. The level of feminization of domestic agriculture may also reflect the intensity of the use of public support under the CAP Strategic Plans 2023–2027, requiring relatively greater involvement of male and female beneficiaries in its acquisition (e.g. knowledge, time input) and involving control by the ARMA. Such forms of financial assistance are, for example, the so-called eco-schemes, which in 2023 were received by 37.2 thousand female farmers (26% of eco-scheme beneficiaries) and 105.7 thousand farmers (74%).

The much lower participation of women than men in domestic agriculture was also evidenced by GUS data on labour input in individual farms in Poland. In 2020, the labour input of women who were either farm users or family members in so-called annual work units (AWUs) amounted to 497 thousand AWUs (39% of total labour input) [Bank of Local Data, GUS 2022]. Women were more likely to perform part-time farm labour as spouses and family members of the main farm user [GUS 2022].

Analysing the results of the Farm Structure Survey,³ it can be concluded that female farmers were more likely to run small farms, characterised at the same time by a relatively smaller scale of agricultural production (measured by the economic size of standard production in thousands of euros). This regularity applied to European agriculture as a whole. In Poland in 2020, the share of female farmers among those managing the smallest farms in terms of area size (from 0 to 5 hectares of arable land) and by size of standard production (from 0 to 3,900 euros) was 39%. At the EU-27 level, the percentage was even relatively lower. The proportion of women in each farm size category decreased (somewhat

² These are previously unpublished data, which were provided to the authors for the Horizon SWIFT project <https://swiftproject.eu/>.

³ The data comes from the Agricultural Census, which includes the basic information on land use, sown area, livestock, means of production and income structure of households with an individual farm user carried out by the GUS.

more markedly across the EU-27 than in Poland) as the area of UR and production size increased. As a result, among those managing farms with the relatively largest area of agricultural land (100 hectares of UR and above), were 13% female farmers for the EU-27 and 24% for Poland. In contrast, in the group of farm managers who run agricultural holdings with relatively highest scale of production (250,000 SO) 11% and 28% of women were included, respectively. The use of relatively smaller area farms with limited economic potential, insufficient technical equipment, combined with low profitability of production, difficulties in selling it and administrative difficulties related to processing, were generally significant barriers to profitable agricultural activity for domestic female farmers [*Polska wieś i rolnictwo* 2022]. In Poland, in the absence of income from agricultural activities or unsatisfactory levels of income, female farmers and their family members supported themselves primarily through non-agricultural economic activity and pensions [GUS 2022]. The scale of involvement in non-agricultural economic activities and income-generating activities directly related to the farm (agro-tourism, processing of agricultural products, provision of agricultural contract work) was small [GUS 2022]. However, a survey commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development showed that female farmers are significantly more likely than male farmers to engage in non-farm income-generating activities (33 vs. 26%) [*Polska wieś i rolnictwo* 2022]. Nevertheless, as ARMA data showed, a small proportion of female farmers developed agricultural production based on their small farms. In 2023, investment grants for this purpose were obtained by 2,900 of them (public support under the CAP Strategic Plan for the development of small farms).

Public statistics data showed that the level of prevalence of socially and environmentally sustainable farming among female farmers was very low and similar to that observed in male farmers. For example, in both cases, the share of farms using organic production methods was about 2%, and the percentage of farms where the value of direct sales to consumers was more than 50% of the value of total sales was at 21% [GUS 2022]. At the same time, Institute of Public Affairs study [Sobiesiak-Penszko 2023] shows that women are much more likely than men to declare that they notice the impact of climate change on agriculture and therefore plan to abandon chemical pesticides and fertilizers.

How to study the emancipation processes of Polish women farmers – selected methodological approaches

The gender-related inequalities in the labour market that Claudia Goldin, among others, studies [cf. 1990; 2017; 2021] are particularly evident in agriculture. Although the situation is changing, as Finnish researcher Tiina Silvasti notes, “the traditional peasant scenario still has considerable influence on the daily lives of rural residents, especially on farms” [Silvasti 2003: 162]. The “invisibility” of women on family farms is widespread in Europe, and although they play an important role, sons are educated and motivated to take over farms. Daughters, on the other hand, are encouraged to be educated so that they can both supplement their income on the farm or leave the family village [Harasimowicz 2019]. Until recently, physical strength was important in the work of a farmer; today it is increasingly less important due to the mechanization of many tasks. However, it is still believed that men are better able to handle new technologies, so in the public’s opinion, farming remains a male occupation. Yet, as Drąg and Górlach argue, this is more the result of socialization, and social construction processes than objective conditions [Drąg, Górlach 2019].

The study of rural women’s emancipation processes is also a challenge in methodological terms. The problem with analysing the situation of women in rural areas and agriculture is compounded by the fact that feminist methodology is most often created by economically privileged urban people who see only one dominant form of oppression against women, namely sexism, remaining indifferent to other types of discrimination (which can enter into various relationships with sexism).

