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## PROFESSIONAL WORK OF WOMEN IN STATE AGRICULTURAL FARMS (1949–1989) — AN OVERVIEW

**Abstract:** Women employed in State Agricultural Farms (SAF) were blue- and white-collar workers, the former group being more numerous. However, the blue-collar workers mainly worked seasonally, during the period of intensive field work. When it comes to full-time work, it was usually related to animal production. The demand for this type of work decreased with the progress of mechanization. Meanwhile, the demand for white-collar workers, especially those with agricultural education and experience, increased. Since the 1960s, the SAFs increasingly employed women qualified in agronomy, animal production, and veterinary medicine. However, they were not always accepted in positions traditionally considered “masculine”. For most women, work in SAFs was not attractive due to difficult working conditions and low prestige. If a woman decided to work there, it was usually for economic reasons. Most women did not take up professional activity and performed the traditional roles of wives and mothers.

**Keywords:** State Agricultural Farms, agriculture, women, work, Polish People’s Republic

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of important studies on the role and position of women in the post-war history of Poland has been published. Researchers’ interests focus mainly on issues related to the life and work of women in cities, and more recently, their participation in social resistance [for example: Chłosta-Sikorska A. 2019; Fidelis M. 2010; Jarska N. 2015; idem 2009: 305-28; Jarosz D. 2000: 116-44]. The body of literature on the subject of rural women is limited. While there is some interest in female peasants in connection with studies on other subjects (e.g. collectiv-

ization), women living and working in SAFs are still waiting to be discovered by researchers.

The problem of women's professional work in SAFs was rarely noticed at the time. The existing source database created by the State Land Property, SAFs and the Trade Union of Agricultural Workers (initially called the Trade Union of Agricultural Laborers and Workers) is insufficient and does not allow, in whole or in part, to distinguish women as a separate category of employees (e.g. in relation to the implementation of the six-year plan).<sup>1</sup> The scale of female employment is the most visible in the (incomplete) payroll documents [Smykowski J. 2002: 55-81]. Most source information necessary to present a full picture of women's economic activity in SAFs is scattered across the documentation of various entities dealing with the broadly understood issues of rural women (e.g. Women's League) and memoirs. Pre-1989 studies on SAF workers, although heavily censored, contain a lot of valuable information, but they usually focus on categories such as education and age. The gender criterion is only occasionally taken into account, mainly in sources from the 1960s and 1970s. The rare studies on SAFs that have been published in recent decades also address the issue in a similar fashion. This article constitutes an attempt to answer the question on the nature of women's employment in SAFs and to determine the factors that influenced their employment decisions. In the long period of over forty years of SAF existence, both the state's policy on the employment of women and priorities regarding the employment of workers in SAFs changed multiple times. There is also the question of whether these changes had an impact on the employment of women in SAFs.

## CATEGORIES OF WOMEN EMPLOYED BY SAFs

Women employed in SAFs were most often residents of SAF settlements, and were also connected with the workplace by family ties (they were wives or daughters of full-time SAF workers). Female office and administrative staff and specialists in agricultural and animal production came from outside SAF settlements.

The largest group of women employed at SAFs were blue-collar workers. This resulted from the specific character of agricultural production at

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<sup>1</sup> In SAFs, it was common practice for full-time workers to take on additional assignments, e.g. weeding beets, which in reality were usually performed by their family members (wife, children). The remuneration for the work was paid to the head of the family.

state farms, where the level of mechanization was low while the demand for physical work was high. At least until the mid-1960s, most of the work in crop and animal production was performed manually. In the following decades, the machinery and equipment available at SAFs systematically improved, but full mechanization was not introduced until the end of their existence. The majority of women employed in blue-collar positions performed relatively simple tasks that did not require any special qualifications (or skills that could be obtained in special courses). What these tasks required was simply good physical condition and a lot of time. What is more, they were poorly paid.

