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## FOOD HERSTORIES AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN TIMES OF CRISIS. WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN FOOD PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND CONSUMPTION

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to analyze women's experiences of household food production, distribution and consumption as a response to the difficulties and challenges of daily life. The adopted perspective integrates research from food studies, historical sociology, and gender studies. The author's intention is to discuss the multifaceted, gendered nature of food practices, highlighting their transformations, and modes of continuation. References to the analysis of alternative food networks draw attention to both contemporary and post-WWII food practices and introduce to the discussion concepts which remain important for contemporary society, e.g. community and sustainable solutions. This analysis is based on a review of literature, particularly oral histories and autobiographical accounts by both urban and rural women, and references various documented food-related activities. As demonstrated in the article, presentation of women's food-related stories involves exploring alternatives to the scarcity economy of state socialism and contemporary anonymous mass production. These alternatives, embedded in the space of the kitchen, the farm field, or the allotment garden, are more than just coping strategies – they appeal to such values and ethical norms as mutual assistance, trust, and reciprocity. They can be interpreted through the lens of creativity and resourcefulness, as well as in terms of power relations and resistance in the context of everyday crises.

**Keywords:** women's food practices, alternative food networks, allotment gardens, food self-provisioning, sustainable solutions

### Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze women's experiences related to household production, distribution, and consumption of food as a response to the difficulties and

challenges of everyday life, both under state socialism and in contemporary Poland. The adopted perspective integrates research from food studies, historical sociology and gender studies. Exploration of the gendered dimension of food practices provides an opportunity to interpret “domestic stories” through the lens of entrepreneurship, creativity, and resourcefulness, but also in the context of power relations, oppression, and resistance. To accomplish this goal, I draw on the works of Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz who studied coping strategies of individual households in the 1980s, drawing attention to the “gendered order in Polish families,” its particular visibility in times of crisis, and the usefulness of the gender perspective in exploring the relationship between state and society.<sup>1</sup> I intend to address the multifaceted, gender-related nature of food practices, highlighting their transformations and modes of continuation. I will also refer to the alternative food networks (AFN) analysis, an approach which has been rapidly developing in the last decade within the food studies in the context of such important concepts as community and sustainability. Alternative food networks were commonly developed under state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe as everyday production and consumption strategies, e.g. in the form of family and neighborhood exchange networks or allotment gardens. They are described as being “embedded” in social life in Poland – in the traditions and locality, which makes them distinct from “imitative” or “mixed” food networks, such as consumer cooperatives, green markets, or community supported agriculture.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will explore the “embedded” model of alternative food networks and describe both self-supply strategies and informal food exchange networks as activities that build resilience and resistance.

The analysis is based on a review of literature. The starting point for my study was research on social history (history of everyday life and consumption) and women’s history in the post-WWII period. The growing interest in the people’s history of Poland gave rise to numerous debates in this field and resulted in e.g. the 2020 publication of a comprehensive monograph *Women in Poland, 1945–1989: Modernity – Equality – Communism*.<sup>3</sup> Using ethnographic approach, I placed particular emphasis on texts that concerned personal accounts.<sup>4</sup> My research interest in sustainability and on-going sociological studies of food-related initiatives guided my selection of further sources for the analysis and directed me towards focusing on con-

<sup>1</sup> K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, *Deprivation of Everyday Life and Coping Strategies During the Crisis of the 1980s in Poland: An Analysis of Women’s First-person Narratives*, “The Polish Review” 2020, vol. 65 (2), pp. 27–28.

<sup>2</sup> W. Goszczyński, R. Śpiewak, A. Bilewicz, M. Wróblewski, *Between Imitation and Embeddedness: Three Types of Polish Alternative Food Networks*, “Sustainability” 2019, vol. 11 (24), pp. 4–5, 14.

