
Study on the Condition, Needs and Problems of Regional Social Economy Entities on the Example of Rural Housewives' Circles in Poland

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to indicate the condition of local organizations whose role is to achieve socio-economic goals in regional areas in Poland. This is because the conditions in which such organizations operate have a significant impact on their achievement of their goals, which include social integration, building social capital, and helping disadvantaged groups.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The basic research tool used in the article is a quantitative, survey, Computer Assisted Web Interview covering the entire area of Poland by province. A representative sample of 300 entities was adopted. The survey had a nationwide character, so a proportional division of the research sample according to the number of Rural Housewives' Circles operating in each province of Poland was adopted.

Findings: Circles of Rural Housewives counted as Social Economy organizations carry out many important activities in the aspect of activation and social exclusion in the Polish territories. Their growing role and dynamic development can be seen. This activity is accompanied by barriers and problems with which KGW members must cope. Undoubted challenges are issues of financing, promotion of these organizations. We should also mention insufficient cooperation with the local government environment, lack of premises or complicated reporting procedure.

Practical Implications: The results of the research, its conclusions and recommendations can become valuable material, indicating the problems and ways to solve them, helping to develop the social economy in Poland, in relation to Circles of Rural Housewives and small local communities, where the social economy is developing most dynamically.

Originality/Value: The article describes and verifies the assumptions of realization of social goals in the area of social economy, which especially in Poland has not been sufficiently described. There are also few primary and secondary materials describing the activities of organizations such as Rural Housewives' Circles in the literature.

Keywords: Social economy, rural housewives' circles, regional development, social exclusion.

JEL codes: R11, R13, I 38.

Paper type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

The social economy is defined as that part of the economy that encompasses a variety of businesses, organizations and different legal entities. They share the objective of systematically putting people first, producing a positive impact on local communities and pursuing a social cause (European Commission, 2023). It can also be defined as activities for the benefit of the local community in the field of social and professional reintegration, creation of jobs for people at risk of social exclusion and provision of social services, carried out in the form of economic activity, public benefit activity and other activities of a paid nature (Dz.U. poz., 1812).

The social economy is playing an increasingly important role in bridging social and economic disparities in Poland. This can be evidenced by the following data: social economy entities generated a turnover of more than PLN 40 billion in 2021, nearly 97.4 thousand such entities operated in Poland. Social economy entities provided employment for a total of more than 209 thousand people of whom almost 26 thousand belonged to the group of socially excluded people (GUS, 2023).

That is why the condition and related preferences and needs of social economy organizations are so important for more effective realization of socio-economic goals. It is worth noting that at the turn of the decade there was a 19% increase in the number of registered organizations. Most of these organizations are grassroots in nature and respond to needs perceived locally and regionally, so the activities of social entities are mainly targeted and produce results in solving local community problems of regional scope.

One of the active ones are the Rural Housewives' Circles (KGW), established for social integration. Such organizations, which have existed in Poland since 1877, are the most popular form of women's self-organization in rural areas. They are an important organization of local civil society and actively shape social potential and rural public space.

Nowadays, rural housewives' circles are a place to integrate villagers and cultivate and maintain traditions. In 2018, with the enactment of the Law on Rural Housewives' Circles, their stature increased as they gained legal independence. The circles in the new law are defined as a voluntary, independent of government administration and local government units, self-governing organization of rural residents, supporting the development of rural entrepreneurship and activity, working for the benefit of rural communities.

This growing role of KGW is recognized in the literature. Tomkiewicz (2019) writes that "in recent years there has been a very dynamic increase in the activity of rural housewives' circles in rural communities in supporting the development of women's entrepreneurship and building social ties between rural residents" (Tomkiewicz, 2019).

According to current data, there are 11145 Rural Housewives' Circles in Poland (Central Economic Information Center, 2023). A detailed breakdown is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. List of Rural Women's Circles with percentage distribution in the provinces of Poland in 2023

Province	Number of KGW	Percentage
Dolnoslonskie Province	423	3,85%
Kujawsko-Pomorskie Province	633	5,76%
Lubelskie Province	1368	12,44%
Lubuskie Province	175	1,59%
Lodzkie Province	961	8,74%
Malopolskie Province	796	7,24%
Mazowieckie Province	1524	13,86%
Opolskie Province	151	1,37%
Podkarpackie Province	788	7,17%
Podlaskie Province	439	3,99%
Pomorskie Province	223	2,03%
Slaskie Province	350	3,18%
Swietokrzyskie Province	683	6,21%
Warminsko-Mazurskie Province	421	3,83%
Wielkopolskie Province	1579	14,36%
Zachodniopomorskie Province	481	4,37%

Note: Names of provinces used as recommended Commission on Standardization of Geographical Names Outside the Republic of Poland (gov.pl 2023).

