

Małgorzata Wenclik

- ▶ University of Białystok
- ▶ e-mail: m.wenclik@uwb.edu.pl
- ▶ ORCID: 0000-0003-2521-6708

RURAL WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS (KGW) AS A PILLAR OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN POLAND

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The aim of this article is a two-fold analysis of the phenomenon of Rural Women's Associations:
 - *Legal and Systemic Analysis:* To present the legal framework and historical context of the establishment, functioning, and development of KGW, with particular emphasis on the Act of November 9, 2018, on Rural Women's Associations.
 - *Popularisation and Research Aspect:* To illustrate the role of KGW as dynamic entities embodying the idea of civil society, by presenting their diverse activities and "good practices" through examples of the selected Rural Women's Associations from various regions of Poland.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The following research methods will be used to achieve the stated aims:
 - *Legal and Doctrinal Analysis:* Examination of legal acts regulating the activities of KGW (primarily the KGW Act of 2018) and analysis of relevant literature in administrative law, theory of state and law, and social sciences concerning civil society and the third sector.
 - *Analysis of Existing Data:* Usage of statistical data from the National Register of Rural Women's Associations maintained by the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture (ARiMR) to present the scale and distribution of KGW in Poland.
 - *Case Studies:* Presentation and analysis of selected examples of the activities of three KGW from different regions of Poland (KGW in Kościelisko, KGW Luba in Lubajny, KGW "Łpianka na Obcasach," and KGW in Dzikie Kolonia "Dzikie Baby"). The selection of associations was made based on the recommendations from the

Polish Homemaker Foundation, which is implementing the project “Rural Women’s Association on Lithuanian Soil.” The analysis will be based on information available from social media (Facebook) and other publicly accessible sources.

- **Analysis of Support Programs:** The examination of the available forms of funding and support for KGW, such as the Government Program for Civic Initiatives (NOWEFIO), grant competitions from local and regional self-governments, competitions from the National Centre for Agricultural Support (KOWR) (e.g., “Battle of the Regions”), and initiatives of the National Rural Network (KSOW).
- **Score/results** – This article is not only a legal analysis, but it also presents good practices of the KGW and attempts to define the role of these organisations in building community spirit in rural areas. The author presents the threats stemming from the desire to politically exploit the circles’ activities and values, but also the opportunities to leverage the circles’ potential in light of new threats such as war, disinformation, and lack of trust.
- **Originality/value** – The article concerns the institutional development, changes and challenges faced by some of the largest women’s organisations in Poland.

Keywords: Rural Women’s Associations (KGW), civil society, third sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local development, civic engagement, civil defense, disinformation, public policy, NGO funding, rural areas, Poland

1. Introduction

This article focuses on **Rural Women’s Associations (Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich – KGW)** – one of the oldest and most numerous forms of association in Poland. KGW represent a unique legal and social construct that distinguishes itself from other non-governmental organisations the primary substrate of which is the human factor (e.g., associations, political parties, Volunteer Fire Departments). This paper will highlight the significant role of KGW in the development of local communities, particularly in rural areas, where they diligently preserve folk culture, art, and culinary traditions, as well as fulfil integrative and educational functions.

In light of the contemporary challenges, such as the new geopolitical reality following Russia’s attack on Ukraine and the ongoing hybrid and disinformation warfare, KGW may face new tasks, for example, in the realm of civil defense or building social resilience. A legal analysis of the conditions for the establishment, functioning, and development of KGW is crucial for understanding their potential within the idea of civil society. The inspiration for an in-depth analysis of these

associations' operations came from the conference "Activities of the Third Sector in the Baltic Sea States – Experiences and Development Perspectives," held on June 12–13, 2025, at the University of Białystok Branch in Vilnius. Interestingly, the present-day Vilnius Region also has experience with KGW from nearly a century ago, although today this legal form is completely forgotten and non-existent in Lithuania.