Meanwhile, as one of the most prominent scholars of the Black feminist movement, bell hooks [Drygalska 2014], points out, it is necessary to demand that this perspective be broadened, showing that alongside sexist oppression, women equally face other forms of cultural violence, such as classism (relevant especially to rural women) and/or racism and that all types of domination intersect. Given the complexity of this process, taking shape under the conditions of a patriarchal society, a transforming economy, including a rapidly industrializing agricultural sector, studying the emancipation of female farmers faces difficulties and limitations. Moreover, even if one accepts the marking of agricultural feminism in a given research situation, it is usually not articulated explicitly. This means the emergence of a dilemma as to how much of the analysed phenomena actually exists, and how much is somehow “caused” by the researcher. To this, the issue of agricultural feminism in the Polish context (and probably not only) is a tangle of threads

rooted in the history, economy, institutions and value systems of various social groups. In order to attempt to grasp it, it would hence undoubtedly be necessary to combine the perspectives of various scientific disciplines (e.g., sociology, history, anthropology, economics) and several social concepts that can be described as meso-social theories. In the situation of implementing an exploratory study, referring to multiple scientific modes of interpretation is simultaneously combined with the need to integrate more than one research method and technique. In defining, identifying, measuring, explaining or predicting the development of agricultural feminism, approaches that focus on a selected sphere of human activity (such as a sector of the economy, institutions or social norms) and methodological approaches formed on their basis prove useful.

The most interesting among them, from our point of view, is the one proposed by Carolyn E. Sachs, Feminist Agri-food Systems Theory (FAST) [Sachs et al. 2016], which combines several theoretical streams and takes into account the diverse spheres of women farmers' activities, including agricultural identities, structural and cultural barriers, and women's innovation in sustainable agriculture. This method provides a structured view of the transformation process of women's condition and roles in agriculture, as well as power relations [Fernandez-Gimenez, Oteros-Rozas, Ravera 2021; Tsiaousi, Partalidou 2023]. Research conducted according to this methodology fits into the discourse of critical feminism by attempting to understand female farmers as a group with special needs, specific values and priorities. Qualitative studies of agricultural feminism using the FAST tool have so far been conducted in the United States [Wright, Annes 2020], Greece [Tsiaousi, Partalidou 2023] and Spain [Fernandez-Gimenez, Oteros-Rozas, Ravera 2021]. Analyses using quantitative approaches have also appeared [cf. Dentzman et al. 2023].

The FAST theory combines six interrelated themes [Sachs et al. 2016]:

(1) Creating gender equality for women on farms – refers to the transformative role of women in agriculture, and addresses not only the increasing number of women farmers but also the various ways for women to enter agriculture.

(2) Asserting the identity of a farmer – refers to the growing popularity of women's self-identification as farmers with the persistence of other social identities (mother, wife, etc.).

(3) Accessing the resources they need to farm – means breaking women's historical dependence on men to access the resources needed in agriculture: agricultural land, labour, capital.

(4) Shaping new food and farming systems – refers to women's agri-food production activities that increase its added value and sustainability using new

business models and marketing strategies, including agricultural activities as a response to new community needs (recreation, health, leisure, education).

(5) Navigating agricultural organizations and institutions – this dimension is related to women's activities within agricultural institutions and organizations, which, as a rule, are not very favourable to women. Women in them therefore have to skilfully manoeuvre to express their interests and see to their realization in an unfavourable environment.

(6) Forming new networking organizations for women farmers – the issue of women creating unique and new social networks and relationships in organizations to fulfil their needs as women farmers.

In this article, we have used a quantitative data approach to present a statistical picture of female farmers in Poland against the background of the EU-27 countries, while in the qualitative dimension, we have used the FAST methodology, treating it as a theoretical framework for the research. This article is thus also an attempt, postulated by Sachs et al. [2016] to verify the usefulness of the FAST concept in different contexts and locations.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES FACING FEMALE FARMERS IN POLAND

Research methodology

In the autumn of 2023, on the basis of expert knowledge and analysis of institutions relevant for domestic agricultural sector, we conducted 12 in-depth interviews with people we identified as experts on the situation of women in Polish agriculture [Milczarek-Andrzejewska, Śpiewak 2015]. They were representatives of public institutions (including an agricultural advisory centre, the Council of Women in Agriculture operating at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development), the third sector, including agricultural self-government (the Council for Women and Families at the National Council of Agricultural Chambers), the media (journalists covering agriculture and rural areas in Poland), and socially engaged agroecological farmers. The selection of female interviewees was conducted using a convenience sampling method, influenced by their social activism, their involvement in matters concerning rural women, particularly female farmers, and their comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by this group, derived from their experiences [Winton, Sabol 2022]. This selection intended to concentrate on the issues encountered by women farmers with whom these interviewees engage and observe daily. At the same time, we are aware that such a selection of female

interviewees does not guarantee capturing the point of view of the “average” female farmer (one must consider the somewhat idealistic nature of such an assertion). There is a risk that these leaders may project their characteristics onto the broader group or impute their opinions to all female farmers. Even though our interviewees are distinguished individuals, we are convinced that their knowledge and extensive range of activities enable them to possess a profound understanding of problems of women farmers and can be considered to represent their interests.

