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Female unemployment trends in rural areas of Poland in 2008-2012

This paper, firstly, identifies the scale and spatial differentiation of registered female unemployment in rural areas of Poland, defined according to the new Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA) classification of LAU2 regions used in the European Union (EU) for the Labour Force Survey, since the onset of the global economic crisis, and secondly, investigates the reasons for the occurrence of very high female unemployment rates that are either stable or increasing and very high gender gaps in unemployment rates. Quantitative analysis identified 27 rural communes in Poland affected by such problems. Most are situated in the north and several in the south-east of the country, mainly in post-state-owned farming areas. The results of semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives of local authorities of nine of those communes indicate that despite the different locations and different types of LAU2 regions, female unemployment is caused by similar factors: liquidation of state-owned farms not followed by any new job opportunities, peripheral location not attractive for external (out-of-commune) investors, lack of entrepreneurial skills, experience and finance to start own businesses, low income or poverty of inhabitants significantly limiting the purchase of goods and services, thus limiting the demand that could be met by local SMEs, and finally liquidation of enterprises, quite often the only employers in the commune. The problem of female unemployment cannot be solved by local authorities as they lack sufficient legal and financial resources, and needs to be addressed by both the government and the EU within actions of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

Keywords: rural areas, female unemployment rate, gender gap, global economic crisis

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Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years Poland has experienced a complex and complicated two-stage transformation process leading from a centrally planned economy to a free market and, since 2004, to membership of the European Union (EU) and its single market. Since 2011 Poland has been a full participant in the EU's single labour market (Dhéret *et al.* 2013).

Owing to changes resulting from past and recent transformation processes, as well as from present demographic trends, the condition of Polish labour market at the local level varies significantly: from more job opportunities in large cities to significant losses in jobs and increases in unemployment in small towns and rural communes, especially those situated in regions lagging behind in social and economic development (Rakowska, 2011). The latter constitutes one of the most serious problems, particularly in the case of women, many of whom are very vulnerable to unfavourable changes in local labour markets and consequently to unemployment. Women have not benefited from the recent increase in employment partly due to the fact that there is a lack of affordable childcare and care for dependent adults, usually members of the family (Bardasi and Monfardini, 2004; Heinen and Wator, 2006; Drejerska, 2008; Drejerska, 2009). It is especially visible in the case of labour force participation of rural married women and confirms the fact that differences in labour market behaviour largely depend on gender (Sawicka, 2008; Pedersen and Schmidt, 2010).

Irrespective of the classification applied, rural areas account for an extremely large share of the territory of Poland, inhabited by 39 per cent of the population (Rakowska, 2013). These areas have been undergoing intense demographic and economic changes leading to diversification of social and economic conditions. These changes have particularly affected women's participation in the labour market, which varies immensely at the local level. It shows most clearly in the emergence of two extremes: strong local rural economies (LAU2 regions or communes) usually situated close to large cities and

with strong functional links to the central city labour market and the opposite: weak and/or declining rural economies, often remote ones, characterised by high unemployment, lack of job opportunities and migration especially of the young female labour force. Between these extremes it is possible to identify a wide variety of rural areas: from peri-urban commuting areas linked to urban centres to remote, rural areas still relying heavily on agriculture, as well as rural areas with economies more oriented towards services, such as tourism or industry, including the food industry (EC, 2008). Consequently, rural women living in different rural communes are not a homogeneous group in terms of their activities, job opportunities and job mobility. Women provide for their households as they "tend to reinvest their income in improved nutrition, health and education for household members, thus increasing living standards and reducing 'non-income poverty' in the long term" (Krogh *et al.*, 2009, p.133). Women also play a pivotal role in maintaining rural communities, both because of their economic activities and their major contributions to the maintenance of family and community life (Braithwaite, 1996). Thus female unemployment is not only a crucial factor causing lower standards of living of affected persons and their families and a factor significantly contributing to social exclusion of both, but also one that strongly restrains local development.