2. Civil society: a theoretical perspective

To understand the role of KGW in building civil society, a prior definition of this key concept is necessary. As Václav Havel aptly put it, "Civil society is the muscle of democracy. Without it, democracy becomes powerless." Professor Andrzej Pułło [A. Pułło, 2012;.275–289] emphasises that the idea of civil society belongs to the most important ideas of political philosophy, and while not *expressis verbis* stated in the Polish Constitution, it is constructed by legal doctrine based on its provisions.

The literature on the subject highlights that the concept of a modern democratic state assumes "a specific model of relations between the state and society. This model, in short, is based on the assumption of inviolable limits for state interference in the sphere of citizens' rights and fundamental freedoms, while simultaneously establishing an appropriate proportion between group interest and public interest" [Blicharz, 2012: 55].

Wiktor Osiatyński, in his work *Rzeczpospolita obywateli* [Osiatyński. 2004: 120], stated that: "Simply put: civil society is the space between the family, the state, and the market, where grassroots social organisations operate. In this space, citizens engage in debate, resulting in social solutions developed for the common good."

Osiatyński points out that civil society is a necessary element for balancing power, offering society the chance to express its interests and needs as a manifestation of common concern, and the possibility to influence public decisions. He emphasises the necessity for civil society to possess its own structures, woven from networks of interpersonal connections and not controlled by the State and its apparatus [Osiatyński, 2004: 120 and next].

E. Wnuk-Lipiński understood civil society as "the sum of non-state institutions, organisations, and civil associations operating in the public sphere. These are structures relatively autonomous from the state, arising from the grassroots,

and generally characterized by the voluntary participation of their members.” [Wnuk-Lipiński: 117–138], in turn, stated that “civil society is the space of uncoerced association among citizens, with a dominant network of social relations filling that space.” [Walzer, 1997: 85 and next]

The above mentioned definitions indicate the complexity of the concept of **civil society**, which on the one hand refers to a set of ideas, and on the other, is a collection of legal regulations granting the right and possibility to build communities, structures, and organisations for the purpose of self-management, independent of state structures. A common feature in these definitions of civil society is the preservation of **autonomy and independence** from the state, which allows for the creation of grassroots actions by members of local communities for the benefit of their social environment. Rural Women's Associations, as a legal entity and a form of non-governmental organisation, perfectly fit this definition of civil society.

3. Rural Women's Associations as a social organisation: status and statistics

Rural Women's Associations are among the oldest and most numerous social organisations operating in Poland. They have permanently embedded themselves in the fabric of territorial communities, constituting unique organisations with a tradition stretching back over 150 years. The first organisation to be named “Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich” was founded in 1877 in the village of Janisławice (the Łódź Voivodeship) by Filipina Płaskowicka. From the outset, KGW primarily united women, residents of rural areas. From the beginning of their activity, Rural Housewives' Circles (Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich – KGW) primarily brought together women living in rural areas. The first circles functioned as a kind of reinforcement of the activities of agricultural associations. Their activities focused on educating residents and on modernising rural areas, which often served as a countermeasure to the policies of the occupying powers. During the interwar period, much of the circles' activity concentrated on self-education through organizing courses, e.g., in food preservation, tailoring and sewing, embroidery, and rational household management. Until World War II, the circles were among the most popular women's organisations, numbering about 4 000 and gathering over 100 000 women.

During the Polish People's Republic (PRL), like most organisations, the KGWs were centralised and politicised. In the 1950s, the circles played a new role by

combating shortages in various economic and social spheres and the lack of access to various goods and services in the countryside. They organised summer vacations for children in rural areas, took care of hygiene and bringing in doctors, continued to conduct cooking courses, and stimulated rural women's entrepreneurship. By the end of the PRL era, there were 31 000 KGWs with over 1.1 million members. [Report, "Stocznia", 2014: 14.]

In a report prepared in 2014 by the Laboratory of Social Research and Innovation "Stocznia," titled *Rural Housewives' Circles – Not Just About Cooking*, the state of KGWs as of 2014 and the analysis of the legal forms in which they operated until the enactment of the 2018 KGW Act are presented. The report points to the ambiguous legal status of these organisations. By definition, the circles were to be one of the forms of agricultural self-organisation – a component of agricultural associations, whose activities were still regulated by a law from the 1980s. According to that regulation, the circles were to be affiliated with a nationwide federation of agricultural organisations. The representative body of the federation was the National Council of Rural Housewives' Circles. In practice, however, the formation and self-organisation of the circles looked quite different and did not fit into the existing legal framework.