Source: Own elaboration based on: *Kola Gospodyń Wiejskich stan na 07.03.2025.*

2. Data and Methods

A nationwide survey of rural housewives' circles (KGWs) was conducted to provide a preliminary diagnosis of their situation, with particular emphasis on the areas of activity of these circles, financial and membership situation. The surveys were conducted in the period 25.07-31.08.2021. They made it possible to identify the real problems faced by KGWs and their support needs. The research particularly sought to obtain candid statements from KGW representatives about their current situation.

To achieve this, the author sought to present the ways in which these organizations operate, as well as their key features and key barriers to their activities, based on quantitative data. Quantitative research was conducted using a survey questionnaire.

In the quantitative survey research, the research questionnaire consisted of 14 questions proper and 4 metric and filter questions. The CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) method was adopted as the method of questionnaire collection.

Semi-open-ended questions with the response option of other (what?) closed with disjunctive (the possibility of choosing one answer from more than two options) and conjunctive (the possibility of indicating more than one answer) cafeteria were used.

The measurement scales adopted were: nominal scale (including Likert-scale, among others), positional scale and interval scale.

Prior to the implementation stage of the survey proper, a pilot study was conducted to check the correctness and proper understanding by the respondents of the questions asked.

The research was nationwide, therefore a proportional division of this research sample was adopted according to the number of KGWs in each province. A statement presenting the state of KGWs as of 25.07.2021 was used to determine the proportion.

525 responses were obtained, including 337 completed questionnaires by KGWs from different regions, which contained complete responses and these were further analyzed. Table 2 shows the distribution of the proportion of the surveyed group.

Table 2. List of rural housewives' circles by province with % arrangement to be surveyed and material collected - as of 25.07.2021

Province	Number of KGW	Percentage of KGWs of the surveyed group	Number of organizations constituting the study sample	Number of questionnaires collected
Dolnoslonskie Province	354	3,6%	11	15
Kujawsko-Pomorskie Province	536	5,5%	16	16
Lubelskie Province	1274	13%	39	32
Lubuskie Province	139	1,4%	4	4
Lodzkie Province	836	8,5%	25	25
Malopolskie Province	830	8,5%	25	28
Mazowieckie Province	1303	13,3%	40	46
Opolskie Province	124	1,3%	2	5
Podkarpackie Province	780	8%	24	24
Podlaskie Province	367	3,7%	11	30
Pomorskie Province	294	3%	8	9
Slaskie Province	309	3,2%	9	9
Swietokrzyskie	635	6,5%	19	19

Province				
Warmińsko-Mazurskie Province	346	3,5%	10	11
Wielkopolskie Province	1467	15%	44	45
Zachodniopomorskie Province	417	4,3%	13	20

Source: Own elaboration.

It should be noted that the KGW research had a much broader and more comprehensive character than that presented in the article. The described part of the research is selectively extracted for the customs indicated in the above research paper. The reason for this approach is dictated by the limitations of the publisher's requirements.

The author intends to publish the results of the next part of the research in future papers, as qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews was conducted. This will be an apt complement to the above article and will allow the condition and functioning of KGWs to be assessed in a broad spectrum.

3. Results

In the initial part of the study, the areas of KGW's activities were defined, in accordance with the 2018 law, according to which the tasks of the Rural Housewives' Circles should include conducting social and educational and cultural activities in rural communities, conducting activities for the comprehensive development of rural areas, supporting the development of women's entrepreneurship, initiating and carrying out activities to improve the living and working conditions of women in the countryside, disseminating and developing forms of cooperation, management and rational methods of household management, representing the interests of the rural women's community before public administration bodies, and developing folk culture, including in particular local and regional culture (Dz. U. 2018, item 2212).

The primary area of interest of KGWs is primarily local products, preparing dishes related to traditional regional cuisine - 86.4% of indications as an area of activity. These dishes are often served at picnics, festivals (handled by 80.7% of KGWs) and special events, which ranks third as an area of activity (65.3% of indications). Associated with this area of KGW activity is the promotion of local and regional products. This type of activity is dealt with by 53.4% of the circles and ranks on the sixth position.