The tasks performed by women employed in SAFs fit in the traditional model of a rural woman who, apart from being a housekeeper and caretaker of children and elderly family members, also fed livestock (except for horses), milked cows, and performed some field work during harvesting, hay-making, or potato lifting [Mędrzecki W. 2000: 170-80]. A clear division into masculine and feminine tasks was held up not only by individual farmers, but also by the whole SAF community. Any attempts to change this model were usually unsuccessful, as in the case of female tractor drivers. During the execution of the six-year plan, women were encouraged to take up professional activity in occupations that had previously been considered masculine. In rural areas, female tractor drivers were supposed to serve as an example of a modern and emancipated woman. At the turn of the 1950s, several dozen girls all over the country completed tractor driving courses. However, it soon turned out that most of them did not end up working in their learned profession (with a few exceptions, including Magdalena Figur, the poster girl for the campaign, who drove a tractor until her retirement).<sup>2</sup> At the time, driving tractors, which were often in a poor condition, required a lot of physical strength, as well as knowledge on how to repair them. Still, the main obstacle for women was the lack of acceptance from their environment, especially from male tractor drivers and SAF management [Stańczak-Wiślicz K. 2013: 159]. Attention was quickly drawn to the negative impact of such work on women's health, as a statutory requirement was introduced to obtain a doctor's permit before commencing work as a tractor driver [Dz. U. 1956, no. 51, item 228].

Blue-collar female workers were divided into three categories: full-time, seasonal, and on-call. Full-time workers were employed mainly in

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<sup>2</sup> *Magdalena Figur, Pierwsza traktorzystka PRL*, <http://forum.e-kwidzyn.pl/viewtopic.php?t=63>, accessed 20.09.2019.

animal production, where they were engaged in feeding animals, milking cows, and cleaning up cowsheds and pigsties. This type of work was not only physically demanding, but also arduous, since it typically took more than 10 hours a day (sometimes even 16 hours), with only a few breaks and without Sundays or holidays off. The situation improved after 1972, when a shift work system was introduced in animal production. In this group of employees, the requirements in terms of professional qualifications were higher than in the case of field workers, which translated to higher salaries. Although the salaries of workers in animal production were higher than the salaries of other farm workers, they did not feel compensated for the difficulties. The category of full-time workers also included women employed in crop production, who were moved to other jobs, e.g. cleaning, in the low season.

Most often, however, women were employed on a seasonal or an on-call basis. This resulted from the specific nature of work in agriculture, where needs are unevenly distributed throughout the year. Demand for workers was the greatest in the periods of intensive field work, such as weeding, hay-making, harvesting, and potato-lifting [*Kobiety z PGR...* 1955]. The lower the level of mechanization and the smaller the scale of application of plant protection products, the higher the demand for such workers. Progress in mechanization only became notable in the 1970s. Mechanization led to a decrease in the demand for manual workers, especially seasonal workers, with the exception of those working with root crops, as the area of these crops systematically increased [Nowak H., Ziarka H. 1978: 129]. The demand for on-call workers for potato-lifting or sugar beet weeding also remained. Among workers employed for the entire season or for individual days, women have always been the most numerous group [APP, Inspektorat Państwowych Gospodarstw Rolnych w Śremie, sign. 111, 2–6].

A much smaller group included women employed in white-collar jobs, mostly office and administrative: secretaries, accountants, personnel officers. These were full-time positions that required appropriate professional qualifications. However, since SAFs struggled with staff shortages, people with primary or general secondary education were also employed. Until the end of the 1950s, there were virtually no women with qualifications in agronomy, animal production, or veterinary medicine employed at the State Agricultural Farms. Female workers with such qualifications first entered the SAF workforce in the following decade, but never became a large group.

## THE CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN SAFs

In the 1950s, women employed in SAFs, mainly blue-collar workers, accounted for approx. 20% of the total number of employees. The number of women employed in white-collar jobs gradually increased. At first, such jobs were available only in administration and accounting. According to 1958 data, fewer than 400 women with agricultural education were employed in all of the state farms (225 with secondary education, 156 with higher education) [Ratajczak K. 1961: 225]. In the following years, more and more women graduated from agricultural colleges and schools (secondary or higher), but that did not translate into better employment opportunities in agriculture. This was a consequence of a widespread belief among management that women were not suitable for work as animal production or agronomy specialists. Therefore, they were often hired in positions that required little responsibility and expertise and, as a consequence, were paid less. This trend in the second half of the 1950s was observed by Juliusz Poniatowski, who recognized that the situation was particularly difficult for female university graduates. After completing apprenticeships in SAFs, with few exceptions, they could not count on being allowed to work independently and manage the animal production department of a large farm (“Although she could keep the title, a female animal production specialist was basically performing the work of a clerk or a secretary”) [Poniatowski J. 1958: 51]. Faced with such difficulties, many graduates, having no possibility of employment in production, decided to take up employment in institutions related to agricultural services.

The situation began to change in the second half of the 1960s. At that time, more and more women with high agricultural qualifications started to find employment in SAFs [Ignar M. 1974: 46]. This situation could be attributed to several factors. One was the varied education level among men. Vocational schools did not offer women sufficiently attractive specialties, forcing them to choose general education after primary school. A natural continuation was higher education, including agricultural studies. Young men had greater opportunities to study in vocational and technical schools. As a result, they finished their education earlier and started working right away [Zawistowska A. 2015: 174].