Almost half of the Circles operated as informal groups, 15% chose to establish associations, and 36% were affiliated with a central organisation. According to the report, these were usually circles whose activities had been initiated during the Polish People's Republic (PRL) era. There were also cases of circles functioning as women's units of the Volunteer Fire Brigade (OSP), even though their activities had nothing to do with the primary role of the OSP, which is firefighting. It seems, therefore, that the legal form was of secondary importance compared to the desire for local activity and engagement. The report also indicates that 2004 was a turning point when the Rural Housewives' Circles began to formalise more strongly. This may have been a result of Poland's accession to the European Union and the availability of funding to support non-governmental organisations. [Report "Stocznia", 2014: 15–17].

Currently, the status of KGW is defined by the **Act of November 9, 2018, on Rural Women's Associations**, although previously they operated as associations or informal groups.

According to data from the National Register of Rural Women's Associations maintained by the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture [www 1, as of July 1, 2025], the number of registered associations was **20 040**.

Table 1. Number of registered KGW according to data from the National Register of Rural Women's Associations – Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture

No.	Voivodeship	Number of Registered KGW
1	Lower Silesian	915
2	Kuyavian-Pomeranian	1167
3	Lublin	1925
4	Lubusz	364
5	Łódź	1615
6	Lesser Poland	1223
7	Masovian	2524
8	Opole	344
9	Subcarpathian	1231
10	Podlaskie	697
11	Pomeranian	709
12	Silesian	593
13	Świętokrzyskie (Holy Cross)	1090
14	Warmian-Masurian	849
15	Greater Poland	2398
16	West Pomeranian	2396
TOTAL		20 040

Source: [www 1.](#)

4. Subject and scope of KGW activities in light of the Act

The KGW Act emphasises that KGW are a form of **voluntary association of individuals, independent of government and self-government administration**. Article 2(1) indicates that it is a **self-governing organisation of rural residents**, supporting the development of entrepreneurship in rural areas and active engagement for rural communities. KGW therefore fall within the category of

entities classified in Polish legal doctrine as **third sector organisations**, and their activities primarily focus on rural areas. The self-governance of Rural Women's Associations means possessing certain qualities guaranteeing their independence, such as: operating within a specific area, having their own organisational structure with representative bodies, their own goals, and effective tools to achieve them (e.g., self-financing, the ability to form associations).

According to Article 4 of the KGW Act, members must be at least 18 years old. With the consent of a legal representative, individuals who have reached 13 years of age may participate in the association's activities, and they may also form youth and children's organisations to support the achievement of the association's goals.

The subject matter of KGW activities, as indicated in Article 2 of the Act, is to improve the socio-professional conditions of rural women and their families, as well as to support the comprehensive development of rural areas. Analysis of the Act indicates that the legal personality of these associations is linked to the rural environment, and in practice, almost 99% of the members are women. Article 2(4) of the Act specifies that these organisations may also have their seat and operate in villages located within the administrative boundaries of cities and towns with up to 5 000 inhabitants.

The scope of KGW activities is enumerated in Article 2(3). KGW tasks include, in particular:

- Conducting socio-economic and educational-cultural activities in rural areas.
- Conducting activities for the comprehensive development of rural areas.
- Supporting the development of women's entrepreneurship.
- Initiating and conducting activities to improve the living and working conditions of women in rural areas.
- Promoting and developing forms of cooperation, management, and rational household management.
- Representing the interests of Rural Women's Associations to public administration bodies.
- Developing folk culture, including local and regional culture in particular.

The phrase "in particular" indicates that this is not an exhaustive list, and the practice of KGW activities shows that their scope is very broad and largely depends on the specific characteristics of the region, the composition of the organisation's members, and the possibilities of obtaining external funds for various activities.

