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BETWEEN EMPOWERMENT AND CONSTRAINT: PARTICIPATORY ART CONFRONTING DOUBLE MARGINALISATION IN RURAL WOMEN'S CIRCLES

INTRODUCTION

It was a crisp, cold December evening when I first arrived in Wyrzeka, a small village almost adjacent to the town of Śrem in Central Poland, with around 478 inhabitants as of 2024 (BIP Urzędu Miasta i Gminy Śrem 2024). I had been invited to *Carolling Together*, a pre-Christmas gathering at the community house—a space managed by the Rural Women's Circle and also available for private rentals. This marked the fastest promotion in my academic career, as the chairwoman introduced me to a gathering of about 80 people as a doctor from a university in the voivodeship's capital, who wanted to become a temporary member of the Circle. Other distinguished guests included representatives of the local authorities and the Śrem city administration, along with the mayor—an appearance that clearly gave the chairwoman a sense of respect and reinforced the significance of her efforts.

Before my arrival, I studied photographs of the board members available online to recognize my hosts. This is how I learned that just a few days earlier, the Circle had received the Śrem Giraffes Award—an honour typically reserved for institutions and individuals who promote Śrem at both national and international levels. The Circle's ongoing activities were among the key criteria I used when selecting *Rural Women's Circles*[1] (*Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich* or KGW) for my study. Other factors included their location within the Greater Poland region (*Wielkopolska*) and their accessibility—particularly whether it was feasible to reach the village using

[1] In my earlier publications, I translated *Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich* as "Rural Housewives' Clubs." On reflection, I now find this rendering both misleading and reductive, as it confines the scope of KGW activities to domestic roles. In fact, the term *gospodyni* in the rural context denotes the women responsible for the *gospodarstwo* (homestead) encompassing both household management and productive labour such as tending animals, gardens and crops. The majority of KGW members are employed outside the household economy, while also carrying out unpaid domestic and, at times, agricultural work within the homestead.

a bus or combination of train and bicycle. Not all villages are well-served by public transportation; some lack it entirely or offer only few scheduled services per day. Consequently, residents frequently rely on private car transportation, which in turn enhances the appeal of on-site activities and excursions organized by KGWs, particularly among older villagers.

Between 2022 and 2024, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 members of Greater Poland KGWs, including both tradition-oriented groups and those reinterpreting this role in creative ways. I also observed KGW activities at culinary competitions such as *Polska od Kuchni* [Poland from the Kitchen] and *Bitwa Regionów* [Battle of the Regions], as well as other regional events, participating as a temporary member of KGW Wyrzeka to better understand the association's work beyond its public image of efficiency. The collaboration with KGW Wyrzeka culminated in a participatory art project to create a publication amplifying members' voices against official institutional narratives. Drawing on my background in fine arts and illustration, I approached artistic techniques as tools of resistance to dominant portrayals of KGWs as mere guardians of tradition, highlighting instead their broader cultural influence and women's roles beyond traditional domains. This, along with observations at competitions and festivals, led me to reflect critically on how KGWs' knowledge of tradition—often diverging from state-sanctioned models—operates within and beyond local contexts.

The following sections examine how Rural Women's Circles (KGWs) produce and circulate tradition-related knowledge. The next section briefly outlines their evolution from agricultural and domestic initiatives to state-recognized custodians of cultural heritage. The third section analyses how this knowledge is legitimized or marginalized, focusing on women's epistemic positions. The last section presents a case study of my collaboration with KGW Wyrzeka, showing how participatory art can amplify underrepresented voices and challenge dominant narratives. Thus, this article constitutes an analysis of the role of *Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich* in supporting women within male-dominated rural institutions, and examines how their engagement with tradition both enables and complicates efforts to assert agency and to challenge hierarchies of power, including those embedded in the state, the local community, the family, and in dominant regimes of knowledge production.

RURAL WOMEN'S CIRCLES NOW AND THEN

Rural Women's Circles (KGWs) emerged in the 1870s–1880s during the partitions of Poland, with the first initiatives taking shape in the Prussian and Austrian territories, whereas similar organisations appeared much later in the Russian partition (Jakóbczyk 1982, pp. 4–5; Kosmowska-Kowalska 1992, pp. 16–17). Closely linked to *Kółka Rolnicze* (Agricultural Circles), which promoted agricultural modernisation as resistance to foreign rule (Poszepczyński 2012, pp. 9–10), KGWs acted as auxiliary structures, carrying out educational and economic tasks (Sawicka 1996,

quoted in Matysiak 2005, pp. 41–43). They advanced women's education, economy, and hygiene while reinforcing traditional family patterns (Sierakowska 2009, p. 39)[2].

After Poland regained independence in 1918, KGWs gained central structures such as the *Centralny Związek Kółek Rolniczych* (CZKR) (Mędrzecki 2000, p. 184). Landowning women in the *Stowarzyszenie Zjednoczonych Ziemianek* (SZZ) created a dual-track model—*koła ziemianek* for gentry women and *koła włościanek* for peasant women (Kostrzewska 2009, pp. 123–130). While some promoted democratisation, gentry dominance often reflected a paternalistic "civilizing" mission.