The in-depth interviews were conducted online between October and December 2023. The interviews lasted between 41 and 95 minutes and were structured according to a pre-designed scenario that aligned with the guidelines of the FAST methodology. The questions in the research primarily focused on several key areas, including the identity of Polish female farmers, the fundamental challenges facing Polish agriculture, and the role of female farmers in addressing these challenges. Furthermore, the interviews examined the situation of farms operated by women, the involvement of women in agricultural organizations, and their various roles within the farms. In the empirical study, we referred to the theoretical framework proposed by Carolyn E. Sachs [Sachs et al. 2016; Tsiaosui, Partalidou 2023; Wright, Annes 2020], i.e. FAST, using it as a tool to identify barriers and challenges facing Polish women farmers. Following this framework, the phenomena under investigation were classified into six distinct problem areas. The data collected in the form of interview transcriptions were analysed primarily through thematic analysis of qualitative data, emphasizing the key issues identified in the study and the relevant areas outlined in the FAST framework [Kiger, Varpio 2020].

Creating gender equality for women on farms

As in many other countries around the world, Polish agriculture is dominated by men. Our female interviewees generally emphasised that it is easier for a man to become a farmer, if only because of the continuing tendency in farming families to pass farms to sons, or the still great importance of physical strength in performing some farming activities [K1, K5, K6]. At the same time, as one respondent pointed out, decisions to take over a farm are relatively more difficult for a young woman because of motherhood [K6]. Agricultural work is a twenty-four-hour-a-day responsibility, so for a person with childcare responsibilities, simultaneously running a farm could be too much of a challenge [K1]. However, according to the observations of several respondents, after a period of focus on the family, there may be an increase in a woman’s involvement in farm affairs or social activities.

Technological advances in agriculture, including the automation of tasks related to animal husbandry and crop production, are driving significant cultural transformations. These changes are fostering greater gender equality, particularly in favour of women. One respondent noted that, in contemporary times, a woman taking on the role of a farmer or farm manager is met with respect, contrasting with the discrimination or lack of regard often associated with such roles in the past.

Modern agricultural equipment has significantly levelled the playing field, it doesn't matter whether machines are operated by a man or a woman. Although there is still a lingering perception that machines are the domain of men. Husbands no longer ride on the combine, but they have employees or use services. [K3]

In addition to the fact that technical solutions potentially increase opportunities for the feminization of agriculture, women are more likely than men to contribute new elements and economic and social values to the operation of farms.

So observing these social media, young girls, there are a lot of young girls who, as I say, women on tractors sit down and do well with it. [...] And they are doing better than many men on the land. I say, we shouldn't step into the shoes of these men either, no? We also had [should have] this sphere of our own where we are strong, because where we are strong, the man is weak. [K1]

According to the respondents, another possibility for women to enter the agricultural profession is the traditional path of association with a farmer, or a fortuitous situation resulting from widowhood, among other things. According to some of the interviewees, the professional and life path for female farmers indicated is not only dominant, but also appropriate. Nevertheless, the interviewees pointed out the possibility for a woman to find a suitable "place for herself" on a farm by regulating mutual relations with a man on the basis of "cooperation, symbiosis" and division of tasks [K6]. They also saw the potential for a woman to farm successfully on her own when family or economic circumstances force her to take on such a task.

[A female farmer] if the need arises, she takes matters into her own hands and also acts independently. I am talking here about women who, for example, have lost their other half. And here I have experience with my female colleagues who have lost their husbands – farmers, and they run their farms perfectly precisely by diversifying their income or changing the profile of the farm in general. [K5]

According to one respondent, social "automatism" in the takeover of farms by men in Poland is also fostered by inheritance and taxation regulations. "In Poland, most women farm when they are forced to do so. [...] I have met women who take over farms, but they wait for their other half [...] They are forced, but

it is not their voluntary choice [...] It is also conditioned by taxation whether of ownership or inheritance” [K5].

In opinion of most of the interviewees, the role of women on farms is becoming increasingly important and noticeable. In their view, these changes are due to the increasing challenges and problems affecting the operation of farms today, such as climate change, declining profitability of agricultural production and frequent agricultural policy reforms. The new difficulties and challenges facing agriculture mean that the role of women is growing. As the interviewees note, female farmers tend to be relatively better educated people than men,⁴ open to change and multi-tasking. In their work they are guided by common sense, good work organization and planning. Women handle the majority of such tasks, including documentation, more effectively than men. As one respondent noted:

A woman gathers everything, reads it, and becomes familiar with every detail. Nowadays, with the internet, she can look things up, visit the agency, and find the necessary information. Women farmers demonstrate exceptional resourcefulness and entrepreneurial skills in their roles. [K4].

In the case of agricultural work, this translates into a relatively greater willingness to make changes on the farm, diversify agricultural activities or establish and develop contacts with the market. The typical attitude of female farmers, often necessary due to the poor financial situation of the family, is also to undertake additional labour outside the farm. Additional paid work is, as one respondent put it: “ceded mainly to women” [K5].