5. Good practices of KGW: examples from the field

For the purpose of this article, the activities of 3 selected KGW from different parts of Poland will be presented, recommended by the Polish Homemaker Foundation, which is implementing the project “Rural Women’s Association on Lithuanian Soil.” The examples presented illustrate the diversity and dynamism of KGW activities.

- I. **The Rural Women’s Association in Kościelisko (the Małopolskie Voivodeship)** KGW in Kościelisko is a continuation of an association founded in the 1950s. Formally established as an association in 2014, and registered in the National KGW Register in 2018. It currently has 25 female members. In addition to traditional sewing and cooking courses, their main goal today is to empower women. Regular activities include:
 - Culinary and liqueur competitions (“Mountain Sweets,” “Flavors of Indian Summer”).
 - An annual themed carnival party for residents and tourists.
 - A competition for a herbal bouquet on Our Lady of the Herbs Day.
 - Further training courses funded externally (English language, computer skills, embroidery, herbalism, floristry, stained glass, fabric painting, carving).
 - Active participation in communal celebrations, regional fairs, and culinary competitions (always in regional costumes).
 - Participation in popular TV programs (“Familiada,” “Jaka to melodia”) – proceeds allocated to charity.
 - Organisation of charity concerts.
 - Publication of the “Old Times” calendar [2020] promoting old customs.
 - Activity during the pandemic (sewing masks, helping seniors) and production of film series (“Memories of People from Polana,” “Tales of Podhale Village”) promoting local history and traditions. [Source: [www 2](#)].
- II. **The Rural Women’s Association Luba in Lubajny (the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship)** Registered in the KRKGW in 2019. Its regular activities include:
 - Preparing harvest wreaths and participating in competitions.
 - Culinary competitions.
 - Organising local events (e.g., “Bread Festival in Lubajny,” “Pumpkin Day”).

- Activities promoting the region (local products, folk costumes, customs).
- Creation of a theatre group and performances of the Masurian legends (“About the Golden Shilling”).
- Creation of the Table Theatre.
- Organisation of winter runs “Winter Family Run” The association’s goal is also to integrate the local population, often newcomers after World War II, create new common traditions, and eliminate divisions. They emphasise strong cooperation with local and regional self-government. [Source: [www 3](#)].

III. **KGW “Łapianka na Obcasach” from Łapy Dębowa (the Podlaskie Voivodeship)** Registered in the KRKGW in 2019, consisting of 11 founding members, including four men. The association operates dynamically within the Podlaskie KGW network created by the Okno na Wschód Foundation. The flagship activities include:

- Organising Children’s Day.
- Culinary workshops.
- Activities commemorating women distinguished for the commune (mural project for the legendary village head, Marianna Łapińska).
- Health prevention (especially breast cancer).
- Maintaining Easter and Christmas traditions (family and intergenerational workshops).
- Celebrating Women’s Day.
- Charity actions. It is worth noting that members of this association are between 35 and 45 years old, focused on contemporary challenges in the rural environment. [Source: [www 4](#)].

IV. **The Rural Women’s Association in Dzikie Kolonia “Dzikie Baby” (the Podlaskie Voivodeship)** Registered in the KRKGW in 2022. The list of founding members includes 30 people, of whom 11 are men, and among the 3 representatives, 2 are men. The association’s goal is intergenerational integration and improving the lives of community members, where some are native residents and others are “new residents” (due to natural attractions and proximity to Białystok). The association focuses on:

- Pro-ecological activities (joint forest cleaning).
- Organising the Potato Dumpling Festival.
- Commemorating local history (documentary films).
- Activities related to neighborly integration.

6. The initiative, establishment, and structure of KGW

The KGW Act states that the initiative to establish a KGW can come from at least **10 individuals** whose place of residence is the village where the association operates, a village located within city limits, or residents of a city with up to 5 000 inhabitants. This number is significantly higher than for an ordinary association (3 people) or a registered association (7 people) as defined by the Associations Law Act.

The initiators establishing the association adopt its **statute** and elect an **organising committee**. The statute is the most important document regulating the functioning of the association and must contain a number of legally required elements, specifying, among others: the name and seat, scope of activity, goals and tasks, scope of income-generating activity, method of acquiring and losing membership, rights and obligations of members, contributions, bodies and their competences, assets, rules for creating funds, procedures for amending the statute and liquidation. The required conditions for the KGW statute align with those stipulated in the Associations Law Act for registered associations. A helpful element in drafting the statute is the model KGW statute, the content of which is specified in the annex to the KGW Act.