The second area of KGW's activities includes activities for the benefit of the circle's members and the local community. It includes: organization of training/workshops - 58.8% of indications and fourth place in the structure of types of activities,

organization of excursions and pilgrimages - 53.4% of indications and seventh place in the structure of types of activities, conducting activities to improve the living and working conditions of women in the countryside - 48.4% of indications and eighth place in the structure of types of activities, promotion of active lifestyles, such as playing sports together - 45.1% of indications and ninth place in the structure of types of activities, supporting the development of women's entrepreneurship - 35.3% of indications and tenth place in the structure of types of activities.

The third area of KGW's activities is related to regional and artistic traditions and includes: folk handicrafts and fine arts - 56.7% of indications and fifth place in the structure of types of activities, reconstruction of traditions and history of the region - 18.1% of indications and thirteenth place in the structure of types of activities, running a folk singing group - 11.9% of indications and running a folk theater group - 4.2% of indications.

Rural women's circles cooperate with local authorities (municipal and district), local NGOs, 25.2% of responses indicate that KGWs represent the interests of rural women to public administration bodies and support the preventive actions of municipal authorities in emergency situations - 23.4% of indications.

It can be assessed that cooperation with local authorities and entities is not yet sufficiently developed. This problem was the subject of the next part of the survey, which analyzed the aspect of cooperation with the aforementioned organizations.

The results indicate relatively good cooperation with local authorities, as 91.7% of the KGWs surveyed responded that they cooperate with municipal offices, 35.9% with county offices and 34.7% with marshal offices.

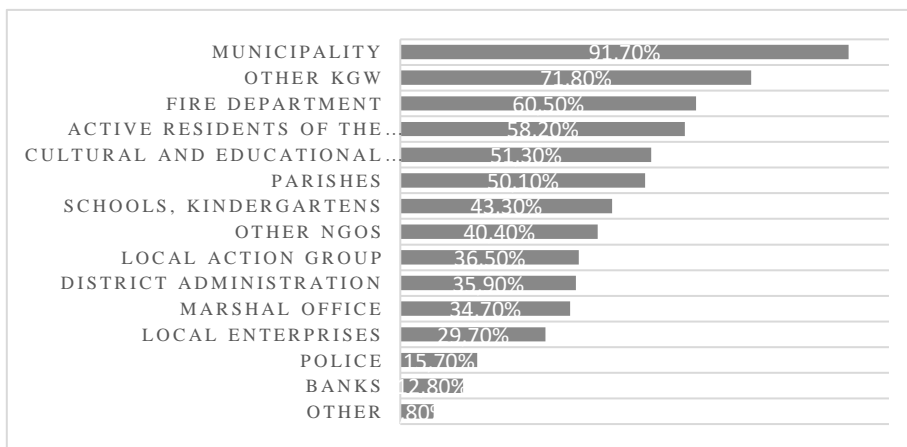
Cooperation with other KGWs should also be viewed positively, with 71.8% of indications, with volunteer fire departments, 60.5% of indications, and with residents of the municipality, 58.2% of indications, which is particularly important, since KGWs, by definition, operate precisely among their local community.

It is also worth noting that the Rural Housewives' Circles, in carrying out their tasks, can cooperate and collaborate with each other, as well as voluntarily associate and form associations of Rural Housewives' Circles.

Critically, very low (or even negligible) cooperation with village councils, community cultural centers, hospices (6.8% of indications of cooperation) and with the police - 15.7% of indications.

Significant improvement is needed in cooperation with local entrepreneurs, with only 29.7% of KGWs indicating this, as well as with local action groups, with 36.5% of indications, and other NGOs, with which 40.4% of circles cooperate. Detailed results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Institutions with which the Rural Housewives' Circles cooperate.



Source: Own elaboration.