For these reasons female unemployment has been a major concern of labour policy makers at both the national (MRD, 2009; MARD, 2010) and EU levels. The achievement of a 75 per cent overall employment rate for the 20-64 age group by 2020 is one of the headline targets of the EU's Europe 2020 Strategy (EC, 2010) and increasing the level of female labour market participation is essential for this to happen (European Council, 2013a). The European Commission's recommendations to Poland on measures it should adopt over the coming 18 months in order to implement the Europe 2020 strategy for growth and jobs (European Council, 2013b) stressed the need to increase the employment level of women. To effectively activate women's participation in the labour market it is necessary to recognise the present condition of the labour

market with special focus on its barriers and limitations for women. Some authors (e.g. Bakas and Papappetrou, 2013) indicate that despite its importance the subject of the structure of unemployment by gender has received relatively little attention. Labour market diagnosis will enable the selection and implementation of measures aimed at reducing also female unemployment, especially at the local level (Copus *et al.*, 2011).

Based on the above, the three main objectives of this paper are: (a) to describe trends in unemployment rates in Poland since the start of the economic crisis in 2008, including comparison of trends in female (FUR) and male (MUR) unemployment rates for different types of LAU2 regions, and to identify different patterns of FUR changes and gender gaps; (b) to identify spatial differentiation of FUR in Poland in 2012 and to identify 'problematic' rural areas in terms of high FUR and high gender gap; and (c) to identify the reasons for high FUR in 'problematic' rural areas.

Methodology

The study consists of a two-stage analysis: quantitative analysis of formal (registered) unemployment statistics for the period 2008-2012, extracted from the Local Data Bank (LDB) of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, completed with the EU's new Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA) classification of LAU2 regions (Eurostat, 2011), and qualitative research carried out in August 2013. The findings of the quantitative analysis formed the basis for selecting 'problematic' LAU2 regions, i.e. those affected by the most unfavourable combination of female unemployment characteristics. Representatives of the authorities of these communes were surveyed in the second stage including qualitative analysis.

The retrieved statistics used for the quantitative analysis relate to formal unemployment, i.e. the number of unemployed persons registered in Labour Offices in accordance with the *Law of April 20, 2004 on Promotion of Employment and Labour Market Institutions* (CSO, 2012), for all LAU2 in Poland. The registered unemployed are defined as persons who are not employed and not performing any other kind of paid work, able and ready to take full-time employment and meeting all the criteria listed in the Law, among them the following: (a) they are aged 18 or over and under 60 (women) or under 65 (men); and (b) they are not owners or holders (sole or dependent) of agricultural real estate with an area of agricultural land exceeding 2 convertible ha; are not subject to retirement and pension insurance from full-time work due to being a spouse or a member of an agricultural household with an area of agricultural land exceeding 2 convertible ha. The latter requirement is of special importance in rural areas, as the fact that owners or holders of agricultural land cannot be registered as unemployed creates so-called 'hidden unemployment' or 'agricultural overload of the unused labour force' and makes the scale of real unemployment impossible to define. FUR is measured as the number of unemployed women registered at Labour Offices as a proportion of all women of working age. MUR is calculated similarly.

Rural areas were defined according to the revised version of the EU DEGURBA classification used for the Labour

Force Survey, LFS (EC, 2012). The classification creates a three-way typology of LAU2 regions: (a) *densely populated area* (alternative name: cities or large urban area), where at least 50 per cent of the population lives in high-density clusters, in this paper called 'cities'; (b) *intermediate density area* (alternative name: towns and suburbs or small urban area), where less than 50 per cent of the population lives in rural grid cells and less than 50 per cent lives in a high-density clusters, in this paper called 'small urban areas'; and (c) *thinly populated area* (alternative name: rural area), where more than 50 per cent of the population lives in rural grid cells, in this paper called 'rural areas'.

To provide a more detailed insight into the situation of women in rural and urban labour markets, FUR and MUR were analysed separately for the three DEGURBA categories, although – according to LFS assumptions – cities and small urban areas may be combined and treated as one category constituting urban areas. For the reference year 2012 the new DEGURBA classification for Polish LAU2 regions was downloaded from the EUROSTAT RAMON metadata server. To reflect the socio-economic character of the regions we used the typology elaborated by Komornicki and Śleszyński (2008) for the purposes of a study on spatial planning. This identified 16 categories of LAU2 regions, of which some were associated with urban centres and their suburban zones; with industrial, tourist, communication, rural, ecological and rural-ecological functions, as well as a separate category of LAU2 regions without any specific functional specialisation.

