Rural Women: Poland
Women are a driving force for the maintenance, conservation and development of rural areas, both in cultural and economic terms.

Not only do they contribute to the preservation of traditions but they also represent a considerable proportion of the workforce in agriculture and contribute to the development of the countryside in the face of a constant process of depopulation.
Unfortunately, due to certain conditions prevailing in rural areas, such as: unemployment, poverty, poor transport and lack of basic services in the field of education, health and care.

These together with the persistence of a traditional mentality imposing stereotyped roles for women and men and confining women to a subordinate role in both private and public life, women in rural areas are confronted with major challenges in the achievement of gender equality and the enjoyment of their rights.
This problem is often aggravated by the failure of Council of Europe member states to adequately ensure gender mainstreaming in the elaboration and implementation of legislative and policy measures relating to agriculture and rural areas.

This was particularly the case during the privatisation process which took place in the ‘90s in a number of states which are current members of the Council of Europe. In addition, rural women are seldom the subject of specific and targeted legislative and policy measures.
The Assembly notes that, despite marked regional differences in the situation of rural women in Council of Europe member states, a number of common issues of concern can be identified:

rural women are not adequately accounted for in national statistics; they have limited opportunities of finding employment, limited access to credits and social security cover; they have limited access to healthcare and social services; they suffer obstacles in access to property and inheritance rights; they face difficulties in reconciling work and family life and have limited decision-making power – if any - within the family business.
Furthermore, the Assembly notes with great concern that rural women are particularly vulnerable to violence, including so-called ‘honour crimes’ and domestic violence and that, in some Council of Europe member states where rural areas are affected by widespread poverty and unemployment, they are particularly at risk of becoming victims of trafficking in human beings.
The Assembly fears that the combined effect of globalisation and the current financial and economic crisis might further deteriorate the living conditions of rural women, aggravating their vulnerability and their exposure to discrimination and human rights violations.
Since 1989 Poland, together with other countries in the region, has undergone radical socio-economic transformations which have had an impact on the characteristics of rural areas.

Unfortunately, despite the importance of the agricultural sector for Poland’s economy, issues connected with life in rural areas and its inhabitants remain one of the research fields that have been the most neglected; rural women are seldom the focus of studies by researchers in agriculture or gender studies specialists.
At the moment, the Polish rural economy is based on small farms producing food mainly for their own use; rural enterprise is also dominated by small family companies, and their earnings are also significantly limited by low demand for goods and services, caused by rural unemployment and poverty.

This situation is aggravated by the fact that a large number of farms are run by elderly and isolated people, whose main source of financial resources is social welfare aid and have neither the resources nor the sense of initiative to change their way of farming methods or develop an innovative approach.
The rural population represents 38.6% of the overall population of Poland, with women accounting for 50.2% in rural areas.

Rural settlement is fragmented, consisting of 53,000 localities, 15% of which are inhabited by less than 100 residents, 66% are inhabited by a population ranging from 100 to 500 residents, 13% by a population ranging from 500 to 1000 inhabitants and only 6% by a population exceeding 1000.
In the years 2000-2005, the percentage of working age population grew from 56.8% to 60.7% in rural areas (in urban areas this percentage amounted to 66.1%). According to forecasts, by 2015 this percentage will increase to 63.7% in rural areas and decrease to 63.2% in urban areas.

This increase in rural areas is due, on the one hand, to the fact that rural families have more children and, on the other hand, to the fact that for 15 years there has been a process of ‘return to the countryside’. An increasing proportion of urban Poles – mainly entrepreneurs, affluent and with a good level of education - settle in rural areas in the proximity of cities.

At the same time, the outflow of rural people to urban areas in search for jobs has halted and there is a marked return to rural areas.
Ageing has become a serious problem for Poland, especially in rural areas, where the percentage of inhabitants in the economically post-productive age is higher than in towns.

As regards the age structure of inhabitants in rural areas, men outnumber women in the age category below 54, whereas in the age category above 54 women outnumber men.
The employment status of rural women has not been measured but research and surveys show that a higher percentage of rural women than men and urban women are unemployed.

Amongst the main difficulties in finding employment are: the shortage of job opportunities in the place of residence, geographical inconvenience, poor local transport, the poor quality of roads, the lack of social infrastructure (nurseries, care homes or social services).
The Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (KRUS) insured 4.5 million farmers and is equally accessible for women and men. Social security benefits and rules are the same for both sexes, with the exception of lower retirement age for women.

In addition, rural women can benefit from birth allowances (three basic pensions) and maternity allowances (equivalent to eight weeks sick pay). These benefits may be claimed by women insured for at least one year.
Even if Poland has been a member of the European Union since 2004, surveys show that rural women do not feel confident in taking advantage of EU structural funds, due to lack of knowledge of the administrative procedures.

They are also reluctant to changing the farming model for more innovative forms that have proven successful in other EU member states, such as agro-tourism; similarly, not many rural women would consider working from home (teleworking).
There are, however, positive signs of change: women who contribute to the family income are more frequently treated as equal partners in decision-making and women’s authority in the family is rising.