During World War II, both KGWs and Agricultural Circles were banned, but many continued underground, with women active in the People's Women's Union and the Green Cross (Sawicka 1996, quoted in Matysiak 2005, pp. 43–46). After 1945, KGWs—more established than the new Polish People's Republic—retained social recognition Pre-war organisations like the *SZZ* declined, and women turned to *Komitety Obywatelskie Kół Gospodyń Wiejskich* (*COKGW*), aligned with the socialist state (Malinowska 2002, p. 119, quoted in Matysiak 2005, p. 48).

During state socialism, the Central Union of Agricultural Circles organized training in sewing, nutrition, and preservation, later expanding to health care, child-rearing, and welfare. KGWs also distributed scarce goods such as fodder, poultry, and tools (Grzebisz–Nowicka 1995; Matysiak 2005, p. 51).

The 1989 systemic transformation improved rural living standards but weakened KGWs, which abandoned functions tied to shortage economy, such as distributing scarce goods (Matysiak 2009, p. 232). As Grzebisz–Nowicka notes, between 1991–1993 KGWs lost over 4,200 circles and 250,000 members due to the collapse of institutional support and closure of „Modern Housewife" centres (ośrodki Nowoczesna Gospodyni), which had provided training and support in home economics (Grzebisz–Nowicka 1995, quoted in Matysiak 2005, p. 52).

Nowadays, due to the Law on Rural Women's Circles, which came into force in 2018 and its amendment in 2021 (Act of 9 November 2018 on Rural Women's Circles; Act of 24 June 2021 amending the act on Rural Women's Circles), the thousands of reactivated or newly established KGWs function as a rightful element of the Polish third sector, able to apply for state funding under the NGO model-like rules thanks to obtaining legal status[3] (Wojcieszak-Zbierska and Zawadka 2019, p. 132). Associated in the public imagination mainly with tradition and cooking, KGWs are now mainly

[2] Although men have long supported KGWs informally, the 2018 Act (Dz.U. 2018 poz. 2212) now allows them full membership, marking a shift from the circles' traditional women-only identity. In practice, many (such as husbands of members) still contribute mainly as informal support, but some circles, including *KGW* Wyrzeka, have held internal votes to admit men so they can access member benefits such as subsidized trips, reflecting contributions that at times exceed those of formal female members.

[3] Before 2018, KGWs could also operate under other acts, e.g., be registered as associations in the court register (*KRS*) or function as a part of the National Union of Farmers, Agricultural Circles and Organisations (*KZRKiOR*), as an independent Agricultural Circle or operating within the structures of an Agricultural Circle. The 2018 Act introduced a uniform system for registering KGWs as separate legal entities (Lis 2023, pp. 47–48).

driven by the interests of their members. While in one village the KGW may be active alongside a folklore group, a Rural Women's Circle in a neighbouring village may be initiated by fresh-faced villagers organising workshops for other women. Still, cooking is declared to be the most common practice among KGW members (Babis, Słupińska, Janowski 2021, p. 8; Książak-Gregorczyk, Liberadzka, Zbytniewski 2022, p. 23; Milczewska, Mencwel, Wiśniewski 2014, p. 17):

> *Why cooking, you ask [...] We don't dance, we don't sing, we don't have any special talents, but every gal cooks something at home, so maybe that's why. Even if not everyone is a great cook, we can put something together* (DK_D_23)[4].

Narratives about KGWs as ambassadors of tradition and rurality are shaped, preserved and disseminated through governmental institutions such as Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture (*ARiMR*), Agriculture Chambers (e.g., *WIR* – Agriculture Chamber of Greater Poland voivodeship), the National Center for Agricultural Consulting (*KOWR*), State Forests (*Lasy Państwowe*), etc. ARiMR, which is responsible for the almost unconditional annual funding of the registered[5] circles' statutory activities, *along* with the other governmental organisations, organises and supports various events and competitions aimed at cultivating "tradition"—understood in this context as a publicly visible, celebratory, and often folklorized version of rural heritage. This institutional discourse tends to emphasize material culture, national symbolism, and gendered representations of domesticity, while marginalizing more critical or everyday forms of rural knowledge.

Before the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections, institutionally organized events involving KGWs were increasingly utilized as a promotional platform for the then-ruling far-right Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*)[6].These events were frequently held under the banner of rural development or cultural heritage promotion, foregrounding symbolic representations of tradition, and reinforcing institutional definitions of "tradition" and "authenticity." Tents with promotional gadgets were set up, politicians were photographed with KGW members, and numerous visitors were drawn by the availability of refreshments priced significantly lower than in nearby commercial establishments. Attractive prices for the delicacies were one of the aces up the organisers' sleeve, encouraging KGW not only to participate in the competition, but also to sell food at their stalls. Although the food is prepared outside of any formalised sanitary or epidemiological oversight (often without

[4] I use the following designations for coded interviews:
For participant observations: First letters of event name_first letter of village name_year).
For semi-structured interviews: First letter of village name_I/G(individual/group)_year).

[5] Registered in National Register of Rural Women's Circles.

