

СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ЯВЛЕНИЯ И ПРОЦЕССЫ

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ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITY OF WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS IN A SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSION (BASED ON THE RESULTS OF AN INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT)

The article reflects the key results of a comprehensive sociological study (implementation period – 2nd half of 2023, methods of collecting information – questionnaire survey, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews), which made it possible to identify the features of life and entrepreneurial activity in rural settlements of the country from a gender perspective. The stated project is being implemented to provide support to the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food of the Republic of Belarus, as well as to the state and local authorities in fulfilling their commitments to the development of rural areas, thereby contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: infrastructure, entrepreneurship, gender balance, land use, agriculture.

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ПРЕДПРИНИМАТЕЛЬСКАЯ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТЬ ЖЕНЩИН В СЕЛЬСКОЙ МЕСТНОСТИ В СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКОМ ИЗМЕРЕНИИ (ПО РЕЗУЛЬТАТАМ МЕЖДУНАРОДНОГО ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬСКОГО ПРОЕКТА)

В статье отражаются ключевые результаты комплексного социологического исследования (срок реализации – 2-е полугодие 2023 г., методы сбора информации – анкетный опрос, фокус-групповые дискуссии, глубинные интервью), которое позволило выявить особенности жизни и ведения предпринимательской деятельности в сельских населенных пунктах страны в гендерном разрезе. Заявленный проект осуществлялся в целях оказания поддержки Правительству Республики Беларусь и Министерству сельского хозяйства и продовольствия Республики Беларусь, а также органам республиканского и местного управления в выполнении взятых на себя обязательств по развитию сельских территорий, способствуя тем самым достижению Целей устойчивого развития.

Ключевые слова: инфраструктура, предпринимательство, гендерный баланс, землепользование, сельское хозяйство.

Introduction. Sociological research on the processes taking place in rural communities provides an opportunity to develop a wide range of effective approaches on agricultural and natural resources management programs, as well as rural women's access to decision-making, finance, «green technologies», etc. Based on its findings an evidence foundation for broader rural development solutions can be provided [1]. Country assessments are usually based on the analysis of scientific literature and statistical data provided by national statistical offices. But for a comprehensive analysis they need to be complemented with data on various qualitative indicators derived from information collected by implementation of sociological research methods [2].

Peasant and private farm households play an important role in ensuring national food and nutrition security by growing fruits and vegetables, and producing meat and dairy products for local consumption. However, so far full-fledged analysis on women's contribution to the economy of peasant and private farm households has not been conducted. A time budget study carried out in Belarus in 2014–2015 showed that women living and working in rural areas spend more time on domestic chores and caring for children, the elderly and the sick than women living in urban areas, and twice as much time as men living in rural areas. These factors affect the type of their employment compared to both urban women and rural men [3; 4]. Rural women's domestic chores are difficult to be separated from their work as family members on private farm households. These are small plots of land and kitchen gardens. Data collected by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), based on international data, indicate a link between gender and productivity in the agricultural sector, due to rural women's invisible labour and access to key resources, such as productive assets, knowledge, skills and information, finance, agricultural production resources, digital and innovative technologies.

The effective and rational use of the rural areas' potential can ensure not only their development, a decent standard of living and quality of life in the villages, but also the sustainable development of the country as a whole. In this respect, the regulation of the social and economic development of rural areas is the most important task of public authorities, which need objective information on the processes taking place in rural areas. In order to develop and implement the programs in the field of agriculture successfully and contribute to the proliferation of these territories, as well as to solve the problems they face, it is necessary to provide scientific support for state territorial regulation. It can assist public authorities to set up regional programs for integrated development of rural areas, organization and methodological support.

Taking into account the relevance of the stated problem, The Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, with the support of FAO, is directly involved in the development of scientifically based socially inclusive policies and programs in the field of agriculture and food security, aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and profitability of agriculture and other rural activities by promoting favourable economic conditions in entrepreneurship. The above mentioned project is implemented in order to support the Government of the Republic

of Belarus and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food of the Republic of Belarus, as well as national and local authorities to fulfill their duties on rural development, thus contributing to the achievement of sustainable development goals.

Method. In order to achieve the full-scale objectives of the study, information was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The timing of the field stage is October – November 2023. Quantitative method of information collection: Using a questionnaire survey, 456 female respondents living in rural areas of Brest, Vitebsk and Minsk regions were interviewed. A qualitative method of collecting information: during the implementation of the study, 6 focus group discussions were organized, as well as 13 in-depth interviews.

Results and discussion. Agricultural activities play a key role in ensuring food security and the well-being of people living in rural areas. The main types of agricultural activities are: plant growing, cattle breeding, horticulture, floriculture.