The National KGW Register is maintained by the **Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture (ARiMR)**, which is another difference compared to registered associations, whose registration takes place in the National Court Register.

7. KGW bodies

The KGW Act provides for two basic bodies:

- **The General Meeting of Members** – the decision-making body. Its competences, specified in Article 15 of the KGW Act, include, among others: electing the management board, adopting directions of activity, examining and approving substantive and financial reports, granting discharge, passing resolutions on the disposal of real estate, joining other organisations, forming unions, division and liquidation of the association, adopting statute amendments, and ongoing supervision and control of activities. The meeting should be convened by the Management Board at least once a year, within six months after the end of the financial year. A minimum of three members

of the association can request the convocation of a meeting. Resolutions are adopted by a simple majority of votes with at least half of the members present (unless the statute provides otherwise). Minutes are taken from each meeting and stored for at least 10 years.

- **The Management Board of the Association** – the executive body. Its role is to manage the current affairs of the association and represent its interests externally. The composition and number of persons on the board are specified in the statute. The board may be a single-person body. Members of the board and the chairperson are elected by the general meeting of members.

8. Assets and funding of KGW

The primary form of KGW funding is **membership fees**. The association can also be financed by donations, inheritances, bequests, income from its own activities, income from the association's assets, and public offerings. As in other corporate associations belonging to the non-governmental sector, income from the association's activities is allocated to achieve statutory goals and tasks and cannot be distributed among members (Article 21(3) of the KGW Act).

A Rural Women's Association can receive **specific-purpose grants** for activities listed in Article 2(3) of the KGW Act, as well as **financial aid from the state budget** (no more frequently than once a year) for the same activities. This aid is granted upon the association's request by decision of the head of the county office of ARiMR. This is a significant support opportunity that legal provisions do not guarantee to other non-governmental organisations.

Rural Women's Associations, like other NGOs, can also apply for **grant competitions** organized by various entities. The practice of the analysed associations indicates that they applied to programs such as the Civic Initiatives Fund (FIO) in regional programs (Małopolskie Lokalnie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie Lokalnie, Podlaskie Lokalnie). Currently, the **Government Program for Civic Initiatives for 2021–2030 (NOWEFIO)** is in operation, which is a continuation of government programs aimed at the non-governmental sector. The main goal of the program is to promote social activity and to activate and shape civic attitudes [www 5]. Within NOWEFIO, organisations, including KGW, can submit proposals in five priorities, covering micro-initiatives, support for civic organisations for the common good, increasing the presence of organisations in public life, strengthening their competencies, and technical assistance.

Another source of funding are **competitions conducted by local and regional self-governments** for the execution of their own tasks in cooperation with social organisations. Information about such competitions is available on the official websites of communes and voivodeships.

The **National Centre for Agricultural Support (KOWR)** also finances KGW activities. One of the popular competitions is the culinary “Battle of the Regions,” whose goal is to popularise traditional regional dishes and highlight the diversity of Polish cuisine, as well as to promote KGW [www 6].

It is also worth mentioning the **National Rural Network (KSOW)** [www 7] which is a network for exchanging information and cooperation between organisations and institutions working to improve the quality of life for residents of rural areas and small towns. KSOW is open, and various entities involved in rural development, including KGW, can be network partners. An example of a KSOW project dedicated to KGW was the “Educational Project for KGW and Rural Entrepreneurship Creators (KPW)” implemented in 2023 by the Hugo Kołłątaj University of Agriculture in Krakow, which included training, a study trip, and a conference, supporting networking, clustering, and KGW competency development.

9. Associating rural women’s associations and forming unions

The KGW Act also provides for the possibility of individual KGW associating into **unions of rural women’s associations**. This is an important aspect of building stronger civil society structures at the regional and national level, enabling greater influence on public policies and more effective actions for the rural environment.