[6] For example, articles from *Wyborcza* newspaper, mentioned in bibliography, referring to events such as financing pots for KGW from the Justice Fund, politicians handing out cardboard checks to KGW for funding already received from state funds, or KGW's involvement in family picnics that were pre-election propaganda financed from state funds (Andriichuk 2024, pp. 5–6).

refrigeration and exposed to the sun, as organisers rarely provide access to electricity)[7], KGW members typically take care to maintain basic hygiene standards. Nonetheless, these meals are often offered at prices lower than the value of the ingredients, which makes them particularly appealing to event-goers.

Although the gender composition of the judging panel depends on the competition and location and does not always perpetuate the stereotype that professional cooking is a male affair, local organizers often position women as informal or low-cost providers of culinary labour. Rural Women's Circles are expected to provide cakes[8] for various occasions, cook pea soup for patriotic events, and host delegations commissioned by the commune or county authorities. As my field research indicates, the only financial effect they can count on is a refund for products they should previously have spent their own money on. Often perceiving this as an investment in their own image, organizers of such events sometimes consider it unnecessary to publicly announce who prepared the refreshments. An extreme example of this approach occurred when the KGW assigned to assist in welcoming guests was informed by representatives of the local authorities that "it would be completely inappropriate for us to be in the same building as these gentlemen who come and treat themselves to what we serve and talk to each other because who knows what we might hear" (M1_I_24). This may indicate that for members of the Rural Women's Circles food work, the unpaid work of planning, shopping for, and preparing meals, goes far beyond the private sphere and is an important component of their social activity (Cairns and Johnston 2015, pp. 8–10; DeVault 1991, p. 35, p. 234).

Given the disproportion between the number of participants and the modest prize value, money cannot be the main motivation for KGW to participate in culinary competitions. First and foremost, KGWs participating in large-scale events such as *Polska od Kuchni (Poland from the Kitchen)* and *Bitwa Regionów (Battle of the Regions)* seek public exposure and recognition; they aim to showcase their achievements not only within their village, but also beyond it. Event like that are oriented more toward competition than mutual exchange and encourage members to showcase their achievements and skills in the most favourable light. Another important reason for participation—even in smaller, government-organized initiatives—may be a sense of indebtedness resulting from the state funding they receive, as noted by my counterparts during interviews and informal conversations. Regardless of the specific motivations, the considerable

[7] There is a recent elaborate article in *Gospodyni* (Housewife) magazine devoted to safe ways of preserving food outdoors in the summer, including at festivals with the participation of Rural Women's Circles. From here, e.g., one can learn that the most popular festival delicacy in the form of a slice of bread with lard and pickled cucumber is microbiologically stable and will not pose a threat even on hot days (Latoch 2024).

[8] Many KGW treat cake duty as an internal organisational matter. For example, in the KGW in Wyrzeka a "cake journal" was kept, in which the chairwoman recorded how many cakes each member had baked that year. Baking a cake is a common way of demonstrating commitment to the organisation's activities, including financial commitment, since the baked goods are prepared using one's own ingredients.

financial, physical and social investments KGWs devote to such events serves to reinforce their image as an organisation committed to tradition, often in a politicized context.

By participating in dedicated events, KGWs engage with a constructed narrative of tradition as defined by the organizers. However, their own understanding of tradition does not necessarily align with this framework and is instead rooted in the lived, everyday practices. A significant issue concerning tradition is the traditional-style attire worn by KGW members, which are rarely grounded in ethnographic sources. Rather than being historically accurate, these costumes are typically the result of loosely interpreted inspirations drawn from patterns and examples that reflect the aesthetic preferences of circle members (Biejat and Wójcikowska 2015, pp. 104–105). Furthermore, some KGW members openly refer to their quasi-folk costume as a "disguise" or even "cosplay" and define their circle's interests as focusing on being "modern women" rather than on tradition (Andriichuk 2024, p. 8). In this sense, the tradition they practice is inspiration-driven, often based on their personal preferences: "We don't have to read books, we don't have to imitate, because it creates itself. We write ourselves" (Biejat and Wójcikowska 2015, p. 105) or "It becomes traditional if we do it" (BR_W_23).

Limited public engagement with state-promoted or institutionally codified traditions (Łukowski and Żukowski 2016, pp. 56, 59) means KGWs' involvement in traditional practices often serves a legitimizing function. Drawing on local history, rituals, and food-related practices, they justify their interpretations through their late-19th-century origins. Local and institutional modes of transmitting tradition operate in parallel but unequally. State-supported competitions and festivals contribute to "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm 1992, p. 2), while the everyday, pragmatic continuity sustained by KGWs holds a lower position in the cultural hierarchy. Without institutional recognition, members' embodied knowledge often remains invisible at official events, risking marginalisation in the absence of formal validation.