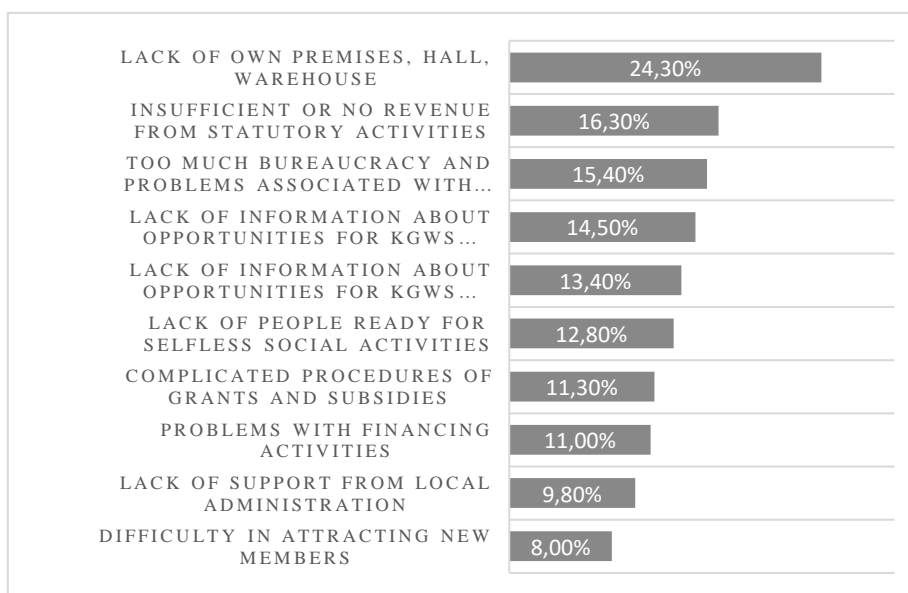
Another aspect was related to the difficulties of running and operating KGWs, as indicated by the survey, the most common problems that respondents identified as important and very important were, in order, lack of their own premises or warehouse, insufficient income or lack of income from statutory activities, too much bureaucracy and problems related to carrying out administrative and office work, lack of space in the village for organizing events, meetings, lack of information about opportunities for KGWs in terms of financing activities, lack of people ready to act selflessly on a social basis, complicated paperwork of grantors, problems with financing activities, fundraising, lack of support from the local administration (municipality, county, etc.), difficulties in attracting new members or volunteers. Detailed data are presented in Figure 2.

It can be noted that in the scale of problems a lot of them concern the forms and manner of financing KGWs. Lack of funds, insufficient funding for statutory activities, complicated grant procedures for KGW activities. This situation is slowly changing; in 2020, Rural Circles were able to apply to ARMA for a grant of PLN 31 million for their activities (Mikos, 2020).

The pool of funds provided for this purpose was PLN 70 million in 2021 (the year of the study) (Marciniak-Musiał, 2021). In 2022, the funds were the same (gov.pl, 2022), while in 2023 it is a total of PLN 120 million (Czupryniak, 2023). The increase in funds for KGW activities, taking into account the maximum funding from ARMA over the last three years, is presented in Figure 3.

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Figure 2. Types of problems that affect KGW in Poland in terms of percentage indications



Source: Own elaboration.

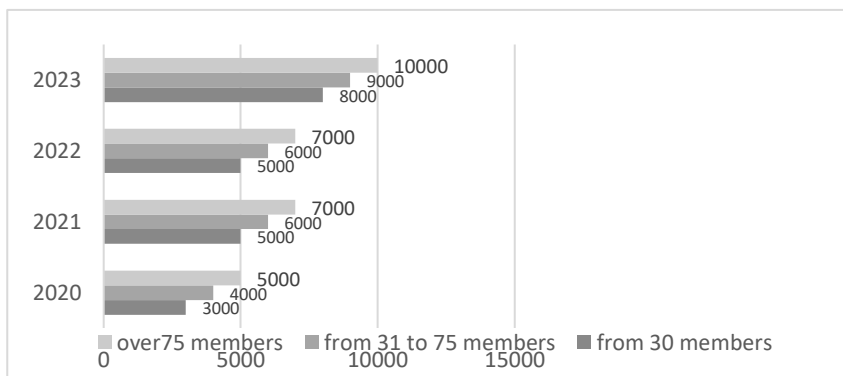
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The indicated problems of raising funds for KGW activities prompted the author to study this issue in more detail. It should be mentioned that the legal personality of KGWs allows them to obtain funding for their activities from external sources. The 2018 Law on Countryside Circles gives these organizations full opportunity to raise funds for statutory activities.