In the second stage of the research qualitative analysis was based on data collected in semi-structured telephone interviews with the Secretary of the Commune¹ in each selected 'problematic' LAU2 region. After an introduction explaining the reason for calling, the interviews started with the open-ended question: what are the reasons for high female unemployment in your commune? The subsequent questions depended on the answer to this and aimed at clarifying the local labour market context for female unemployment, especially unemployment duration, job opportunities for men and women in the local and adjacent labour markets, volume of job seeking migration by gender and age, main destinations of job seeking migrants, etc.

Results

Findings of the quantitative research

According to the revised DEGURBA criteria 79 per cent (1958) Polish LAU2 regions are defined as rural, 18 per cent (447) as small urban areas and the remaining 3 per cent (74 communes) as cities. The mean FUR for the years 2008-2012 was 10.9 per cent in rural areas, 8.7 per cent in small urban areas and 7.7 per cent in cities. The mean FUR was higher than MUR in all three types of LAU2 region, and followed the same tendency to be higher in rural than in urban areas (Figure 1). During the five year period both FUR and MUR

¹ Secretary of the Commune is one of head positions in the hierarchy of local authorities.

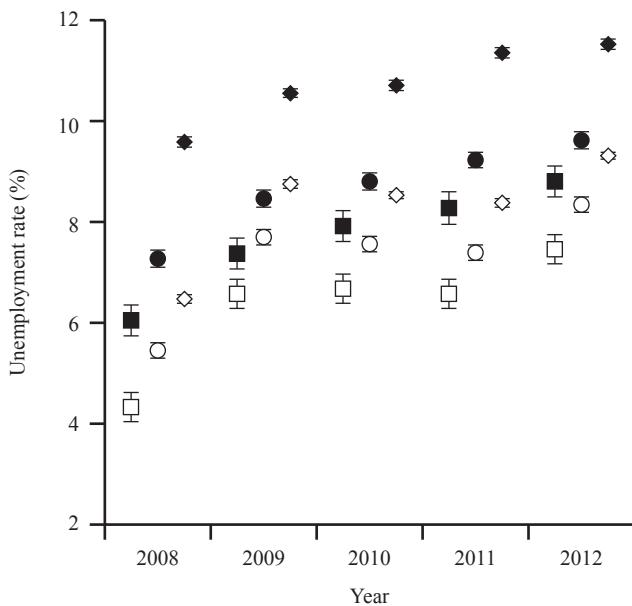


Figure 1: Female (black symbols) and male (white symbols) unemployment rates in the period 2008-2012 in LAU2 regions of Poland classified according to DEGURBA criteria (squares = cities, circles = small urban areas, diamonds = rural areas). Error bars indicate 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: author's elaboration based on the Local Data Bank (LDB) of the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS)

increased substantially but the mean increases in unemployment rates differed between rural and urban areas as well as between females and males. Male unemployment increased more than female unemployment in percentage terms during this time but, in rural areas, mean MUR in 2012 was still much lower than mean FUR in 2008. By 2012 FUR equalled 11.5 per cent in the rural areas of Poland, compared to 9.6 per cent in small urban areas and 8.8 per cent in cities.

Between 2008 and 2012 the biggest decrease in FUR in a rural LAU2 region was -9.9 percentage points (pp) and the biggest increase was 10.9 pp, while the change in MUR ranged from -10.2 pp to 9.9 pp (Figure 2). FUR increased by 4.0 pp or more in 13.2 per cent of rural LAU2 regions and fell by 2.95 pp or more in 1.6 per cent of rural LAU2 regions. In 85.2 per cent of rural LAU2 regions, characterised by changes ranging from -2.95 pp to 3.99 pp, FUR was relatively stable over the five year period. The corresponding figures for MUR were 22.7 per cent, 0.4 per cent and 76.9 per cent respectively illustrating that, notwithstanding the higher overall female unemployment rates, more regions witnessed large increases in male unemployment rates during this period.

Increases in FUR in excess of 5 per cent were observed in 90 rural LAU2 regions, of which 29 were defined by Komornicki and Śleszyński (2008) as communes of agricultural function and others as: without any specific function (7), with valuable natural sites (7), of developed agricultural function and with environmentally valuable sites (6), of developed industrial function (7), of developed industrial and tourism functions (6), outer zones of *poviat* (LAU1) towns (6), and transportation corridor extensively used (6). The remaining 16 LAU2 regions are of mixed types, i.e. representing two or more of the above listed characteristics.