Gender division of labour in agriculture is the practice when certain types of agricultural work are traditionally performed by people of a particular sex. For example, women are more likely to do harvesting, animal care and kitchen gardening, while men usually do heavy physical work such as ploughing and sowing. The gender division of labour in agriculture can be related to traditions, customs and cultural attitudes, as well as possibilities to get education and access to resources. It can limit women's ability to participate in decision-making, get education and be appointed to leadership positions in agriculture.

According to the results of the study, it can be noted that respondents do not see a gender difference in plant growing, cattle breeding and horticulture – they mostly state that men and women are involved equally in these areas. At the same time, floriculture is perceived by the survey participants as a typically “feminine” type of activity.

In the process of agricultural production and organization of everyday life in rural areas, women entrepreneurs as a rule distinguish typically “male” and typically “female” types of work: *“Let's say, plowing everything, preparing the land for planting – it all has to be done by the husband. This is such a man's work. And I do more women's work – to weed something. If we don't manage to do something, then we help each other”* (focus group participant, private subsidiary farm); *“Men's work is to install a small stove somewhere, to cover a greenhouse, to install shelves, to bring some soil. Women's work is to plant seedlings, to prick off [seedlings], to water, to feed”* (focus group participant, private subsidiary farm).

At the same time, women tend to empower men with a certain symbolic authority, feeling safe “behind their husbands”, often regardless of the functional load he carries in reality: *“The peasant farm is registered as a property of my husband, personally I follow my husband in my case... No matter how many participants there are, there is always someone in charge. The one who has the last word... This is my husband, he is an independent mature person”* (focus group participant, peasant (farm) household); *“Well, well, of course, he is in charge there, I think so. Well, that's the way it is. At the moment, he is in charge there”* (focus group participant,

JSC); “*A woman is used to being behind a man*” (in-depth informant, village executive committee).

A comprehensive and effective infrastructural environment that effectively functions is one of the main factors of entrepreneurship development. Almost one in two women surveyed (48.2 %) believes that rural infrastructure contributes to the development of entrepreneurship. 55.8 % of female respondents in the 18–30 age group support this view. A quarter of the survey female participants (24.6 %), are of the opposite view, 27.2 % found it difficult to answer.

Survey participants who believe that the infrastructure of rural areas *does not* contribute to the development of entrepreneurship stated the following reasons: lack of markets for manufactured products (45.5 %), limited areas of entrepreneurship development (44.6 %), unavailability to get consultation (21.4 %). Other reasons were mentioned by 8.0 % of respondents. A quarter of respondents (25.9 %) found it difficult to answer the question.

Improving the infrastructure of rural settlements is an important step for the development of rural areas and improving the quality of life of their residents. Within the framework of improving the infrastructure of rural communities, the following activities should be carried out.

1. Construction and repair of roads to provide convenient access to villages and to improve transport infrastructure.

2. Construction of new social infrastructure facilities such as schools, kindergartens, medical centres, sports grounds.

3. Development of agriculture and agribusiness, including the establishment of modern farms; development of infrastructure for agricultural products processing.

4. Improving access to public utilities such as water supply, sewerage, electricity.

5. Improving accessibility of information technologies and the Internet for residents of rural areas.

6. Creating jobs and supporting entrepreneurship for the development of the rural economy.

Improving the infrastructure of rural communities contributes to improving the life of the rural population, attracting investment, developing tourism and creating favorable conditions for various types of activities. It is important to carry out systematic work on infrastructure modernization, taking into account the needs and peculiarities of each particular region and the country as a whole.

Access to land resources in agriculture can be realized in different ways. The most common forms of access to land resources in agriculture are: ownership of land, land lease, collective ownership, use of public land: in some areas of agriculture, farmers have access to public land for grazing livestock or growing crops [5]. Each country has its own laws and regulations that control access to land resources and define the rights and obligations of farmers and landowners. In the Republic of Belarus, citizens most often possess land plots on the right of ownership and on the right of lifetime inherited possession.

The right of lifetime inheritable ownership of a land plot includes the powers of possession and use except for the right to dispose of it. The only possibility for a citizen to dispose of a land plot granted under such a right is to inherit it. The owner of a land plot on such a right has all the opportunities to use it, but he has no right to sell, give a gift or otherwise alienate it.

The results of the survey showed that 43.9% of the women surveyed are registered owners of their land plots, and another 25.2% say that their spouse is the owner. Both spouses are named as owners in equal shares by 12.5 % of survey respondents, and 11.4 % indicate other household members. At the same time, women participated in the focus groups, often expressed the opinion that it does not matter to them who is the registered owner of the land plot, as all the decisions regarding business and land disposal are made together.