<sup>3</sup> K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, P. Perkowski, M. Fidelis, B. Klich-Kluczevska, *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989. Nowoczesność. Równouprawnienie. Komunizm*, Universitas, Kraków 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, “Jak związać koniec z końcem” – *jedzenie i konsumpcja w Polsce w latach osiemdziesiątych XX w. w dyskursie eksperckim i kobiecych narracjach osobistych*, “Rocznik Antropologii Historii” 2014, vol. 2 (7), pp. 136–138.

temporary practices. This article draws on current publications addressing food production, distribution, and consumption, primarily sociological analyses of AFNs in Poland, ethnographic research of local communities, and autobiographical accounts. The materials I selected reveal not only the diversity of individual and collective food strategies, but also the social and cultural conditions in which personal experiences are embedded. I will also refer to the documented food-related activities, both urban and those that overcome the “city centrism.”

## Self-sufficiency and Resourcefulness

The “post-Stalinist backlash” restored the traditional female roles associated with household management. Women have been assigned the moral responsibility to ensure the basic food security of their households. Thus, they were primarily responsible for self-sufficiency strategies. Accordingly, it was also women who were targeted by expert messages. Academic institutions, women’s organizations (e.g. League of Women) and mass media (mainly press) undertook educational campaigns that reflected modernizing and rationalizing discourses concerning eating habits and kitchen practices. The messages of the 1960s emphasized the importance of comfort, pleasure, and consumer desires. In turn, in the crisis years of the 1980s, experts focused on the need for savings, modest living, self-sufficiency, and resourcefulness.<sup>5</sup> In Poland, the 1980s were the era in which goods were either in short supply or reached prohibitive prices, replacement parts for broken equipment were impossible to purchase, and market services were suspended or closed. People stood in endless queues to buy luxury goods and basic foodstuffs, such as sugar, oil, butter and meat.<sup>6</sup> They also participated in semi-legal food circulation, often described through the prism of exchanging specific products and favors, “jumping the queue” by taking advantage of one’s connections, and looking for other unsanctioned opportunities to obtain scarce goods.<sup>7</sup> As noted by Stańczak-Wiślicz, the gender dimension of “crisis consumption practices” is very evident in memories of post-war Poland, as women perceived this crisis in particularly harsh terms.<sup>8</sup> Their daily responses to supply shortages included stockpiling, mainly of basic ingredients such as flour, sugar and pasta. Purchasing decisions were driven by what was available on the shelves, and goods

<sup>5</sup> D. Kałwa, *Post-Stalinist Backlash in Poland*, “Clio” 2015, vol. 41 (1), pp. 154–156, 158; K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, *Eating Healthy, Eating Modern: The “Urbanization” of Food Tastes in Communist Poland (1945–1989)*, “Ethnologia Polona” 2020, vol. 41, pp. 143–145, 150–151, 154–157; eadem, “*Jak związać koniec z końcem*”..., op. cit., pp. 141, 152–153.

<sup>6</sup> K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, *Deprivation of Everyday Life*..., op. cit., pp. 29–32, 34.

<sup>7</sup> M. Mazurek, *Spoleczeństwo kolejki. O doświadczeniach niedoboru 1945–1989*, Wydawnictwo Trio, Warszawa 2010, pp. 49–51; eadem, *Keeping It Close to Home: Resourcefulness and Scarcity in Late Socialist and Postsocialist Poland* [in:] P. Bren, M. Neuburger (eds.), *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, Oxford University Press, New York 2012, pp. 303–306.

<sup>8</sup> K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, “*Jak związać koniec z końcem*”..., op. cit., p. 146.

were also bought for family and friends with whom they could be exchanged. Women returned to old, pre-war recipes, the so-called “grandma’s recipes”, for flour and vegetable-based dishes that required lengthy preparation. When making home-cooked meals, they relied on substitutes for less readily available products and frequently made use of leftovers, provoking culinary experiments, such as dried cheese casseroles. Food processing was done mostly by women. Working at home, they would dry and marinate mushrooms and make preserves from garden crops or backyard farming, such as jams and compotes, or canned meat. On the other hand, backyard animal husbandry and growing plants in the garden or on the balcony often required the help of the whole family and could be a source of important supplies for further processing.<sup>9</sup>