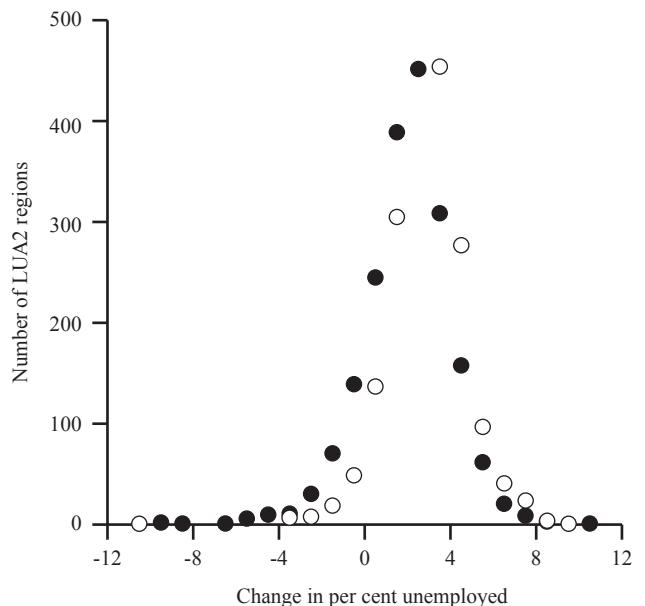


Figure 2: Distribution of rural LAU2 regions of Poland according to the change in female (black symbols) and male (white symbols) unemployment rates during the period 2008-2012.

Source: author's elaboration based on LDB of the GUS

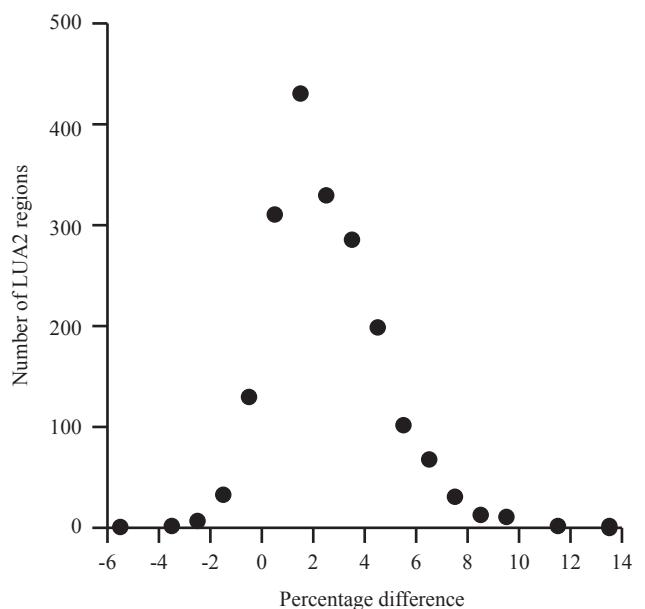


Figure 3: The difference between the mean female and male unemployment rates of LAU2 regions in Poland for the years 2008-2012.

Source: author's elaboration based on LDB of the GUS

The difference between the mean FUR and MUR for the years 2008-2012 varied between LAU2 regions: the unemployment gender gap ranged from a mean FUR that was 5.3 pp lower than the mean MUR of the region to a value that was 13.2 pp higher (Figure 3). Only in 9.9 per cent of rural communes was the mean MUR higher than the mean FUR over the five year period. In 11.2 per cent of rural communes the mean FUR was higher by 5 pp or more than the mean MUR.

In 2012 the FUR in rural LAU2 regions ranged from 2.9 to 30.3 per cent (Table 1). The FUR of the majority (59 per cent) of these regions fell into the lowest one-third of this

Table 1: Female and male unemployment rates in rural areas of Poland in 2012.