According to the respondents, on some farms, regardless of the persistent patriarchy, a division of tasks has developed, where management and key decision-making (e.g., about agricultural investments) belongs to the woman, while physical work and operation of machinery are the domain of men. At a time of increasing automation of agricultural activities and valorization of professional management tasks, the role of female farmers is becoming increasingly important. They are the ones who not only organise the daily work and operation of the farm, dealing with marketing, administration or agricultural accounting, but also raise funds for business development or make strategic business decisions [K1, K7, K12].

⁴ As GUS, data shows, female farmers in Poland were relatively less likely to have vocational education (in 2020, the proportion of those with agricultural education among all female farm managers was 30%, and 46% among men). However, in terms of general education, compared to farmers, female farm managers were relatively more likely to have a university degree (23 vs. 15%) and post-secondary and secondary education (42 vs. 37%) [GUS 2022].

The way I see it. Even if there is a marriage, and overwhelmingly [this is the case] it's the wife who leads, in the sense [that] she supervises and delegates tasks to her husband first of all. I have an example at home. It was always like this that my mother made all the decisions, and my father was the one who went to the field, and my mother did all the administration, she took care of all that. [...] There is no farm without a farm woman. Men do a poor job of this management when they are alone. [K1]

Asserting the identity of a farmer

Agriculture in Poland is still perceived as the domain of men. This state of affairs attempts to explain the necessity of engaging in this sphere of activity with considerable physical strength and the ability to operate machinery. As one of the respondents noted, for a long time, men themselves contributed to the perpetuation of the stereotype of the male farmer, discouraging women from entering roles that were previously not obvious to them [K3]. In her opinion, the situation of women on farms was changed only by European integration and the introduction of CAP mechanisms and institutions into Polish agriculture. This led to a significant increase in the importance of women on farms, who took up agricultural administration and accounting. In this context, one of the interviewees points out the different approach to facing agricultural bureaucracy in female and male farmers. The former, in her opinion, solve problems, look for a way out of the situation, do not give up. Men, on the other hand, often do not understand farm regulations and requirements, as a result of which they often give up on obtaining additional sources of funding for agricultural activities.

A female farmer is a woman who is not afraid of challenges. Nowadays, she is familiar with accounting, with all kinds of documentation, because such things are assigned to women. Because this physical labour nowadays we experience less and less, because we are replaced by equipment, machines that do it all, and we female farmers deal with all those things that the EU requires of us today. That is, we deal with all the paperwork, documentation, we deal with writing applications, applying for additional funds for the farm, and at the same time deal with raising children, running the house. Of course, together with her husband, because today this division of these roles is not what it used to be – it all works together... but in the main, home and family - this is what a rural woman does. With a sense of such tradition, and at the same time combining modernity. [K5]

This meaningful involvement and the subsequent influence on farm affairs has given women a sense of agency and the value of their work, which seems to have translated into their professional self-identification. Being convinced of the value of their contribution to the operation of the farm (even when formally owned by another person), they are more likely to identify themselves as farmers. In the opinion of most of the female interviewees, the farm today is a family

enterprise, where both men and women have their own contributions and roles. Hence, according to them, the people who run them should be referred to as female farmers (farmers' wives) or, less frequently, female agricultural entrepreneurs. Respondents noted a relatively greater tendency for women to refer to themselves as farmers. In fact, as one respondent emphasised, female farmers increasingly talk about their profession and who they are with pride [K10].

The informants [especially K8 and K3] recognise the significant changes that have taken place in the Polish countryside over the past 30 years. They emphasise the positive nature of these transformations, their equal direction and high dynamics. The statements of all respondents lead us to conclude that they are aware of the significant transformation of social relations in terms of gender equality. Indeed, they all referred to the past as a counterpoint to the current situation of women in agriculture. Perhaps the pace of the transformations taking place makes the participants in the survey feel empowered as farmers and rural women in general, so that they do not identify the barriers that still exist. Referring to a common metaphor, one might say that in observing the process of the glass filling up, they have lost sight of its empty part. Nevertheless, they feel the consequences of this oversight, which they articulate when discussing the differences in how women and men function in agriculture. They highlight the workload borne by women farmers, the need for systemic support for women in the primary sector, and the image of the woman farmer as a figure of success overcoming adversity.

Access to resources

In the interviews, the issue of women's access to the resources necessary for farming was not addressed explicitly, and the interviewees themselves did not identify it as relevant to women's activity in the first sector. Only one of the interviewees [K2], citing the results of the European Commission's research, pointed to women's difficult access to productive resources. The other respondents do not seem to see gender as a differentiating factor in terms of access to land, capital or labour. However, an analysis of their statements indicates that there are some limitations. Responding to a question about the differentiation of the barriers that male and female farmers face in their work, one interviewee said that nowadays the two can no longer be clearly separated, as men and women face the same challenges. She noted, however, that there is still a persistent perception that machinery is the domain of men, which limits the availability of new technologies for women [K3]. She also pointed to other issues that affect women farmers

either exclusively or to a greater extent than their male counterparts, revealing the inherent invisibility of these inequalities.