RURAL WOMEN'S CIRCLES IN PUBLIC AND SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE

Articles about KGWs that have appeared over the last 20 years focus mainly on contemporary directions of KGWs' activity and networks, with references to heritage serving mainly to contextualize the association's history. Before and after the 2018 Act, research groups published national (Milczewska, Mencwel, Wiśniewski 2014) and provincial reports (Babis, Słupińska, Janowski 2021; Książak-Gregorczyk, Liberadzka, Zbytniewski 2022) on KGWs' main activities, cooperation networks, financial situation, etc. KGWs' entrepreneurial prospects have also attracted scholarly interest (Lisowska and Łojko 2022; Wojcieszak-Zbierska and Zawadka 2019), as well as their role in local communities (Szczepańska and Szczepański 2019) e.g. as organisation of the third sector (Matysiak 2009). Most of these studies reference tradition within the context of KGWs, either by describing the circles' traditional aspirations and their influence on contemporary activities (including entrepreneurial efforts)

or by providing a historical outline. These themes were further developed and analyzed in a publication based on the same nationwide research conducted for the 2014 report (Biejat and Wójcikowska 2015).

Written narratives about KGWs mainly come from academic works or state organisation websites, usually without KGW direct involvement. In contrast, members produce their own chronicles—handwritten albums combining text and photographs that document significant events such as annual meetings, Women's Day, Christmas, and festivals—and manage Facebook pages as their digital extensions. Often kept in chroniclers' homes due to lack of office space, these records focus on factual details rather than personal reflections. Facebook posts often adopt a more casual tone but remain public-facing, targeting members, supporters, sceptics, and local authorities, while avoiding sensitive internal issues. Broader discussions occur in nationwide KGW Facebook groups, usually to showcase achievements, seek recommendations, or exchange advice on organizing events and solving local problems.

It is noteworthy that most KGWs do not actively engage with written ethnographic sources (Biejat and Wójcikowska 2015, p. 105). Since these groups seldom consult local cultural history or documented heritage, their representations of tradition at competitions and festivals occasionally diverge from institutionally recognized or academically grounded interpretations. During my fieldwork, some circles have been criticized for combining elements from unrelated regional costumes or using invented symbols, which may be viewed as a faux pas by experts or heritage professionals. Aiming to address such gaps in cultural knowledge of KGWs' members, The National Institute of Rural Culture and Heritage (*NiKiDW*) has initiated efforts such as the *Wykłady Etnograficzne* (Ethnographic Lectures) series for KGWs in 2023 and the *Dziedzictwo Kulinarne Regionów* (Culinary Heritage of the Regions) webinars scheduled for 2024. For example, during an ethnographic lecture held as part of a series for the Greater Poland region, which I attended as part of my research, the invited expert emphasized the inappropriateness of the widely popular flower crowns worn by KGW members. According to ethnographic sources, such garlands carry specific symbolic meanings, often linked to virginity and rites of passage, and treating them merely as decorative objects may be perceived as a distortion of their original significance and function (Maciewicz 2021, p. 59).

Although detailed attendance data from the Ethnographic Lectures remain confidential, other research indicates that KGW members prioritize practical knowledge, especially on find grants, including project management, grant writing, and financial settlements (Babis, Słupińska, Janowski 2021, p. 20). Many volunteer members struggle with Simplified Income and Cost Recording (*UEPIK*), which often requires them to manage accounts without formal training. Circles earning over 100,000 PLN annually must abandon UEPIK for standard bookkeeping, which is a problematic issue for active KGWs engaged in commercial activity or high-value competitions (Ustawa o kołach gospodyń wiejskich, art. 24 ust. 4, Dz.U. 2018 poz. 2212). Despite facing comparable bureaucratic and financial demands, KGWs rarely seem to exchange strategies with one another, which limits not only peer learning but also the capacity

to build collective resilience. The lack of regular exchange may stem from competitive dynamics, often fuelled by competition-based events as well as the lack of the official platforms designed for such exchange. As a result, the opportunity for one KGW to learn from the good practices of another is restricted.

It seems that the state's emphasis on expanding the KGWs through almost unconditional funding does not presuppose a space where KGWs could exchange information about their experiences. Most events targeting KGWs are organized in the form of competitions, where numerous groups compete for a very limited prize pool. This format does not foster a collaborative atmosphere or encourage the sharing of practical knowledge and know-how. In contrast, locally established KGW associations such as the Association of Rural Women's Circles of the Wielichowo Commune or the Association of Rural Women's Circles of the Rakoniewice Commune, are based on the principles of cooperation rather than competition. Within these associations, KGWs cooperate to pursue shared goals, including facilitating the exchange of knowledge about navigating financial and legal frameworks and coordinating efforts with other local institutions.

An example of an event that encourages collaboration is the "KGWs – Leaders of the Polish Village" (*KGW – liderki polskiej wsi*) organized by the *Pomaganie Krzepi (Helping Strengthens*) Foundation—an initiative of the state-owned *Krajowa Grupa Spożywcza S.A.*(National Food Group), supporting social engagement in rural areas. Initiated in 2021, the event was held for the fourth time in 2024. Focusing on ecological problems related to living in the countryside, the organizers also provided a space for establishing contacts and exchanging experiences both within and between the circles. Workshops were held on resolving conflicts within the organisation, and a workshop on eco-friendly household cleaning products was conducted by KGW members (Fundacja Krajowej Grupy Spożywczej S.A. 2024). This is one of the few examples of KGW being able to take an expert position at an event of this scale, at least in matters of handicrafts and folk art, which are commonly attributed to their domain by public institutions and cultural policy frameworks.