They can not only apply for special start-up financial support, but by being given the opportunity to independently apply for funds (including European funds), grants and participation in development programs, they become full participants in these solutions. The law also gives them the opportunity to accumulate assets and conduct business activities. Circles can accept donations, inheritances and bequests. This significantly expands the ability of KGWs to stabilize their finances, thereby increasing their capacity to operate.

Figure 3. Comparison of ARMA funding for KGW in 2020-2023 in PLN



Source: Own elaboration on the basis of: (Mikos, 2020; Marciniak-Musiał, 2021; gov.pl, 2022; Czupryniak, 2023).

These increased fundraising opportunities prompted further research into the types of funding sources for KGWs. Funds from ARMA, as well as membership dues, were cited as the main ways. A large number of circles subsist on the contributions of their members and on what they earn from their statutory activities.

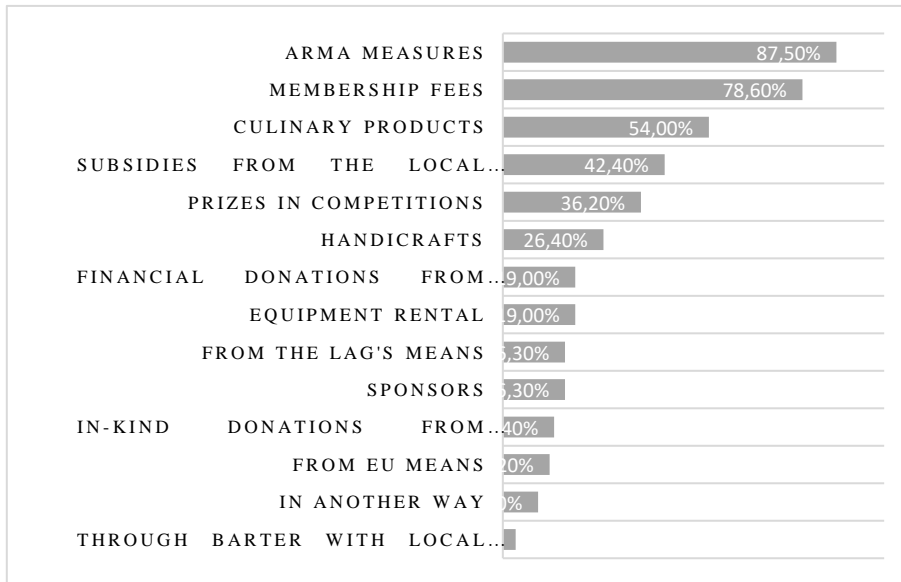
From funds derived from the sale of their own products (mainly culinary and handicrafts) and also the services provided, half of the KGWs maintain themselves. In addition, funds from sales also apply to culinary products, handicrafts, KGWs also earn money by offering services of renting dishes and equipment. KGWs also benefit from donations from the local government. Financial and in-kind donations are another source of income. KGWs also obtain some funds from corporate sponsors. Detailed survey results are shown in Figure 4.

KGW's organizational efficiency and ability to raise external funds largely depends on its administrative, clerical, accounting and financial accounting skills, as well as its knowledge of financial law. Therefore, the next issue was to address these issues, mainly related to handling financial and grant activities. The results of this study are shown in Figure 5.

Responses to the question of whether there are people in the circle who are able to account for a grant or other funds raised show that 68.5% of the KGWs surveyed have such people. In the case of the question about people who are able to write such an application, the response rate confirming that circle members have such qualifications was comparable to the previous answer, at 68.2%.

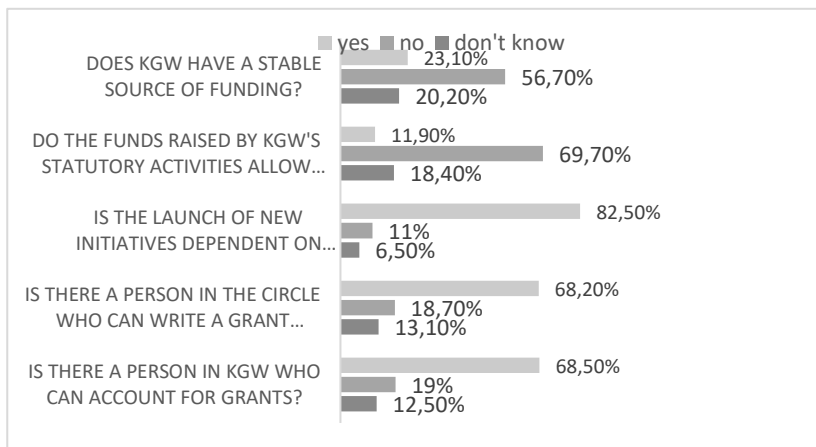
A significant group of KGWs believes that undertaking new initiatives depends on obtaining additional external funds - 82.5%, 11% believe that this is not a factor determining the possibility of undertaking new activities, and 6.5% do not know or find it difficult to say.