Category	Total number of LAU2 regions	Female unemployment rate %		Male unemployment rate %	
		mean	range	mean	range
Low	1161	8.6	2.9 - 12.0	7.3	1.2 - 13.8
Moderate	750	15.3	12.1 - 21.1	11.9	6.2 - 22.7
High	47	23.0	21.2 - 30.3	17.9	8.0 - 28.2

Source: author's elaboration based on LDB of the GUS

range, 38 per cent of regions fell into the middle one-third, and in the remaining 2 per cent the FUR fell into the highest one-third of the range. The mean FUR of these 47 regions was 23.0 per cent, compared to a mean MUR of 17.9 per cent. A combination of high 2012 FUR with either a high increase or a relative stability was observed in 39 rural communes, which represent all types of LAU2 regions in the typology of Komornicki and Śleszyński (2008), except cores of metropolitan areas, their adjacent areas and *poviat* towns.

An unfavourable combination of high 2012 FUR with a high increase or relative stability over the period 2008-2012 and the biggest gender gap in terms of the mean FUR for the years 2008-2012 exceeding the mean MUR occurred in 31 rural communes located in six NUTS2 regions (Figure 4):

- Świecie nad Osą, Lipno, Łasin and Dobre in Kujawsko-Pomorskie;
- Chlewiska, Pionki and Jastrząb in Mazowieckie;
- Domaradz, Dydnia and Lutowiska in Podkarpackie;
- Trzebielino and Czarna Dąbrówka in Pomorskie;
- Sępopol, Godkowo, Budry, Działdowo, Wilczęta, Rychliki, Braniewo, Lidzbark, Kowale Oleckie, Lelkowo and Dąbrówno in Warmińsko-Mazurskie;
- Wapno in Wielkopolskie;
- Bliżyn in Świętokrzyskie; and
- Przelewice, Barwice, Recz, Szczecinek, Grzmiąca and Kalisz Pomorski in Zachodniopomorskie.

These 'problematic' rural communes represent seven different types in the functional typology of Komornicki and Śleszyński (2008):

- i) Nine communes of developed agricultural function (Łasin, Świecie nad Osą, Dobre, Sępopol, Braniewo, Wilczęta, Lipno, Lelkowo and Wapno);
- ii) Seven communes without any distinct functional specialisation (Działdowo, Rychliki, Przelewice, Barwice, Grzmiąca, Jastrząb and Szczecinek);
- iii) Six communes with environmentally valuable sites (e.g. national parks) (Chlewiska, Dąbrówno, Recz, Pionki, Bliżyn and Kalisz Pomorski);
- iv) Four communes of developed tourism function (Lutowiska, Czarna Dąbrówka, Lidzbark and Godkowo);
- v) Three communes of developed agricultural function and with environmentally valuable sites (Dydnia, Kowale Oleckie and Budry);
- vi) One commune of developed industrial function (Trzebielino);
- vii) One transportation corridor intensively used (Domaradz).

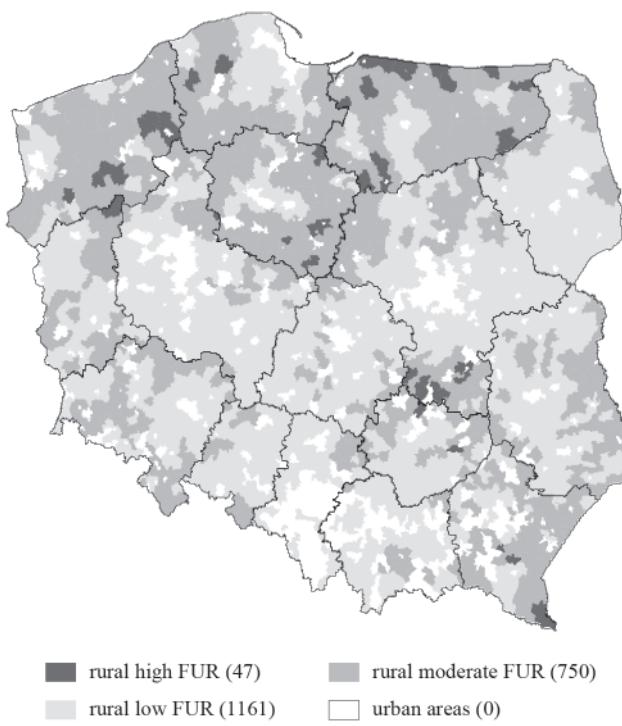


Figure 4: Location of rural LAU2 regions of Poland characterised by low (pale grey), moderate (mid grey) and high (dark grey) female unemployment rate in 2012. See Table 1 for unemployment rate thresholds. Urban areas are shown in white.