The practical knowledge of KGWs, though invaluable, is often overshadowed by institutional knowledge—formal, expert-defined interpretations of tradition promoted by state agencies, researchers, and heritage institutions. In this hierarchy, the lived, experience-based insights of KGW members are framed as "informal" rather than recognised as legitimate in their own right. Drawing on Clifford Geertz's notion of "local knowledge", such situated understandings are not secondary or anecdotal but constitute the interpretive frameworks through which communities organise meaning (Geertz 2005). Institutional frameworks tend to construct etic (outsider-defined) accounts of cultural practices—a process that, as Izabela Bukraba-Rylska (2008) and Piotr Szacki (2011) note, is shaped by the ethnographer's positionality and the external criteria through which traditions are selected. This translation from *emic* to *etic* typically involves distillation, abstraction, and standardisation. Ironically, the institutional knowledge disseminated in these contexts often originates in fieldwork conducted

within rural communities, including KGWs, yet is returned in a form stripped of its original meaning and functionality. From a hermeneutic perspective, anthropology should strive for a "thick" account attentive to context – when local insights are reduced to abstractions, they lose precisely the significance that makes them culturally intelligible. In such case, the feedback loop of knowledge production—central to cultural anthropology—remains incomplete.

For KGWs, these codified understandings often reappear as "expert" guidelines, such as those issued by the National Institute of Rural Culture and Heritage (*NIKiDW*) on event organisation, heritage preservation, or documentation. While presented as authoritative, such recommendations are rarely implemented wholesale: local actors adapt them to fit specific sociocultural and material contexts, modifying procedures "according to their possibilities" (P_I_2024, N_G_2024, BR_W). Yet these adaptations seldom travel back to the institutions that issued the guidelines. Without mechanisms to integrate local innovations into the official record, knowledge flows remain stifled by the prevailing notion that learning is merely the vertical "transmission" and "internalization" of knowledge, rather than an integrated, emergent aspect of social practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, pp. 34–35, 47). This blocked loop of learning excludes adaptive community expertise from the formal system—even when the institutional model itself originated locally.

In Bourdieusian terms, this process exemplifies epistemic dominance: state and academic institutions exercise what Pierre Bourdieu calls a "monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence" (1991, p. 55), authorizing certain practices as "tradition" while relegating community-based knowledge to a subordinate position. As Harry Collins and Robert Evans (2002, p. 250) observe, such distinctions between "certified" and "uncertified" experts are socially constructed. From a Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspective, knowledge is not a neutral fact but the product of socio-technical contexts shaped by actors, norms, and institutional frameworks (Jasanoff 2004, p. 3). Heritage studies scholars, notably Laurajane Smith (2006) and Rodney Harrison (2013), develop the concept of an "authorized heritage discourse," (AHD) a framework that privileges institutional authority and, in doing so, often marginalizes communities, treating them as passive consumers rather than as active co-creators of heritage. The failure to recognise KGWs as active custodians of cultural knowledge echoes older, gendered hierarchies. For centuries, agricultural institutions dominated by men have disregarded women's practical expertise, mirroring historical divisions in knowledge production (Herman 2019, p. 17). In some cases, men underestimate the scope and complexity of KGW activities (W3_I_24) or dominate conversations once they join (Ch_G_24). This asymmetry reflects a deeper hierarchy in which female knowledge, especially embodied, tacit, and practice-based, has been rendered invisible.

Some KGWs respond by cultivating counter-narratives. Garbaby from Garby (Poznań Country) for example, invoked the figure of the witch as a symbol of women's knowledge. Without formal funding, they hosted knowledge-sharing sessions with personal growth coaches and female entrepreneurs:

> A witch is a woman who has knowledge, who can share knowledge or use [knowledge] in relation to others [...] this is the idea as if the circle that until we had money, it was a kind of action [...]. So one person to another, but transformed into women to women (G1_2023).

The knowledge of witchcraft—and the figure of the witch more broadly—has long been treated as problematic and marginalised, until its partial reintegration into the feminist movement (Ehrenreich and English 1973; Federici 2004). Second-wave feminists sought to reclaim such knowledge—herbal medicine, community-based healing, and ritual practices—removing it from the realm of superstition and reframing it as a source of female empowerment. A central critique emerging from this movement targeted the institutionalisation of medicine, particularly the displacement of women from roles they had traditionally held. For example, midwifery, once grounded in empirical and culturally embedded knowledge, was increasingly medicalised and professionalised under male authority. Similarly, women healers drawing on herbal and folk traditions were often labelled as witches, especially during the European witch hunts (Ehrenreich and English 1973; Federici 1998).

This return to the figure of the witch resonates with feminist "herstory" projects in Poland that recover women's roles in historical knowledge production and reclaim silenced voices from archives and oral traditions. Examples include *Herstoria stosowana* (Applied Herstory), the Women's Archive, initiatives of the Institute of Women's Studies in Białystok, publications by the Women's Space Foundation, the series *Kobieta i...* edited by Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc, the project *When Science Is a Woman*, and digital repositories such as herstorie.pl and studiakobiece.pl.