The stereotypical attribution of machine proficiency to men appeared in the statements of several respondents, but only one interpreted this phenomenon in terms of inequality in access to the means of production [K12].

[...] a trip to the Pöttinger factory, which makes agricultural machinery. Well, and the men themselves went, although the wives expressed, at least some of them, a desire to go. Well, they said, of course, no – this is a trip for guys. They were also very surprised that I was present there. But I was also there because of the fact that this is kind of an industry that interests me somewhere, I'm an agricultural consultant, so I kind of want to know, actually. [K12]

The attitude of farmers preventing women from participating in a tour of a machinery factory was undoubtedly also influenced by social factors (the desire to meet in a male group), but the context and purpose of the event – learning the ins and outs of heavy equipment production – are not insignificant as traditionally attributed to the sphere of male competence [Saugeres 2002].

The informants pointed out the need for women who want to farm to make more effort: A woman has to work harder to achieve the same thing. I think it's like that in every industry. That we have to do more, we always have to do more, it's also, I'll be honest, can discourage women from doing more and achieving their dream goals. We really have to put in more work to achieve the same success as a man. I for one think that everything comes faster, easier and simpler to men because of their gender. [K1]

They [women in agriculture] proved themselves, because they always had such... I don't want to say, because I had exactly the same thing, that they always had to prove they could do something. [K3]

Also, a survey participant who expressed her belief that women in agriculture do not experience discrimination emphasised the role of determination in running an agricultural enterprise: “there is no shortage of determined women”, “determined and tenacious women succeed” [K10].

Some of the female experts we surveyed advocated the need to implement systemic solutions to support women in agriculture [K2, K3, K6]: “I for one think that certain things, once there is more public awareness, need to be introduced by law, by statute. To force something. Enforce a little” [K3].

The system is badly needed, because without these opportunities there is no first step. But I feel that it shouldn't just target women, but also men, raising awareness that it would be nice if women also had opportunities, and this is no form of threat to them. [K2]

It should be noted, however, that those surveyed did not agree. There were also opinions questioning the legitimacy of solutions that reward women as unfair, which could lead to discrimination against men [K12].

Shaping new food and farming systems

According to the respondents, women in agriculture are more inclined to seek solutions, implement new business models, enhance the added value of products, and expand the scope of farm operations [K2, K3, K6, K9, K10, K12]. Due to their greater involvement in the administrative and accounting aspects of farm management, they are also better prepared for business development planning and risk assessment [K1, K7, K12]. Moreover, they are more likely to rely on scientific evidence in decision-making [K2, K4, K11].

However, one respondent expressed a differing perspective, stating that she does not observe gender-based differences in agricultural business strategies and does not view women as the “vanguard of best practices” [K8].

Respondents indicated that women are more likely to choose to diversify production or expand farm operations to include processing [K5, K11, K12]. The fact that female farmers are more likely to decide to set up RHD⁵ should be associated, on the one hand, with the traditional division of responsibilities, which predisposes women to engage in processing and retail. On the other hand, however, an important factor influencing women’s activity in this field may be knowledge of regulations and the resulting greater self-confidence. Survey participants pointed to fear of control as an important element holding back the decision to expand the farm:

In general, farmers are afraid of inspections. This is something I have noticed for many years now. When we entered the Union, we were all afraid of this Union, this big brother, that it would inspect us from everything, that we would have to return funds. [K9]

For farmers, it is essential to “demystify” the concept of regulatory control. As one respondent explained during discussions about establishing direct sales (RHD), they heard from agricultural schools that in countries like Germany, the approach is different. For example, when someone starts their own business, health inspectors do not immediately conduct inspections. Instead, they first inform the farmer about the requirements they need to meet and later visit to ask how they can assist in meeting those standards [K9].

Knowledge of the formal requirements and rights of farmer women undoubtedly offsets similar concerns. This is probably why one interviewee pointed to women’s involvement in farm decision-making as one of the factors of economic success. Referring to her own example and that of her female colleagues, she argued that it is female farmers who make decisions to diversify their activities, for example, on dairy farms they initiate cheese production, increasing the income of the farming family [K6].

⁵ Agricultural Retail Trade.

According to our respondents, women are more open to change, particularly in implementing eco-friendly solutions and recognizing the risks posed by climate change. They are more likely to independently seek solutions and draw on expert knowledge and scientific research findings [K11]. "For the most part, women respond to these [scientific] reports. As an agro-environmental consultant with many years of experience, I notice that women are more likely to decide to convert their farms to organic farming" [K10].

Increasing quality of the products is also followed by the use of new marketing strategies, such as the use of social media, storytelling, and the creation of themed villages. Women seem to have a better understanding of consumer needs: "now a product must have a soul, have a story" [K11] and are able to build more lasting relationships with customers.

Take active roles in agricultural organizations and agricultural advisory centres

The experts we surveyed highlighted the remarkable activity of women in rural areas. For some respondents, the increasing number of female village leaders [K6, K9, K11] serves as strong evidence of this trend. One expert viewed gender parity at the village leadership level as a potential stepping stone to women holding significant positions beyond the local level: "I would like to see this village leadership as a political activity, not a social one" [K3].