The noted methods for acquiring land are: purchase (45.6 %), inheritance (34.4 %), rent (9.9 %) were mentioned as the ways of land plot acquisition. Other ways of acquisition were mentioned by 7.2 % of female respondents, and 2.9 % indicated that the land plot is unregistered property.

Among the family members who work most on the land plot, the respondents mentioned themselves (36.6 %), all household members equally (29.8 %), both spouses equally (24.1 %), a spouse (6.1 %), employees (1.8 %).

The key aspect of agricultural activities is legal awareness. The results of the survey showed that 44.1 % of the interviewed women stated that they are aware of the legislation of the Republic of Belarus in the field of land plot use, 32.6 % are not aware, and 23.3 % of respondents found it difficult to answer.

The obtained survey data show that only 7.0 % of women who participated in the survey are engaged in entrepreneurial agricultural activities. Women who are currently engaged in agricultural entrepreneurship, in their majority neglect business planning – 84.4 %; only 15.6 % practice it in their businesses. Among those who neglect business planning, the most common opinion is that it is not a necessary element of business – 66.7 %. More than a third (37.0 %) admit that they do not have enough knowledge to make a business plan, 7.4 % have no idea what a business plan is and what it is for, and 3.7 % do not know who to contact for information and consulting assistance in making a business plan.

The most important condition for entrepreneurship is access to finance. The results of the survey showed that 37.5 % of the women surveyed need financial support to develop their entrepreneurial activities. 40.6 % of the women said they did not need it. Another 21.9 % of female respondents found it difficult to answer.

The absolute majority of women entrepreneurs (93.8 %) stated that they had never received financial support for their activities. Only 6.2 % of women entrepreneurs had previously received such assistance. It was provided by public authorities and services (50.0 %), as well as by relatives, friends and acquaintances (50.0 %).

The data obtained during the survey show that 81.2 % of female respondents engaged in entrepreneurial activity do not know about any special business financing programs for women, only 9.3 % of women entrepreneurs stated that they know about such programs.

Thus, taking into account the high level of problems with access to financing for rural businessmen, we can propose the following several ways to increase the level of access to financial resources for those working in the field of agriculture. Here are some of them.

1. Credits and loans: Agricultural businessmen should have a real opportunity to apply to banks, credit unions or other financial institutions for borrowing credits or loans for the development of their business. Some government programs may also provide agricultural businessmen with access to special loan products. Some government programs may also provide agricultural entrepreneurs with access to special loan services. Especially for young farmers. There may be no start-up conditions, as long as they have a business plan.

2. Investments: businessmen should be given the opportunity to attract investments from private investors, venture capital funds or other financial organizations for the expansion of their business under a simplified procedure.

3. Government support: It is important for the government to provide real support to agricultural businessmen in the form of grants, subsidies, soft loans and other types of financial support. Businessmen should be able to contact relevant government agencies or ministries for detailed information on available local financing opportunities.

4. Crowdfunding: this is a funding method where businessmen can attract funds from the general public through specialized online platforms.

5. Agricultural cooperatives: businessmen should be able to join agricultural cooperatives that provide access to common resources, financial services and outlets.

In addition, it is also important to take into account the possibility of receiving consultations and advice from specialised organisations and experts in the field of finance and agriculture in order to choose the most appropriate and efficient financial resources for their business, the crucial relevance of which is underlined by the results of the research [6].

Regardless of the size of the business, access to information and technology is a critical factor in business performance, facilitating informed decision-making and maximizing profits at identical resource costs.

As the survey data show, the majority of women entrepreneurs have never consulted specialists in the field of educational services on business activities (81.2 %), 18.8 % did so *sometimes*, and none of the respondents did so on a *regular basis*.

There is a lack of awareness among women entrepreneurs about the possibility of receiving educational services of this kind in the region – more than half of them found it difficult to answer the question (56.3 %). The share of “those who found it difficult to answer” indirectly indicates the lack of a formed need for targeted entrepreneurship education (respondents did not make a targeted search for such services in order to give a more definite answer). Often the lack of need for educational services is associated with the subjects’ imaginary competence or their unrealistic assessment of their knowledge level. This is largely due to the general oversaturation of the information space, which creates the illusion of availability of any informa-

tion: “Now you do not even need any courses, the Internet is full of information, there is enough information, but you have to devote time to it” (focus group participant, peasant (farm) household).

About a third of women entrepreneurs (31.3 %) do not see the possibility of receiving educational services in the region, while 12.4 % indicated that such an opportunity does exist in the region.