Figure 4. Ways of financing KGW activities



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 5. Financial and subsidy aspect



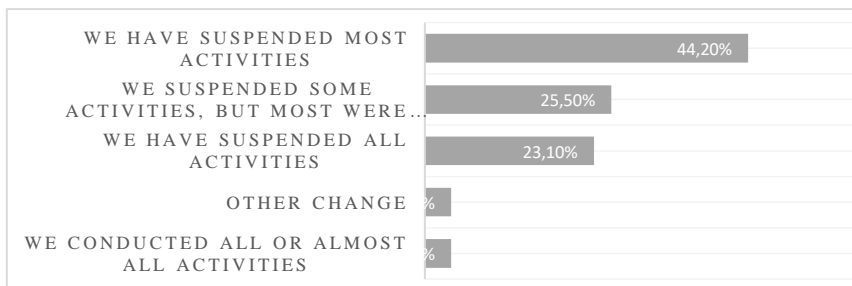
Source: Own elaboration.

A group of 56.7% of KGWs believe they have a stable financial situation, 23.1% have a different opinion and 20.3% say it is difficult to answer this question unequivocally.

In 2019, the environment was undoubtedly affected by the pandemic, which caused profound changes in the lives of Poles and the functioning of all institutions, social and public organizations and NGOs. Therefore, the impact of the Covid-19

pandemic on the activities of KGW was also examined. The results are indicated in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Impact of COVID 19 pandemic on KGW activities

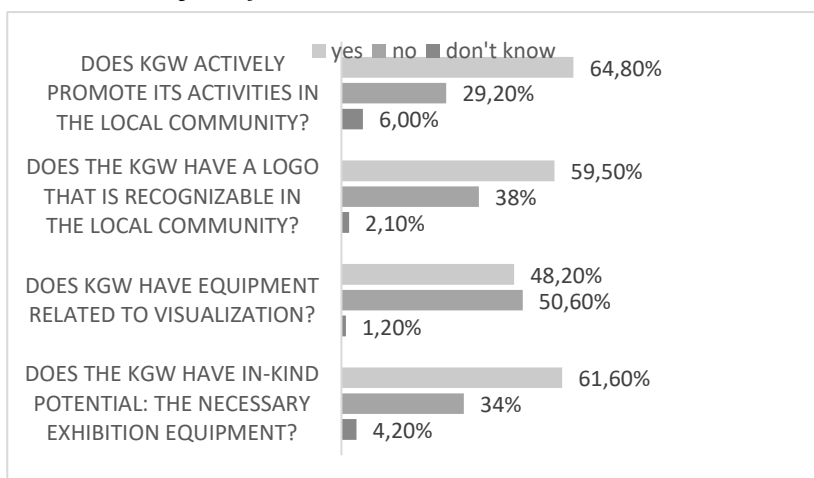


Source: Own elaboration.

As the results showed, 44.2% of KGWs suspended most of their activities due to the Covid-19 pandemic, 25.5% suspended part of their activities, only 3.6% conducted all or almost all activities as before.

In the final part of the questions, respondents were asked to address the promotional aspects of their activities in terms of their resources, as well as the activities they undertook. The structure of the answers provided is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Promotion aspect of KGW



Source: Own elaboration.

When asked about the in-kind potential they have, i.e. tents, tables, display equipment, among others, 61.6% have such potential, in the case of equipment related to visualization, the percentage declaring to have it is lower - 48.2%. In terms

of taking care of KGW's image, 59.5% have their logo, thanks to which they are recognizable.

A group of 64.8% of KGWs undertake promotional activities of their activities in the local community, while 29.2% do not, and 6% do not know.

4. Summary and Discussion

Based on the quantitative research conducted, some of the most significant conclusions and observations can be made.

Rural housewives' circles are the most popular form of women's self-organization in rural areas. Next to volunteer fire departments, they are the most numerous rural social organization in Poland.