It is important to note, however, that the rise in the number of female village leaders is not solely a result of the growing social engagement of rural women. It also reflects changes in the role of village leaders and the evolving expectations of local communities. These shifts have made the position less appealing to men, opening opportunities for women. Despite this, women increasingly view village leadership as a pathway for self-realization, enabling them to transcend traditional gender roles and pursue professional or educational aspirations they may not have fulfilled in other domains [Matysiak 2013:148].

In our view, the growing number of female village leaders signifies broader socio-political engagement among rural women. However, in the context of advancing the interests of female farmers, we believe that active participation in chambers of agriculture remains essential. Respondents' opinions regarding activity in chambers of agriculture are divided. For some, the chambers are a good example of women's growing involvement in agricultural issues, while for others, the organizations appear to be male-dominated and indifferent to issues important to female farmers.

Noting the growing participation of women in the chambers, the first group stresses that, despite the situation, which has been perpetuated for decades, in which the positions of presidents of the Chambers of Agriculture⁶ are usually filled by men, women's activity is clearly noticeable at all other levels. "Initially [women] were engaged only in organizational and administrative work, but they have begun to assert their position. They are directors of regional offices, and have led to the establishment of a women's council" [K3].

Some respondents also stressed that while there is indeed a lack of women at the highest political levels, the most important positions in institutions established to represent the interests of female and male farmers are held by women. Examples given by the informants included the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture, and the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund [K5].

On the other hand, in the second group of respondents – convinced that women are under-represented in these structures – the prevailing belief is that the "eternal" balance of power, in which men dominate, operates. This is confirmed by such statements as: "In the rural environment, I don't see many women at high levels. There is a male group holding power" [K8]. "As for me – a drama. I am disappointed. They are mostly men. We have a chamber of agriculture made up of only gentlemen. Maybe there is one lady" [K12].

Individual respondents believe that the limited participation of women in agricultural organizations is largely due to male jealousy of their success, which creates barriers for female farmers striving to achieve their goals. This hostile environment is said to discourage women from becoming active in agricultural chambers.

Additionally, some respondents expressed the view that the nature of these organizations itself alienates women, particularly those who value having a tangible impact on real-world issues. As one respondent noted: "Trade organizations have little influence on agricultural policy. Most decisions are made at the European level, and we have less and less influence" [K10].

However, according to the majority of survey participants, the under-representation of women in agricultural organizations, is primarily due to a lack of time for such activities.

⁶ It is worth remembering that turnout for elections to the National Council of Agricultural Chambers is extremely low. In the last elections to the Council of Agricultural Chambers, 5.9% of eligible voters took part.

Maybe it's also a matter of the fact that in order to act in an organization you have to devote time to it. A woman, in addition to having a job on the farm, has children, has the school of these children, has a house to run, has to cook dinner and so on. Here no one can replace her, and it's not like we have organizations in a neighbouring village, where we can drive up in the evening and have a meeting, but somewhere in Poland, where you have to devote, let's say, a whole day to the trip. [K7]

Another interviewee, who works at an agricultural advisory centre on a daily basis, takes a similar view. According to the respondent's observation, women begin to get involved in social and political life only after they have raised children [K9].

Only one participant in the survey indicated that the biggest barrier that hinders women's social activities and membership in organizations and associations is not lack of time, but the traditional model of education and upbringing of young girls, which places the woman in the home and not in the public space: "[...] from the very beginning it was imposed on us, what we are allowed, what we are not allowed, some women admit that they don't do something, because "no, because what will people say". This is changing, but there is much to do. There are still stereotypes left in our heads" [K12].

Forming new networking organizations for women farmers

Lack of cooperation among farmers and association, regardless of gender, is a serious problem in the rural areas. It was mentioned by all female participants in the survey, both those involved in industrial and large-scale agriculture, as well as representatives of organic farming. A few examples of fruitful cooperation between farmers can be found among dairy farmers, according to the interviewees. According to one interviewee, dairy cooperatives, which are quite widespread in Poland, are guaranteed to shorten supply chains. However, there is still room for improvement in this area as well, according to her [K5].

As indicated by those surveyed, the main obstacles to association are mental barriers [K1] and the belief that it is safer to act separately.

Some interviewees even consider the lack of cooperation between female and men farmers as one of the most important problems of modern agriculture [cf. Knieć 2019]:

[...] the ailment of Poles and especially of farmers is the inability to cooperate, which actually aggravates the other problems, because if farmers were able to organise themselves better and create some organizations or unions that would better represent them, certain harmful phenomena could be counteracted. [K8]

As of today, there is no thriving agricultural organization, one that is young, modern, with

a new approach, with a new vision. What has been created is still wading somewhere in these stereotypes. Agrounia⁷ was a breakaway, but Kolodziejczak began to make a political career... [K12]

According to the interviews, there is a lack of women-only agricultural organizations in the countryside, or organizations centred around the problems of female farmers. When asked about official women's associations and organizations, the interviewees most often mentioned well-established organizations, namely the Rural Housewives' Circle,⁸ noting, however, that these are not initiatives representing the interests of female farmers: "In KGW, women act together. They can do interesting things for the community. But it's more like knitting, festivals, some workshops, they are not agricultural initiatives" [K7].