The efficiency of agricultural production and entrepreneurship is directly linked to the availability of specialized machinery. Mechanization of labor often makes it possible to compensate for the lack of workers and is also a condition for scaling up production. However, many agricultural entrepreneurs cannot meet their need for specialized machinery.

According to the survey, half of women entrepreneurs believe that their households are sufficiently provided with machinery and equipment (50.0 %). The lack of specialized equipment in the household was indicated by 40.6 % – absolutely all of them cannot purchase the necessary equipment due to lack of financial resources. 9.4 % found it difficult to answer this question.

Acquisition of large agricultural machinery is extremely expensive – often women entrepreneurs, especially owners of private subsidiary farms, do not even consider the option of buying their own machinery due to the incomparability of their income and potential expenses: “*Mine is at a price... It costs so much money that it is even... So there is not even such a thought to buy such machinery*” (focus group participant, private subsidiary farm).

Problems of access to specialized equipment become a limiting factor in production due to lack of physical strength, especially if a woman runs an agricultural business alone or without an equal partner. In choosing to expand their agricultural business, women entrepreneurs inevitably face the need to mechanize production and find different ways to access machinery and equipment.

The product sales stage in agricultural entrepreneurship is the most unpredictable and stressful one, since centralized ways of selling products that bring profit from small volumes are practically absent. Every time, women entrepreneurs are forced to take risks when planning production volumes, solving the problem of finding sales markets at the individual level. Producers of perishable agricultural products are forced to resort to dumping in order to avoid mass disposal of unsold products.

The majority of women entrepreneurs surveyed sell their products at retail outlets – 68.8 %, about a third sell their products in bulk – 31.2 %. However, both selling methods have their own problems. In the case of retail trade, an entrepreneur, as a rule, needs to bring the product to the end consumer on his own. This makes it possible to sell one’s products at a higher price, but requires specific skills, as well as willingness to compete for the best trading locations, transportation costs, advertising, etc.

In conditions of uncertainty regarding the sale of products, entrepreneurs in the field of agriculture have to make difficult decisions regarding the planning of production volumes and investments.

Despite a number of contradictions in the development of entrepreneurial initiatives identified above, half of the surveyed women living in rural areas (51.9 %) consider entrepreneurship to be a prestigious occupation, 18.2 % hold the opposite opinion, and 29.9 % could not decide on the answer.

As an advantage of entrepreneurial activity, more than half of the respondents noted the opportunity to independently plan their working hours – 61.4 %. At the same time, the share of respondents who see the main advantage of entrepreneurship in self-realization is also high – 48.2 % indicated the opportunity to do what they like, and 36.0 % indicated the opportunity to realize their dreams.

However, during the focus group discussions, the self-made women entrepreneurs could not boast of the opportunity to freely manage their time, since agricultural activities require high involvement, in addition, entrepreneurship is not always the main source of income. Sometimes women entrepreneurs find themselves in a paradoxical situation – in order to maintain their agricultural business, they are forced to work at a “permanent” job, investing profits exclusively in the development of the economy, without taking anything for personal needs.

The majority of respondents (67.8 %) see the disadvantages of entrepreneurship in the high risks of this type of activity, 52.2 % also specify that they are afraid of problems with the sale of manufactured products, and 9.0 % believe that entrepreneurial activity in society is not prestigious.

At the moment, the majority of the surveyed women living in rural areas (75.9 %) do not see themselves as entrepreneurs; 7.5 % are already engaged in entrepreneurship (however, not all in the field of agriculture), another 7.0 % are ready to try themselves in this business.

Among those interested in starting an entrepreneurial activity, 37.5 % would like to try themselves in agriculture, 31.2 % in handicrafts, 12.5 % would choose non-agricultural activities, and 6.2 % are focused on activities related to the preservation of traditional values and cultural heritage in rural areas.

Among those who are currently not ready for entrepreneurship, a third (33.2 %) indicates lack of financial resources as the main reason, 9.2 % do not have the necessary resources (such as land, machinery, etc.), 8.7 % do not feel the support of household members, 6.4 % lack information on entrepreneurship, 18.8 % indicated other reasons, including age restrictions and health problems.

Conclusion. Successful development of rural areas presupposes a harmonious combination of legal, economic and social components. The national policy in the field of agro-industrial complex is aimed at creating favorable and equal conditions for all economic entities, regardless of the forms and levels of ownership, as well as the socio-demographic status of their owners.

The conducted sociological research allowed to identify the peculiarities of life and entrepreneurship in rural communities in the gender context. As a result of analyzing data from a quantitative survey of rural women, as well as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with women entrepreneurs, representatives of local administration, ministries and the business community, the main difficulties

faced by women living in rural areas were identified, and points of growth for the development of agricultural entrepreneurship were identified.