Rural housewives' circles are an organization that integrates villagers and cultivates and maintains traditions in the countryside.

After the entry into force of the Act of November 9, 2018 on Rural Housewives' Circles the forms of activity of the circles are open and flexible, as a result of which, depending on the needs, interests and professional and time capabilities of the members and the conditions in the village, they can carry out activities in the area of social, entrepreneurial, cultural, educational, support, sports or simply social activity.

The KGW's primary area of interest is primarily local products, preparing (cooking) dishes related to traditional regional cuisine. These dishes are often served at picnics, festivals (supported by KGW) and special events. Associated with this area of KGW activity is the promotion of local and regional products. The second area of KGW activity includes activities for the benefit of the circle's members and the local community. Depending on their own resources and local needs, the circles diversify the scope of their activities, addressing them primarily to their own members, as well as to the entire rural community.

The high growth rate of KGWs in recent years testifies to the fact that female villagers need accepted and "tailored" to local needs and opportunities, joint meetings and collective activities. The existence of KGWs enables older, sometimes lonely women to keep in touch with other people.

Since 2018, when the current KGW law is in effect, there has been a revival of their activities, as the legislation allows them to become legal entities once they are registered with the Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture. KGWs also have the opportunity to receive funding from that Agency. They can also apply for grants or subsidies from other sources.

An analysis of KGWs' cooperation with other local institutions (mainly with local government offices, with the fire department and with other KGWs), as well as the support given to KGWs by their surroundings, testifies to the large social capital of the rural housewives' circles.

It seems that the potential inherent in the social capital of housewives' circles is not fully utilized. Such a position is also presented by M. Halamska when she speaks of the untapped organizational potential of KGWs and missed opportunities (Halamska, 2015). One can take the view, following this author, that it would be relatively easy to activate this potential activity. This is also confirmed by a survey conducted in 2007 for the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy on a representative sample of 1,500 female villagers (Walczak-Duraj, 2008).

Without adequate support from local government and government administration, the enthusiasm of KGW members alone may not be sufficient for such organizations to cope with the current problems/difficulties outlined in the content of the publication. The main difficulty occurring in the activities of KGWs is insufficient financial resources and the need to educate themselves in obtaining them effectively.

Significant organizational obstacles also include formal and legal issues, such as: the obligation to keep accounting records, which is quite a challenge for people without relevant experience, even in a simplified form. Another developmental barrier for KGWs are the difficulties associated with digital exclusion, occurring in the rural environment, especially among the elderly who are members of KGWs. Digital exclusion is therefore a real constraint to the proper development of KGWs. Another issue is applying for and obtaining grants, as well as promotional activities, which absolutely require today the ability to use computer equipment and the Internet.

The research indicated that an important barrier limiting the development of the circle is the lack of premises where KGWs could operate: meet, carry out office-administrative work, store documents and set aside movable assets. Due to the lack of their own office, KGWs do not receive important information, such as announcements of competitions or tenders.

The municipal government was most often cited for the lack of premises for activities. Since the entry into force of the Act of November 9, 2018 on Rural Housewives' Circles, KGWs have obtained the status of a non-governmental organization, and therefore have the right to obtain premises from the municipal government.

KGWs have made many efforts to improve their financial situation. They serve or participate in many festivals, local fairs, where they sell their own products (mainly culinary) and handicraft products. This is an important source of income for them.

KGW members (often on their own) have learned to prepare project applications for competitions, as they see them as a very important source for obtaining external funding.

Despite the many indicated difficulties occurring in the current activities of KGWs, respondents indicated that they would make efforts to keep their organizations playing important roles for the local community and develop them in the future.

5. Conclusions

As the survey results indicated, Rural Housewives' Circles in Poland face a number of problems and barriers. Despite this, the members of these resilient organizations do not give up, and their number grows from year to year. The need to achieve goals of a social nature in the rural space, in small regional areas, seems to be unquestionable. It is very positive that there is a strong need among KGW members to help and integrate the local community. This is undoubtedly an important part of the social capital of the village.

The author hopes that the above work will become a practical source of information for both KGW members and related institutions. In addition, it will contribute to the popularization of this very important economic and social problem. Rural Housewives' Circles have been very modestly discussed in the literature so far, so the creation of the above publication can be considered purposeful and necessary, all the more so considering the scale of problems and difficulties faced by KGW members.

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