10. Conclusion and findings: KGW – between tradition, development, and new security challenges

Rural Women’s Associations (KGW), with their deeply rooted history and undeniable contribution to the development of local communities, constitute one of the pillars of Polish civil society. Their activities, including cultivating cultural heritage, empowering women in rural areas, supporting entrepreneurship, and working for the common good, prove their indispensable role in building and maintaining social ties. The legal analysis, confirming their status as autonomous and self-governing organisations, along with impressive numerical statistics, indicates

their enormous potential in shaping grassroots civic initiatives. Good practices presented by KGW from various regions of Poland illustrate their ability to adapt and respond to contemporary needs, from education to support in crisis situations.

10.1. Critical perspective on the role of KGW in the political context

However, to ensure a full understanding of the phenomenon of Rural Women's Associations, it is necessary to address their changing position in the political landscape, especially during the rule of Law and Justice (PiS). The introduction of a dedicated act in 2018, the simplification of registration with the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture, and the creation of new, preferential funding pathways undoubtedly improved the formal and financial condition of KGW. Increased access to state budget funds, often administered by agencies subordinate to government ministries, as well as nationwide competitions directly aimed at KGW, created a **privileged position** compared to many other non-governmental organisations.

This favorable situation, though theoretically intended to support the development of civil society in rural areas, also became the subject of **criticism and public debate**. Many commentators and representatives of the third sector expressed concerns that the increased support for KGW could have been an element of a **political strategy** aimed at gaining support in rural areas. The participation of politicians in events organised by KGW, the promotion of their activities in the context of a narrative about tradition and national identity, and the management of funds through state institutions, raised questions about the **politicisation** and potential **instrumental use** of these organisations.

For some non-governmental organisations, especially those operating in other areas (e.g., human rights, ecology, urban culture), the privileging of KGW could be perceived as **unequal treatment** and a lack of consistent policy towards the entire civic sector. This created the impression that organisations whose profile and scope of activity were more aligned with the vision of the ruling party were being favoured.

10.2. KGW in the face of contemporary threats: potential in civil defense and the fight against disinformation

The new geopolitical reality, shaped by the full-scale war in Ukraine and the escalating hybrid and disinformation warfare, presents the Polish society, including Rural Women's Associations, with urgent and unprecedented challenges. In this

context, the **potential of KGW extends beyond their traditional cultural and social functions**, gaining new, strategic significance.

Due to their deep roots in local structures, knowledge of the rural environment, and a network of trust and mutual aid, KGW can play a **key role in the civil defense system**. Female and male members of these associations often possess practical skills necessary in crisis situations (e.g., large-scale cooking, organizing shelter, providing first aid, local knowledge). They can be effective contact points and coordination centres for aid in the event of natural disasters, evacuations, or other threats. Their ability to mobilise quickly and organise grassroots actions, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic (sewing masks, supporting seniors) or after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (organising aid for refugees), makes them a valuable resource in building state resilience.

The potential role of KGW in the **fight against disinformation is equally important**. As trusted entities in their local communities, KGW can become an important channel for verifying information and disseminating reliable data. In an era of escalating propaganda and fake news, their authority and direct contact with rural residents can be invaluable in building civic awareness and strengthening information resilience. Educating local communities about disinformation threats, promoting critical thinking, and pointing to reliable sources of information are new, yet extremely important tasks for which KGW are naturally predisposed.

10.3. KGW in the future: independence or further challenges?

In light of these observations, the future of Rural Women's Associations requires continuous reflection. On the one hand, their potential in building social capital, cultivating traditions, and responding to local needs is indisputable. On the other hand, the key question becomes how to maintain their **autonomy and independence** from political influence. It is essential that KGW can develop based on genuine grassroots initiative and self-reliance, without the risk of becoming a tool in the hands of any political party.

Further research should focus not only on the formal aspects of KGW functioning and their successes but also on the perception of their role in local communities, the extent of their actual independence, and the impact of changing political contexts on their dynamics. Only in this way will KGW be able to fully realise their mission as true "muscles of democracy," working for the common good, regardless of current political trends, while effectively engaging in the state's security system.

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