The low status of women's knowledge, both academic and local, is historically linked to the Cartesian mind–body dualism, which privileged mind over body, form over matter, and masculine over feminine (Grosz 2009, pp. 1–6, 17–18). In KGWs, embodiment is central: members' expertise spans cooking, food processing, handicrafts, subsistence farming, and cultural event management. Yet such knowledge remains undervalued in formal frameworks.

KGW expertise is transmitted intergenerationally (Herman 2019, p. 15) through both familial and collective activities, aligning with feminist epistemology's emphasis on lived experience, embodiment, and relational learning. Feminist theorists have challenged the gendered association of rationality with objectivity, arguing that all knowledge is socially situated. Donna Haraway's (1991) "situated knowledge" rejects claims to neutrality, while standpoint theory (Hartsock 1983; Harding 1992) highlights the "privileged epistemic access" of marginalised groups. Feminist empiricism (Harding 1992; Bednarek and Czeczot 2013) calls for methodological reforms to integrate such perspectives into institutional knowledge—yet for KGWs, this integration is minimal.

From an STS perspective, KGW knowledge spans tacit, embodied, and explicit forms. Tacit knowledge, in Polanyi's terms, is learned through "subordinate focal awareness" and enacted bodily; embodied knowledge, per Maurice Merleau-Ponty, emerges from repeated sensory–motor practice (Hadjimichael, Ribeiro, and Tsoukas 2024).

Within Collins' (2018, p. 40) typology, KGW members also hold contributory expertise: they can perform and articulate domain-specific skills. Explicit knowledge includes recipes, documented folklore, and event checklists; tacit and embodied expertise underpins tasks from event coordination to volunteer management. Members adapt traditions using modern tools or new dietary approaches, while events such as the *Dożynki* (harvest festival) demand a combination of craft, culinary, and symbolic knowledge.

Despite functioning as key custodians of intangible heritage, KGWs rarely have authority in defining "tradition." The embodied techniques of cooking, sewing, and group coordination—Marcel Mauss's (1973) "techniques of the body"—remain absent from archives, perpetuating a blocked learning loop (Lave and Wenger 1991). In this way, KGW expertise, though central to community life and heritage continuity, remains structurally marginalised within the systems that claim to safeguard cultural tradition.

PARTICIPATORY ART-BASED RESEARCH AND COOKERY BOOKS.

In 2022, I began an ethnographic study asking how women's food work shapes the professional opportunities, social status, and personal development of members of Rural Women's Circles. Initial methods—participant observation and semi-structured interviews—proved insufficient to capture the group's complex social dynamics and experiential knowledge. I therefore introduced a participatory approach aimed at both accessing and co-creating knowledge with KGW Wyrzeka. This responded to two key concerns: the absence of a forum for members to collectively reflect on their work and identities, and the persistent appropriation of KGW narratives by state institutions and media. Together, we developed a collaborative project resulting in a small publication—a leaflet with hand portraits and a set of recipe postcards—produced through an artistic, co-creative process.

Participatory arts-based research (*PABR*) is grounded in the interaction of art, society, and science, generating forms of knowledge historically marginalised within academic research but increasingly recognised in interdisciplinary and practice-based scholarship. It combines participatory research, which emphasises democratic, change-oriented processes, with arts-based research, which employs art forms as methodological tools within the study (Chevalier and Buckles 2013; Finley 2005; Leavy 2018, quoted in Nunn 2020). A central element is the creation of a "sphere of belonging," described by Caitlin Nunn, in which participants feel part of a shared and safe space that fosters collective exploration and expression—echoing Bourdieu's idea of the research interview as an "exceptional situation for communication." Capturing such knowledge requires breaking down the hierarchy between researcher and researched. Although inevitably shaped by the researcher—and never fully equal—PABR calls for processes in which all participants can act as co-researchers (Peters, Gunsilius, Matthias, Evert, and Wildner 2020, p. 2).

Critics have questioned the credibility and dependability of *PABR*, particularly among scholars committed to disciplinary orthodoxy (Phillips, Christensen-Strynø, and Frølunde 2022, p. 393). To address this, I employed methodological triangulation, combining interviews, participant observation, and collaborative artmaking, in line with qualitative case study recommendations (Silverman 2008, quoted in Wieczorek 2014, p. 30).

Although the blurred boundaries between roles—researcher and participant, artist and non-artist—require careful negotiation and strict ethical standards, PABR prioritises and amplifies marginalised voices. It assumes that the knowledge produced should remain accessible beyond academic audiences (Nunn 2020, p. 4). Its orientation toward analysing and challenging power relations in knowledge production builds on the achievements of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including second-wave feminism. These movements, alongside postmodernist, poststructuralist, and queer theoretical perspectives, questioned dominant epistemologies, undermined the hegemony of quantitative research, and opened space for qualitative and artistic approaches (Leavy 2019, pp. 54–56). While qualitative methods typically operate within an interpretive framework, arts-based methods—conceived as a distinct paradigm—treat art itself as capable of generating and communicating knowledge (Barone and Eisner 2012, quoted in Leavy 2019, p. 68). In feminist epistemology, such methods offer tools to transform disciplinary practice while embedding a gender-conscious perspective (Bednarek and Czeczot 2013, p. 9).