In response to inquiries about organizations representing the interests of women farmers, our interviewees frequently mentioned the European organization Copa-Cogeca and the international peasant movement La Via Campesina. In contrast, among Polish organizations with a similar focus, the most commonly cited were EkoLand, which represents the interests of organic farmers, the Women's Councils within the Chambers of Agriculture, and the Council for Rural Women and Families at the National Council of Agricultural Chambers.

In particular, the National Council for Rural Women and Families at the NCR, established in 2014, had a good reputation among respondents.⁹ It was noted that it served as an advisory voice to the board, primarily focusing on social issues such as insurance, health care, and social benefits. One member of the council was among the survey participants, and she also cited the establishment of analogous bodies in provincial and county chambers as a positive example of the involvement of female farmers. According to her, women have a fresh perspective on health and social issues [K6]. It is worth noting, however, that the council's powers are limited to social issues not directly related to agriculture, which petrifies the traditional division of roles.

There is also a lack of informal forms of cooperation among women farmers. The respondents were overwhelmingly unable to name significant examples of informal networks of mutual support among women in agriculture. Only one of them, who runs an organic farm, said that informal cooperation among women farmers is alive and growing:

⁷ Leader of Agrounia – social movement created in 2018. In 2024 he was appointed for the vice-minister of Farming and Rural Development.

⁸ Polish name is Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich and abbreviation is KGW.

⁹ Among other things, the council announces a biennial competition entitled "Women farmers driving innovation on farms in Poland".

Informal cooperation among rural women does exist. I know women who run seed banks; in fact, twice a year I hold a produce fair on my farm combined with a seed exchange of varieties that we want to preserve, that can withstand our climate and soil conditions well. Accessing, preserving and exchanging seeds ensures food security. And this is the informal cooperation of women who realise the importance of this heritage contained in seeds. [K10]

CONCLUSIONS

The research shows that Polish agriculture remains male-dominated and is still strongly influenced by traditional patriarchal cultural structures. The transformations we are seeing, such as an increase in the percentage of female farm owners, do not go hand in hand with changes in deeply held beliefs about gender roles. As in Greek agriculture, the transformations are occurring quite quickly, but are not deep enough [Tsiaosui, Partalidou 2023: 26].

On most Polish family farms, a traditional division of responsibilities persists, making it challenging for women to fully engage in professional work. As a result, women often face greater difficulty deciding to pursue farming as a profession, and even when they do it can be harder for them to become actively involved in agricultural organizations. Marriage or inheriting a farm from a husband is still frequently cited as the easiest and most obvious path into the profession, although it is important to note that it is not the only one.

In the respondents' statements, determination and exceptional diligence consistently emerge as key factors enabling women to succeed in agriculture. On one hand, this may reflect the profile of the respondents themselves, who can be described as "successful women" and thus tend to evaluate the position of women in agriculture through the lens of their own experiences. On the other hand, these comments vividly highlight the scale of the challenges women face in the agricultural sector.

Women in Polish agriculture identify themselves as farmers, are proud of their profession and see it as a form of business/enterprise. Also, farmers' wives who do not own farms and/or do not work on the land, but provide administrative and accounting support for the farm identify themselves with agriculture. This attitude stems from a belief in the importance of the work they do and a recognition of the value of their contribution to the operation of the farm. One of our interviewees explicitly links the accession to the EU and the subsequent increase in the administrative burden on farmers to the empowerment of women, who were able to meet the new demands better than men [K3]. It is also worth mentioning that farmers are among the professional groups that enjoy steadily increasing respect

[CBOS 2019: 3] and public trust [Instytut Finansów 2023: 5], which may translate into a desire to establish an agricultural identity.

The majority of respondents did not perceive difficulties in accessing key resources for farming. However, the interviews show that there are some barriers, stemming from traditional understandings of gender roles, such as with regard to favouring boys as “natural” successors or denying women competence in operating agricultural machinery. However, these issues remain transparent to the respondents. Even when barriers to accessing resources are perceived by them, the respondents do not interpret them in terms of discrimination. A large number of those surveyed were negative about the idea of systemic solutions to facilitate women’s access to funding, arguing that “gender points” are a form of unfair favouritism to female farmers. Some also expressed concern that similar mechanisms could lead to questioning women’s competence in agriculture.

It seems that women are more involved than men in creating a new agri-food system – they are more willing to look for ways to diversify production, set up RHDs and are more open to implementing new solutions.¹⁰ At the same time, while engaged in processing or organic production, they remain, so to speak, anchored in the stereotypically defined sphere of women’s activity, and their sensitivity to climate and ecological issues is explained by their “natural” predisposition to care for the environment – family health, animal welfare, etc. Women’s innovation in agriculture, even on a local scale, is also sometimes dictated by economic interests – having a statistically smaller acreage, they are forced to develop the added value of the product to keep the business profitable. It is thus necessary to nuance the not infrequently raised argument about the culturally motivated (feminist) phenomenon of innovation and versatility of female farmers and entrepreneurs [Shahbaz et al. 2022].