Another reason for the growing employment rate of women in SAFs was the outflow of men from agricultural workforce. Due to their educational profile, men could take up better paid jobs in factories, which, however, required daily commutes or spending longer periods of time

Table 1. Percentage of women among all SAF employees, broken down by education

Education	1958	1968
Total	19.0	26.3
Higher	10.1	26.1
Secondary (vocational)	20.1	49.4
Secondary (general)	28.2	49.4
Partially completed secondary (general)	27.9	58.9
Basic vocational	65.9	22.8
Completed primary	22.8	19.3
Partially completed primary	15.6	29.7

Source: Misiuna A. J. [1970: 79].

Table 2. Employment in State Agricultural Farms

	1950	1955	1960	1965	1968
Men (in thousands)	260.3	379.9	295.6	346.3	396.9
Women (in thousands)	67.1	100.4	79.0	106.0	137.0
Women (%)	20.5	20.5	21.1	23.4	25.7
Including in State Agricultural Farms of the Ministry of Agriculture	.	.	.	.	29.2

Source: Misiuna A. J. [1970: 75].

away from home. Women were much less likely to choose such a solution and looked for jobs near their place of residence, as it allowed them to combine household and professional duties more easily. For this reason, they were also more willing to accept the lower wages and more difficult working conditions offered by SAFs. The outflow of men from agricultural workforce was also observed in individual farming, where more and more farms were run by women whose husbands took up work outside agriculture. In SAFs, this process led to an increase in the number of women employed in specialist positions, especially in the field of animal production. It is worth mentioning that female specialists usually had higher qualifications than their male counterparts. This process took on such a large scale that both the management of SAFs and economists were concerned about the feminization of the profession [Ignar M. 1974: 46]. The increase in women's employment was also influenced by organizational changes in SAFs (establishment of conglomerates, unions, and associa-

tions). As a result, the number of administrative and office positions, for which mainly women were employed, increased significantly. Between 1958 and 1978, the number of women in the group of white-collar workers doubled [Knychała K., 1978: 49].

In a way, this happened against the wishes of many farm managers, who were reluctant to employ female specialists and preferred men even if their qualifications were lower. This was typical not only for state farms, but occurred throughout the whole economy [Zawistowska A. 2015: 179]. Women were also rarely entrusted with managerial positions, even at a junior level. In 1981, the “Robotnik Rolny” [“Agricultural Worker”] magazine featured a milking brigade consisting of female graduates of an agricultural technical college as an example of highly qualified workers. However, they still had a male foreman [*Robotnik Rolny* 1981: issue 16]. In the 1980s, when the percentage of women employed in SAFs reached 30%, it was estimated that only one in fifteen held a managerial position [Tryfan B. 1987: 15].

The management was less reluctant to employ women in positions directly associated with animal production, as this was considered an absolute necessity. For practical reasons, SAFs wanted to employ women from families of their full-time employees, treating them as an important source of labor force that could be used in a flexible manner, according to the needs of a given farm. This was more profitable than employing people from other regions, who had to be provided with transport and accommodation. SAFs, supported by the Women’s League and the media, among others, tried to attract women by opening kindergartens, seasonal playgrounds for children, and canteens [APP, Inspektorat Państwowych Gospodarstw Rolnych w Śremie, sign. 111, 2-6]. However, these activities did not bring the expected results, as women followed their own priorities when making decisions about work.

Despite being constantly understaffed, SAFs still preferred employing men or married couples. The latter solution was advantageous and rational, as employing at least two people from a family at least partially solved the problem of the housing deficit. Another argument in favor of employing women (in this case – the wives of full-time workers) was the desire to stabilize the personnel, as a high employee turnover was one of the greatest ills of state farms. Already during the time of State Land Properties, efforts were made to recruit whole families, as it was too easy for singles to give up work [APP, Państwowe Nieruchomości Ziemskie Zarząd Okręgowy w Poznaniu, sign. 142, 5]. This practice was also ap-

plied – with varying degrees of intensity – in later years, especially by farms with significant shortages of qualified workers (especially in the 1970s and 1980s, when press advertisements emphasized that jobs were offered to both spouses at once) [e.g. *Robotnik Rolny* 1984: issue 3; *Robotnik Rolny*, 1990: issue 2].