Source: author's elaboration based on LDB of the GUS

Findings of the qualitative research

One commune representing each of types (iii) to (vii) was selected for further research, together with two communes from each of the more numerous groups (i) and (ii). To better identify inter-regional differentiation of female unemployment the selection was based on additional criterion of including 'problematic' LAU2 regions from different *voivodships* (NUTS2 regions). As a consequence the survey group included nine units with populations ranging from 2120 to 6344 inhabitants and total unemployment rates ranging from 14.2 per cent to 26.7 per cent. FUR, although the highest in Poland, also varied: from the highest in Chlewiska to the lowest in Wapno (Table 2).

The causes of female unemployment were quite similar in all surveyed communes irrespective of type or location. Thus these causes can be generalised. All respondents pointed out that female unemployment in their communes has been long-term and that the statistics are a sum of the unemployed women who were registered recently (less than one year ago) and thus have rights to financial benefits and those who were registered more than one year ago, thus do not get any financial benefits, only social (including health) insurance. As there are no new job opportunities in the local labour market for women the numbers of long-term unemployed without unemployment pay are increasing. This is related to the legal condition that one has to be employed full-time for one year and then made redundant to be eligible to be registered as unemployed with all benefits. If the employment is of a different form or is of shorter duration the unemployed do not receive any money. This condition

Table 2: Labour market data for the rural LAU2 regions selected for survey.

Name of LAU2 region	Type*	Population total	of working age		Unemployment		Working age females	Female unemployment	
			total	%	total	%		total	%
Chlewicka	iii	6183	3807	61.6	1016	26.7	1694	513	30.3
Trzebielino	vi	3745	2437	65.1	493	20.2	1110	288	25.9
Budry	v	2961	1879	63.5	389	20.7	812	200	24.6
Domaradz	vii	6141	3793	61.8	748	19.7	1714	417	24.3
Rychliki	ii	4057	2590	63.8	505	19.5	1142	268	23.5
Braniewo	i	6344	4161	65.6	798	19.2	1862	421	22.6
Recz	iii	5717	3746	65.5	651	17.4	1679	372	22.2
Lutowiska	iv	2120	1440	67.9	264	18.3	643	142	22.1
Wapno	i	3102	1983	63.9	281	14.2	912	195	21.4

* According to the typology of Komornicki and Śleszyński (2008)

Source: author's elaboration based on LDB of the GUS (as of 31 December 2012)

is especially important in rural areas where seasonal job opportunities occur, however 'seasonal' means shorter than one year. Respondents stressed that the real extent of female unemployment, i.e. formal and informal, is unknown, but it is certainly higher than the official statistics show.

Prior to the economic transition, all 'problematic' communes located in the northern regions had numerous large state owned farms employing the local population. Owing to differentiation of agricultural production in most of them there were sufficient jobs both for men and women. A few respondents remarked that women did not then have to work as jobs at state farms in the centralised economy included the provision of extra non-financial but significant benefits sufficient for only a man to support the whole family. The political and structural changes after 1990 resulted in the privatisation of those farms and caused large scale loss in jobs, as ex-farm hands were offered no alternative employment. Men have been in a little better situation as their short-term or seasonal job mobility is higher. According to the respondents women run households (perform mothers' and housewives' duties) so their job mobility is significantly limited. These facts lead to the conclusion that in the surveyed 'problematic' communes authorities face structural long-term female unemployment.

All respondents agreed that despite the lack of formal job offers there is a 'black' labour market in their communes, but that it is "not of considerable size". An informal job, where the employer does not pay obligatory insurance, is disadvantageous to the employee, but in situations where there is no other choice it is accepted. Still there are more informal job offers for men than women, reflecting the general trend in surveyed local labour markets.

In all cases the peripheral location was pointed out as the main reason for the difficult situation in local labour markets. This means not only a long distance from urban centres of considerable social and economic significance but also a lack of railway or – more importantly – road connections with such places. In some communes bus routes operate only in the weekday mornings and evenings. Neither public nor private bus transport operates at weekends. Location, especially directly at Poland's north and east borders, which are at the same time external EU borders, was indicated as most unfavourable to developing local small and medium-sized enterprises and/or attracting external investors and employers. After Poland's EU accession the rules of the EU's single market stopped cross-border trade with Ukraine and Belarus,

which for many inhabitants of border LAUs was a source of either formal or informal but significant income.