Improvement of *infrastructure in rural settlements* plays an important role in the development of agrarian business. The results of the survey have shown that the surveyed rural women are predominantly satisfied with the infrastructure of the settlements in which they live. At the same time, the modernization of infrastructure is of great importance, taking into account the needs and specifics of each particular region and the country as a whole.

The study of issues related to *access to land resources* has shown that rural women have plots of land both on the right of ownership and lifetime inherited ownership, and land is registered variably (for themselves, their spouses or other household members). It is worth mentioning that only less than half of the interviewed women stated that they have an understanding of the key norms of legal regulation in this area.

The analysis of issues related to *planning entrepreneurial activity* allows us to conclude that the majority of interviewed women entrepreneurs in agriculture do not make a business plan, as they do not see the need for it. In all phases of business planning, such as finding resources and markets, determining production volumes and allocating finances, the interviewed women entrepreneurs consider their participation to be predominant compared to all other household members.

Serious difficulties in finding markets and the lack of any guarantees on the sale of products do not allow agricultural female entrepreneurs to make long-term forecasts in their activities and strive to increase production. All this points to the urgent need for consulting support in the preparation of a business plan, as well as informing women entrepreneurs about the functional load of this document.

In the *process of agricultural production and organization* of everyday life in rural areas, women entrepreneurs usually distinguish between typically “male” and typically “female” types of work. Among women living together with a spouse or a partner in the household, equal partnership and complementary division of responsibilities are typical, and the marital tandem acts as the centre of decision-making and driving force of the household, regardless of how many members live in it.

There is a tendency among the interviewed women to give men symbolic power and authority as the head of the couple, which is not always conditioned by their direct contribution to entrepreneurship. Women living without men, alone or with children or parents, are in the most vulnerable position.

Access to finance is an important condition for entrepreneurship. More than one third of the women entrepreneurs who participated in the survey stated that they need financial support to develop their business. The following points were noted among the shortcomings: financial assistance is not provided to individual entrepreneurs and at the initial stage of business development, there is no preferential lending, to receive support it is necessary to provide too large a list of necessary documents, there is a lack of information about the possibility and procedure for obtaining it.

Analysis of *access to information* resources allows us to record the absence of a formed need to obtain additional knowledge on the issues of entrepreneurial activity among the majority of interviewed women entrepreneurs, which is due to both the perceived competence of respondents due to the routinization of activities and low awareness of development opportunities in agricultural entrepreneurship. The main problem of low awareness is the lack of well-established communication between entrepreneurs and management structures: the amount of work that is implemented «from above» does not bring the planned result due to the fact that projects are focused mainly on farmers, but pass by the largest group of agents of agricultural entrepreneurship – owners of private subsidiary farms. The Internet is an optimal source for obtaining visual information on agricultural production, but it rarely helps to solve procedural issues on conducting entrepreneurial activities – in this respect, consultations with specialists are a more appropriate option, but the interviewees often encounter incompetence of local administration staff, i. e. they cannot receive clear instructions on typical issues.

Problems of *access to specialized equipment* become a factor limiting production and development of agricultural entrepreneurship.

The analysis of *access to markets and sales channels* shows that product realization is the most problematic stage of entrepreneurial activity in agriculture. Retail trade is complicated by the struggle for trading platforms, logistics costs and the need to make sales independently; the problem of wholesale sales is low sales price (both to the individuals and the state).

The analysis of the *level of readiness to engage in entrepreneurial activity* among the respondents shows that currently the majority of women living in rural areas are not ready for it. As the main reason for their unpreparedness for entrepreneurship, the respondents indicated the lack of financial resources, but there are also mental and psychological reasons – lack of support in the family, fear of starting something new alone, and the attitude to a modest lifestyle.

The conditions of doing business for women have not changed significantly over the last five years, but the drivers of development can be: 1) state order for the products of entrepreneurs in the sphere of agriculture, 2) innovations in the production and processing of agricultural products, 3) building a dialogue between the state and business with reliance on the strong mental and psychological traits of the Belarusian people, such as diligence, thrift, and perseverance.

Thus, the obtained results can be used by state authorities to create additional opportunities for providing employment in rural areas, increasing the economic potential of both individual territories and the country as a whole. The formulated recommendations are aimed at enhancing activities of small and medium-sized enterprises in agricultural regions through the use of the most relevant mechanisms, as well as economic, administrative and legal methods of public administration with further improvement of the effectiveness of regulatory framework, taking into account the interests of society, business and government.

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