With the increase in mechanization, the approach towards women's employment in agricultural production in SAFs changed. The demand for manual labor decreased, while demand for work in animal production increased, as the process of mechanization was much slower there. However, the intensification of animal production favored progress in this department as well. Milking machines, feed conveyors, and elevators made work easier – but the widespread use of such automatic solutions negatively affected female employees. There was a quite common belief that the rapid mechanization of work was rendering women useless. Agricultural economists directly expressed their hope that, with the increase in salaries and the introduction of a new bonus system in SAFs, men would take up the positions so far occupied by women [Strużek B. 1981: 47]. In the end, the work of women in this production department was not completely eliminated, but the workplace atmosphere was far from motivating.

## MOTIVATIONS AND BARRIERS TO OCCUPATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN IN SAFs

Women's employment in SAFs was never very popular despite the fact that throughout the entire period of their existence, state-owned farms were understaffed. This means that, at least in theory, there was no shortage of work for women. This warrants the question about factors that affected women's decisions to take up employment in SAFs.

One group of women was in a special situation, as the work and life of SAF workers was quite peculiar. On the one hand, land as their means of production, the countryside as their place of residence, and their separate community, made it similar to the work and life of farmers. On the other hand, however, the state ownership of the means of production, the standard working hours, the remuneration system, and the management style made it similar to the work and life of factory workers. The latter characteristic had a particularly strong impact on attitudes to the professional work of women – wives of agricultural workers. It was widely believed

that the duty to support the family rested with the man, and that the woman should only take care of the house and children (or at most, the household plot). Women who decided to stay at home enjoyed greater prestige than those who worked professionally, especially full-time. On the other hand, work, especially seasonal, was considered obvious and natural in rural traditions.

The decision to take up full-time employment was particularly difficult for married women. They often had to overcome the resistance of their own husbands, many of whom did not accept their wives' professional activity and the necessary reorganization of family life that it entailed [Wojciechowska-Kołątaj B. 1974: 255]. Most often, however, financial arguments were decisive. Additional income from the wife's full-time or seasonal employment was an important part of the household budget, as for many years, salaries in SAFs remained low. Full-time female workers also benefited from a number of social benefits provided by the workplace, such as free nurseries and kindergartens. They were also entitled to a family allowance and, from 1968, to carer's leave.

Single women, and especially single mothers, were the most economically vulnerable group [Szpak E. 2007: 74]. For them, employment in SAFs was the solution to most of their livelihood problems. Although salaries were not high, they were accompanied by allowances in kind (e.g. milk for each family member). Every full-time employee was entitled to tied accommodation, provided free of charge (all maintenance and repair costs were borne by the SAF) and an infield. The employer was also obliged to provide childcare, which gave single mothers a sense of security. On the other hand, for childless women, especially young ones, SAFs offered a chance to quickly become independent (by providing them with an apartment, or more commonly, a room). Notably, many young women only worked until they got married, even if their husband was also a SAF worker.

Financial considerations, although undoubtedly important, did not preclude other motivations. It is difficult to say to what extent individual decisions were influenced by the model of a professionally and socially active woman, created by the media and propaganda. Arguments such as being able to contribute to the household budget, dispose of one's own money, and be less dependent from one's husband fit well with the "modern woman" model and women's ambitions. The few available diaries and memoirs of women working in SAFs also show that they were satisfied with their work [Błażejowski K. 2013]. One could again refer to the example of tractor drivers, who were mainly young girls, fascinated

with technology, who wanted to do a job associated with progress and modernity.

Women with vocational and secondary education had a different perspective. For them, the positions of an accountant or a secretary were more attractive and prestigious. Meanwhile, for women with agricultural education, employment in SAFs was one of the few opportunities to work in their profession. Women living in the vicinity of a SAF were also often interested in working there. These were mainly young women who had usually completed at least primary education, and took up office work. It was an attractive job opportunity for them, as they gained financial independence; however, after getting married, they usually left their jobs, which contributed to high employee turnover [Marek J. 1972: 7].