Another contributing reason is the lack of job opportunities for women in directly neighbouring communes. Not too long a distance would enable commuting by cars, even in case of lack of bus or railway transportation.

Only in four communes respondents said that female unemployment increased recently due to closing enterprises, most of which were production plants. These employed from 20 to 80 people. The latter case is Trzebielino, which Komornicki and Śleszyński, (2008) identified as a commune of developed industrial function, and which now due to liquidation of enterprises is affected by high unemployment.

The gender gap, meaning higher female than male unemployment, was caused by two main reasons. One of them is the fact that men are employed or run their micro-enterprises (often self-employed) in construction, which is a typically male field. They offer construction and redecoration services also to outside local markets, including work abroad on a seasonal or whole-year basis. Two respondents mentioned that the main employers in their communes offer mostly so-called 'manual' jobs requiring physical men's labour (e.g. a plant producing artificial fertilisers).

Two of the surveyed communes, Wapno (Box 1) and Lutowiska (Box 2) make quite special cases. Furthermore, two extra interviews were carried out with authorities of Lelkowo and Górowo Iławieckie communes where formal FUR, although still very high, decreased in 2010-2012, which is why they were not classified in this study as 'problematic', but provided additional information. The decrease in FUR was caused by emigration of the unemployed for so called 'permanent stay', which requires formal registration as a resident in the new place of living. The main reason for taking such a decision is the lack of local job opportunities. There are two destinations for emigrating job seekers: the first is domestic, mostly Warszawa, and sometimes other big cities of Poland, and the second but not less important is Germany. As the leaving population is of productive age, local authorities consider this situation very unfavourable and indicative of a stronger trend of demographic decline.

Box 1: Case study: Wapno commune.

A rather unusual and interesting situation exists in Wapno, the only 'problematic' LAU2 region in Wielkopolskie region. Before 1977 this local labour market had been thriving but it never recovered from a mining catastrophe. In Wapno there was a salt mine employing 600 people. It was an old-established plant, renowned for its extremely high quality salt. As more than 90 per cent of its production was successfully exported central authorities decided to increase the output by exploiting the upper layers, situated dangerously close to the surface. Soon this caused floods of underground waters to the mine corridors and subsidence which destroyed several dozens of private and public buildings in Wapno village. The real underground extent of that collapse and possible future consequences are unknown even now, as due to a decision of the central authorities the 'collapsed' mine was flooded with water from the nearby lake shortly after the catastrophe. The mine was a kind of 'employer-monopolist'; no other plants operated there at that time, so overnight all of its employees became jobless. As a consequence the previously prosperous local shops and service providers lost their clients, which resulted in their businesses closing. As the area has been perceived as insecure no new enterprises have been set up there ever since – neither in the time of the centrally planned economy nor after 1990. The cost of extensive geological analysis is too high for the small local budget. The unfavourable, peripheral location without satisfactory road connections also makes the commune unattractive to external investors, both domestic and foreign. According to the above presented functional typology, the commune has rather an agricultural character but the case of Wapno commune is unique in the whole country when considering the primary reasons for unemployment in this commune. However, the other characteristics of the current situation in the local labour market are similar to those in other 'problematic' rural LAU2 regions.

Box 2: Case study: Lutowiska commune.

Lutowiska is a commune located in the very south-east corner of Poland. A large part of its borders are national and external EU borders, the latter inhibiting formerly existing cross-border trade. Nearly 60 per cent of its area is taken by Bieszczadzki National Park, which is on the one hand an undeniable asset, but on the other a restraint on many kinds of economic activity. External investors willing to establish in the area, such as Bieszczady Safari Park, were discouraged by legal and administrative barriers and environmental protection demands related to the National Park. The commune is peripheral in terms of location and road and railway connections, and this is the main reason why the unique natural beauty of the surrounding mountains does not attract as many tourists as it could. Thus the well-preserved natural environment and unique landscapes do not influence the labour market, as opposed to, for example, the Tatra mountains and Zakopane area, where such assets are the driving factor for the prosperous development of communes. In Lutowiska high female, and also male, unemployment is of long-term structural character. In the 1990s a big state-owned farm employing 500 people from Lutowiska and the neighbouring communes was closed, then the Forest Superintendencies cut the number of their employees by 300. These were the only significant employers in that area. Such job losses caused the migration of young people seeking job opportunities both abroad and to big cities in Poland. Long-term unemployment (formal and informal) of a large share of the population results in a very low purchasing power and limited demand for the goods and services provided by local small business. At present women are offered only seasonal jobs connected with forest care. Lutowiska is classified as a commune of developed tourism function, but this function is not developed enough to prevent high and long-lasting female unemployment. This is partly due to the fact that tourism in that area is only a seasonal activity. The case study of Lutowiska commune is an example that illustrates the most common reasons for female unemployment, reflecting the situation in the majority of surveyed 'problematic' LAU2 regions.