The primary inspiration for this project comes from the often trivialized yet profoundly significant format of the cookbook. Cookbooks serve as important documents in women's history, offering valuable insights that enrich historical discourse and analysis (Avakian and Haber 2005, pp. VII–VIII; McLean 2013, p.1). These books often respond to shifts in the transformation of the political-economic landscape, reflecting larger culinary and cultural changes, and "may contain social commentary, political views and/or cultural celebrations" (Le Dantec–Lowry 2008, p. 118). Cookbooks may contain poetry[9] excerpts from the authors' private lives, fiction, and other reflections that, on first glance, do not seem related to food. Feminist groups and women's organisations have published cookbooks to raise funds for their activism, and some believed that a cookbook addressed to men could mark an important milestone in women's liberation by challenging the gendered division of domestic labour (Williams 2014, p. 60).

By managing the narrative strategy of the cookbooks, the authors "were able to re-appropriate the kitchen and deconstruct or reconstruct some of the imposed definitions of femininity and domestic life" (Le Dantec –Lowry 2008, p. 118). Therefore, using a cookbook-inspired format in this project is not just a homage to a common literary form historically dedicated to women, but also an experiment to explore the genre's limits and possibilities.

[9] Or be considered a form of literature themselves, such as fiction, as Avakian and Haber argue, referring to Anne L. Bower.

Fig 1. Behind the scenes of the hand portrait session at KGW Wyrzeka -1

The members of KGW Wyrzeka, as well as those in Rural Women's Circles in general, are not novices in creative practices; rather, they have worked in different media in the past (Radner and Lanser 1987, p. 414). Their core activities, expected by their audience and initiated by the circle members themselves, revolve around various forms of handicrafts, particularly cooking. Therefore, referencing the ambiguous role of cooking in women's lives—both as a source of oppression and empowerment (Belasco 2008, p. 42)—alongside the artistic skills of the circle members involved in the participatory process of creating the publication, seemed a fitting choice. This approach highlights the KGW's knowledge of tradition, which is deeply embedded in both the act of cooking and the collective work of the circle itself.

The original concept of creating a cookbook was adapted to the practical realities of KGW Wyrzeka's operations. Most activities were driven either by the chairwoman or the project initiator, and meetings had to be scheduled around members' already intensive personal commitments. This made it difficult to dedicate time to an open-ended, exploratory discussion phase. As a result, all project-related activities were integrated into the circle's existing schedule. I quickly realised that, to encourage participation, I needed to present concrete proposals with visible outcomes—reflecting the way the KGW typically operates. When a competition or event is proposed, it is introduced to the group to assemble a team of willing participants—usually the same active core of members. Taking this into account and following informal conversations about the circle's ideas and aesthetic preferences, I suggested an accessible format: a leaflet featuring members' portraits, accompanied by a set of culinary recipe postcards.

Fig 2. Behind the scenes of the hand portrait session at KGW Wyrzeka -2

Fig 3. Occasional postcards created by members of KGW Wyrzeka during collage workshops

The circle members were eager to take up the idea of postcards, as they had previously considered using this format for describing culinary recipes for a regional competition. The issue arose with the portraits, as opinions varied. Ultimately, there was no full agreement on either photographing private kitchens (since very private space of their own and not all KGW members had even seen their colleagues' kitchens), individual or group portraits of members, or using archival photographs of the circle. As one member stated, "We are doing this now; it's our work, not theirs, so it should be us in these pictures." In our search for something meaningful and private, yet comfortable, the idea of hand portraits appeared. The shift from the classic portrait to a more multi-layered form was surprising for many members, but also attractive: "I was thinking about why the hands, and now I think I understand. Because you can see everything there—work, everything. Better than on the face," stated one of *KGW* Wyrzeka members. As a background for photos, the circle members brought their tablecloths, some embroidered by their grandmothers, others purchased at the supermarkets.

To determine the content of the postcards, I conducted informal telephone interviews with members of the circle interested in participating in the project. We discussed culinary recipes that were important for them and how these were tied to events the circle had participated in, as well as themes of seasonality and memory. To create the visual layer of the postcards, I proposed collages as an inclusive technique with a low entry threshold. Collages, which blend visual and textual elements, offer valuable insights that are often difficult to gather through other methods (Leavy 2019, p. 327). Additionally, collages facilitate the integration of multiple meanings, allowing for a depth of interpretation beyond the sum of their parts. This process combines artistic, theoretical, and subjective knowledge, derived from individual experiences and interpretations, and intersubjective knowledge, which emerges from interactions and shared understanding between individuals (Chilton and Scotti 2014, p. 166; Leavy 2019, p. 320).

This *PABR* project faced several key challenges, primarily stemming from the dynamics of the KGWs and their pre-existing organisational structure, such as issues of ownership, role negotiation, and the integration of artistic methods within a more task-oriented structure.