Professionally active women in SAFs, especially blue-collar workers, encountered a number of obstacles. One of the most important barriers was the above-mentioned traditional family model, in which women were mainly confined to the role of a wife and mother. Taking up employment did not relieve women from their household and childcare duties, and juggling these two roles was not easy [Bednarski H., Gustowski A. 1978: 86]. Domestic duties, such as preparing meals for the family, doing laundry, and shopping, required a great deal of commitment, time, and effort from a woman, and were all done manually. This only started to change in the late 1960s, when the availability of household appliances increased. Living conditions in new flats were much more tolerable, with bathrooms, running water, and even gas supply, but their availability remained insufficient [Dzun W. 1981: 140-43]. Most household duties still rested on women's shoulders. If they were employed, for example in animal production, where until the 1970s the workload was spread out over more than ten hours a day, they had to have excellent organizational skills. One former employee describes her working day thus:

*I worked with cows in the barn. Before milking, the cows had to be tidied up, the manure thrown away, new straw bedding laid, etc. We went to work at 3:00 AM, 2:30 AM. Milking started at 4:00 AM. When I started working, we already had electric milking machines. We usually finished this at 6:00 AM. We had to clean everything and then we went home. At 1 PM we went back to work. There were two milkings, and the second one began at 4 PM. I mostly worked with other women. There were probably two or three men. It was not an easy job. Sometimes I had to carry 40 kg bags of feed [Janina Banasiak 2014: 68].*

At the same time, she points out that it was precisely this type of work that enabled her to combine her domestic and professional duties, as she

could come home, take care of her children, and prepare a meal in the middle of the day.

Women also devoted a lot of time and energy to obtaining provisions for their families. The underdeveloped retail network in rural areas offered only the most basic products. In many towns and villages, towards the end of the 1950s, one could not even buy bread on a regular basis. It was not until the 1960s that ready-made meals appeared on the market: instant soups, canned meats, dried pasta. But still, many of these products were not available in rural shops [Machalek M. 2018: 195-206].

Another important activity of SAF women was the cultivation of their household plot. These plots allowed families to produce their own fruit, vegetables, and meat, which solved some of their supply problems. Some products, especially pigs, were sold to gain an extra income, in addition to the salary of the head of the family. The efficiency of production on such plots was very high, especially in the 1950s and 1960s (later on, animal production by workers was limited by SAF authorities) [Machalek M. 2012: 322]. Although the basic agricultural activities on workers' household plots were performed by the SAF, the remaining work was performed mainly by women. Running such a mini-farm was sufficiently profitable and time-consuming for them not to have to take up professional work.

For many women, the problem of childcare limited or even excluded the possibility of taking up full-time employment. Families of agricultural workers were usually large, and continuous migrations between SAFs meant that women could not count on the support of grandparents or other relatives. Although SAFs were obliged to ensure access to nurseries, kindergartens, and other childcare facilities, in practice only a part of SAFs fulfilled this obligation. In the 1970s, only one SAF in five provided access to such facilities. The availability of seasonal playgrounds was equally low. Notably, however, in many towns the availability of childcare facilities did not translate into increased professional activity of women. Some even proposed that women who did not work professionally should not be allowed to use the services of kindergartens at all.

A low level of material needs and aspirations was also a barrier to making career decisions. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were no clear incentives in the form of an attractive retail offer, so the need for material goods did not sufficiently develop. It was not until the beginning of the 1970s that supply began to improve significantly, but this did not last long. At the same time, there was a significant increase in wages in state agriculture, which meant that men earned enough to satisfy the needs of their

families. Thus, taking up employment, especially involving hard physical work with very low social prestige, was regarded as unnecessary. Instead, they chose to limit their needs and their spending, as it was much easier, especially when the subsistence minimum was always provided by the employer.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present findings on the subject are far from exhaustive, but they allow one to conclude that working in SAFs was not attractive for most women. This is confirmed by relatively low employment rates throughout the existence of SAFs. Due to the specific economic characteristics of SAFs, most women employed there were blue-collar, mainly seasonal workers. They performed heavy, dirty, tedious, and usually low-paid jobs, and in addition, they did not enjoy social prestige. That is why such employment was mostly taken up by single or economically disadvantaged women. Most women preferred to minimize their needs and perform the traditional roles of wives and mothers. The employment of blue-collar workers, both male and female, started to decline with the development of mechanization, i.e. towards the end of the 1960s. Until the end of their existence, though, SAFs kept employing seasonal workers. However, at this stage of research, it is difficult to determine exactly how many women were in that capacity.

Rapid mechanization resulted in a significant increase in demand for specialists in SAFs. Women who, since the end of the 1950s, more and more often graduated from secondary and higher schools and colleges of agriculture, met with reluctance on the part of SAF managers. If they took up employment in SAFs, they had to fight for acceptance in a male-dominated environment and often gave up, looking for employment in other departments of state agriculture or in other sectors altogether. All the way until their dissolution, SAFs rarely employed women in specialist positions. The most stable and growing professional group of women in SAFs were administrative employees. However, determining the exact scale and nature of the issues concerning women's professional activity in SAFs requires further research.

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