Discussion

During the period 2008-2012 there has been, according to official statistics, both a continuing increase in female unemployment rates and a significant unemployment gender gap in rural areas of Poland. However, the real extent of female unemployment is evaluated by the local authorities interviewed in this study to be much higher than the official level.

Both the post-1990 economic and social transition and recent economic and social conditions have caused a polarisation of local labour markets. Female unemployment rates and the gender gap are both less favourable in rural peripheral areas than in rural suburban areas. In most surveyed rural labour markets in peripheral areas there are fewer job offers

for women than for men, so women living in these areas are more vulnerable to negative changes in local labour markets and to unemployment. Furthermore, although female and male unemployment have similar causes, in Poland as in other countries (e.g. Ollikainen, 2003; Ollikainen, 2006; Lauerová and Terrell, 2007 and Dăncică, 2012) unemployment affects men and women differently as a consequence of their different social roles. The survey results suggest that in recent years there has been no significant change in women's roles in child care and in families as compared to the earlier findings of Bardasi and Monfardini (2004), Heinen and Wator (2006), Drejerska (2008) and Drejerska (2009). Thus while men can often seek job opportunities in non-local labour markets, most rural women with children continue to

be more bound to their place of living and are dependent only on local job opportunities. Rural women living in suburban areas have more job opportunities due to the possibility of commuting to the city than is the case in peripheral rural areas.

By contrast, the group of unemployed single women is in a different situation, as the absence of childcare responsibilities allows them to be more mobile and able to migrate from rural areas, often for a long-term or permanent stay. Out-migration of the (especially young) female labour force is an important factor in the correct interpretation of changes in female unemployment rates and the gender gap. Local authorities of 'problematic' communes stress that the decreases in rural female unemployment rates and in gender gaps recorded in official statistics do not necessarily imply increases in female employment and improvements in job opportunities in local labour markets as might be assumed. On the contrary, they may result from such a worsening of conditions that the unemployed move away, seeking a job mostly in the big Polish cities or abroad (Rakowska, 2012), and intending to stay there not temporarily, but for a longer period. In such cases the communes face not only still unsolved, although statistically lower, female unemployment but also a loss of demographic capital, as female out-migration can cause a significant gender imbalance in the younger working age population. It shows that not only have the economic and social problems arising from the transition process not been solved but that they have in fact increased and become a cause of other negative phenomena such as demographic decline. Rural areas affected by such phenomenon should also be identified as 'problematic'.

As among the most common reasons for unemployment are those resulting from the process of economic transformation (i.e. liquidation of state-owned farms not followed by any new job opportunities, peripheral location not attractive for external (out-of-commune) investors, lack of entrepreneurial skills, experience and finances to start own businesses, low income or poverty of inhabitants significantly limiting the purchase of goods and services, thus limiting the demand that could be met by local SMEs, and liquidation of enterprises, quite often the only employers in the commune), the role of local authorities in reducing female unemployment, and also total unemployment, is limited. What local authorities in Poland can do is determined by the law: regulations strictly define their duties and responsibilities and most of all the principles and aims of spending budget funds. Still they can realise projects supported by EU Structural Funds that are aimed at activation of rural women in the labour market, provided that the implemented programmes are devised according to local needs.

In this context the identification of 'problematic' rural communes and their local experiences, as well as the correct interpretation of statistical changes, is necessary to better understand the factors and processes that influence rural employment and unemployment as key elements in elaborating future well-targeted rural development policies in line with the EU's Europe 2020 Strategy. Recognition of local experience and accommodation of this knowledge in strategies may – as Copus *et al.* (2011) observe – increase the effectiveness of such policies.

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