Since the KGW members were accustomed to working on clearly outlined tasks, such as competition regulations or catering guidelines, the project was initially viewed as just another task, which also hindered the sense of collective ownership. Despite the collaborative nature of the project, it was often referred to as "Yuliia's project," positioning it as the researcher's rather than a collectively owned initiative, and thereby constraining shared responsibility and creative engagement. While the project intended to create a "sphere of belonging," as described by Caitlin Nunn, and encourage new interpersonal dynamics within the circle, it did not succeed in creating these new interactions. The established roles and tasks within the KGW limited the potential for deeper relationship. In the end, although participants were given space to reflect on their self-representation and their views within and

outside the circle, the project's transformative potential was limited by the KGW's entrenched task-oriented culture, fixed role hierarchies, and the perception of the work as the facilitator's personal project rather than a collectively owned initiative.

Moreover, treating the project as just another task blurred one of my core motivations: to create a space where women in the circle could express themselves freely, independent of the government-imposed restrictions they typically face in public activities like festivals and competitions. Although some women voiced disagreement or dissatisfaction with this approach in interviews (G1_2023, W1_2023, M1_2024, etc.), the existing system has allowed active circles to function smoothly in their established forms. In this context, a participatory project grounded in artistic methods risked appearing as an unfamiliar and even burdensome concept, potentially undermining the sense of comfort and safety needed for participants tocommunicate their views.

CONCLUSIONS

Participatory arts-based research (PABR) provides a valuable framework for engaging marginalized groups—particularly women—in the co-production of knowledge, redistributing epistemic authority and fostering inclusivity. However, it also faces persistent challenges in both implementation and in achieving recognition for the knowledge it generates.

In the case of *KGW* Wyrzeka, the project encountered tensions over ownership, decision-making, and aesthetic direction. The circle's internal hierarchy, centred on its management board, led some members to perceive the initiative as an externally assigned task rather than a collectively owned endeavour. Past experiences with externally imposed obligations—such as catering contracts or competition guidelines—had shaped expectations and constrained the sense of agency among participants.

While the aim was to facilitate independent expression beyond officially sanctioned narratives, this goal was not immediately embraced. Although some members had voiced dissatisfaction with restrictive institutional formats, the participatory structure felt unfamiliar and abstract. Nevertheless, the project created a temporary "sphere of belonging" (Nunn), in which members reflected on how they present themselves and their knowledge internally and externally. Decisions over attire (folk costume vs. everyday clothing), recipe selection, and the wording of skill descriptions illustrated these moments of agency. Yet this sphere was short-lived; the KGW's task-oriented culture, entrenched hierarchies, and the perception that the project primarily belonged to the facilitator meant that collective ownership was only partially realised.

The concept of "double marginalisation" captures the layered exclusions at play. First is the position of KGW women within male-dominated state and local government structures, where their contributions are frequently reduced to symbolic or decorative roles. Second is the marginal cultural status of the knowledge they transmit, situated outside the hierarchy of officially legitimized "knowledges." The first exclusion reflects gendered constraints on agency within dominant narratives of tradition;

the second stems from the non-academic status of KGW members and their limited access to institutional platforms.

KGW members integrate practical expertise with interpretive engagement in tradition, positioning them as cultural experts whose recognition must preserve the values of bottom-up knowledge production. Yet the absence of dedicated institutions capable of archiving, interpreting, and disseminating contemporary KGW practices limits the potential for such recognition. The KGW model nevertheless occupies a unique position, mediating between institutional expectations for traditionalism, the need for public appeal, and members' personal aspirations. Its dual knowledge base—embodied expertise in traditional practices and reflexive engagement with women's collective identity—remains difficult to capture through conventional ethnography and even more challenging to incorporate into state-driven narratives of Polish tradition.

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BETWEEN EMPOWERMENT AND CONSTRAINT: PARTICIPATORY ART CONFRONTING DOUBLE MARGINALISATION IN RURAL WOMEN'S CIRCLES

Key words: participatory arts-based research (PABR); feminist epistemology; rural women; Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich (KGW); tradition; experiential knowledge; heritage discourse; Poland

This article examines the use of participatory arts-based research (*PABR*) to document and disseminate rural women's non-academic knowledge of tradition and explores how such knowledge might inform the work of government institutions in Poland. The study engaged members of the Rural Women'sCircle (*Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich, KGW*) in Wyrzeka—one of the oldest and most widespread rural women's associations—as co-creators in an artistic project designed to provide a space for self-expression outside state-defined frameworks. While KGWs are publicly legitimized as ambassadors of tradition and folklore, their role in defining and updating this knowledge remains marginal; institutional narratives dominate, often instrumentalizing their work for political purposes. Drawing on feminist epistemology, the project employed accessible visual arts methods, including collage, to: (a) reclaim women's subjectivity within tradition narratives; (b) reach audiences beyond government channels; and (c) produce contextually relevant research through collaboration with women whose contributions are undervalued both for their non-academic status and for the gendered character of their expertise. The findings highlight the persistent marginalisation of women's experiential knowledge within heritage discourse and the potential of *PABR* to challenge this imbalance.

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