Women’s participation in agricultural organizations remains rather low, the respondents mostly expressed the belief that it is insufficient. Those who recognised the positive changes that have taken place in this sphere also emphasised that women are a minority in agricultural organizations. This is evidenced by the clear disparities in the board structures of the Chambers of Agriculture (the organization established to represent the interests of farmers as a professional group). While 80 board members of all regional branches are men, there are only six women serving in this capacity.

¹⁰ The above weakness of public statistics, which does not provide data on RHD by gender, means that we can only estimate based on our research.

In a traditionally male environment, it is more difficult for women to succeed, and some of those interviewed even spoke of women's access to important positions being hindered. Their activism is also negatively affected by the burden of domestic responsibilities and the culturally based discouragement of public activities. The existing structures for organizing women, at the Ministry of Agriculture and the Chambers of Agriculture, are not particularly attractive to respondents; most did not even identify them when we asked about Polish organizations for women farmers. There is also a lack of informal networks that meet similar goals. A semblance of recognition of women's interests is created by women's councils established at the chambers of agriculture and at the ministry. However, these are advisory bodies whose influence on reality can be questioned. In the case of KRIR, moreover, the council's competence is limited to social issues – problems concerning the situation of women and families in rural areas. At the same time, the respondents raise the problem of insufficient cooperation among farmers (regardless of gender) as a factor negatively affecting the development of the sector and the influence of the farming community on agricultural and environmental policy. Studies of the level of social trust and cooperation confirm these diagnoses, indicating a low level of trust and a low propensity to undertake joint initiatives in rural areas [Domanski 2018; Tarkowski 2017]. There is little gender dimension to this problem, as it affects women and men to a similar degree (although the latter are characterised by slightly higher generalised social trust, [cf. CBOS 2022]. In the case of the former, a certain role may be played by the responsibility for caregiving and household duties, already mentioned several times, limiting the time that female farmers could devote to organizational activities. However, with regard to the sheer willingness to undertake this kind of activity and the belief in the success of the venture, gender is unlikely to matter much. However, this “mental barrier”, as one respondent [K1] put it, affects women, who are still under-represented in agricultural organizations to a greater extent.

Women's work is more related to the private sphere than men's, which is slower to undergo changes. Those in the field of farming are forced by external factors: the market, trainers, agricultural advisers, administration [Krzyworzeka 2014: 34]. The low dynamics of transformation in the private sphere is confirmed by the observations of our female interviewees, who point to EU accession and the changes in farm management forced by it as a turning point in the formation of emancipatory attitudes among Polish female farmers.

The use of the FAST approach, for the first time in Polish conditions, enabled a systematised look at the transformation process of the situation of women in agriculture in the 21st century. The weakness of Polish statistics, as well as the

lack of representativeness and the purposeful selection of interviewees for the study, who were women representing specific groups related to agriculture (e.g., social activists, representatives of public administration, organic food producers), limits the possibility of showing a full picture of the transformation of the situation of Polish women farmers. Nevertheless, based on our own research and secondary data available, we were able to identify the main systemic challenges and barriers facing women farmers. Our study is exploratory, allowing us to understand the context and identify the main problems, because, as we have indicated, women farmers in Poland are studied very rarely, while their role in the necessary transformation of the food system can be significant.

Acknowledgement

We would like to convey our sincere appreciation to the female experts who participated in the in-depth interviews and generously shared their insights, knowledge, and experiences concerning the status of women in Polish agriculture. Additionally, we extend our gratitude to the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture, especially to Ms. Joanna Gierulska, Vice President, and Ms. Katarzyna Kotańska, Director, for their provision of aggregated data regarding the beneficiaries of selected EU Common Agricultural Policy instruments in Poland for the period of 2023–2027.

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**POLSKIE ROLNICZKI W XXI WIEKU
– MIĘDZY KONSERWATYZMEM
A NIEWYARTYKUŁOWANĄ EMANCYPACJĄ**

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja barier strukturalnych i kulturowych w procesie upodmiotowania kobiet w polskim rolnictwie oraz głównych wyzwań systemowych stojących przed polskimi rolniczkami. Ramą metodologiczną przeprowadzonych badań jest metodologia zbudowana na koncepcji feministycznego systemu rolno-spożywczego (FAST – *feminist agrifood systems theory*). Bazując na własnych badaniach jakościowych i dostępnych danych wtórnych, autorzy rekonstruuja proces transformacji sytuacji kobiet w rolnictwie w XXI w. Zmiany, jakie zaszły w tym czasie, mają charakter równościowy, cechuje je duża dynamika, jednak uwarunkowania kulturowe sprawiają, że tradycyjne ograniczenia wciąż stanowią barierę dla rolniczek w Polsce.

Słowa kluczowe: feminizm, polskie rolniczki, rolnictwo, wieś