## Working. Learning. Resisting

Allotment farming became a very visible activity in urban spaces of the 1980s. At that time, there were about 900,000 allotment gardens in Poland. They were perceived as a guarantee of a minimum level of food security in the face of scarcity economy. Their use can also be seen as a “strategy to shift the burden of food production away from industry and the state” towards “unpaid reproductive labor of households” – mostly performed by women.<sup>10</sup> The produce from the garden was used to cover household needs and sometimes exchanged or sold. Those who did not have their own plots of land took advantage of other options – they helped their relatives working in agriculture to cultivate the land in exchange for a share of the harvest.<sup>11</sup> There were plenty opportunities for learning and experimentation. Writing in 1968 for the “Przekrój” magazine, Zenona Stróżyk-Stulgińska described her urban garden as a place of constant exploration and implementation of unusual ideas:

It was no longer enough that everything was turning green, growing and bearing fruit. People looked for flowers of rare beauty, vegetables with mysterious names and unusual flavors. They swapped recipes for scorzonera, exchanged seeds of crisp lettuce, squash, salsify. [...] They built small greenhouses, hotbeds and rabbit sheds, and the houses were given solid basements. [...] if one had not seen it with one’s own eyes, it would have been hard to believe that the back wall of this neat little house was a huge store cupboard, the sides were made from old barracks, and the rest of the house’s pedigree was equally complicated.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See: K. Stańczk-Wiślicz, *Deprivation of Everyday Life...*, op. cit., pp. 36–37; eadem, *Eating Healthy...*, op. cit., p. 145; eadem, “*Jak związać koniec z końcem*”..., op. cit., pp. 145–146, 153–154.

<sup>10</sup> A.C. Bellows, *One Hundred Years of Allotment Gardens in Poland*, “Food and Foodways” 2004, vol. 12 (4), pp. 248, 254, 262.

<sup>11</sup> E. Dunn, *Prywatyzując Polskę. O bobofrutach, wielkim biznesie i restrukturyzacji pracy*, trans. P. Sadura, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2017, p. 199.

<sup>12</sup> Z. Stróżyk-Stulgińska, *Spraw działkowych opisanie* [in:] M. Szczurek, M. Zych (eds.), *Dzielo-działka*, Muzeum Etnograficzne im. Seweryna Udzieli w Krakowie, Kraków 2012, pp. 72–73.

In turn, Grażyna Kubica, who cultivated a plot of land which had been sectioned off from a farm in the Silesian Voivodship, recalls that owning a garden involved a lot of processing work: frying plum jam – the traditional way, without using sugar, stirring the boiling fruit for hours; making raspberry and currant juices by squeezing them through a linen bag; pickling cabbage in a barrel; drying plums, pears and apples in the oven – on self-made grates. As Kubica explains, “[w]e were doing all of this until late fall, in the evenings, in our flat, bringing in the crops on a two-wheeled cart. This was our post-peasant urban-rural life through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s”.<sup>13</sup> Allotment gardens were used primarily to produce food, which required regular, physical labor. Exchanging seeds and crops or providing others with assistance in construction of infrastructure helped to maintain social connections. It was not until the 1990s, i.e. the decade of political transformation, that allotments began to be associated more with summer rest and relaxation.<sup>14</sup> Under state socialism, allotment gardens were also spaces which were excluded from the state control and the industry’s directives, functioning as extensions of homes.<sup>15</sup> As Elisabeth Dunn states: “women’s work on allotments took on the same political tinge as domestic labour: by creating a space free from state interference, in practice, it constituted a domesticated form of resistance.”<sup>16</sup> This can be illustrated by a story provided by Anne C. Bellows – about a family that grew “subversive potatoes.”

The autocratic state put such emphasis on agricultural science and the development of certain crop varieties that in some places, local functionaries found it their political duty to discourage or fine those who followed traditional or alternative growing practices. In the Poznań area of west central Poland, a family grew an heirloom variety of potato that was not officially approved. Every morning the mother or children would race outside to nip off the new red flowers – the variety’s telltale indicator – before a neighbor or anyone else might easily observe their personal “revolt” against the state and report it.<sup>17</sup>

Stańczak-Wiślicz introduces the term “defensive strategies” to describe day-to-day pragmatic activities performed under state socialism.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Dobrochna Kałwa writes about the “phenomenon of the double life of Poles” who, although officially supporting the actions of the authorities, in the private sphere undertook numerous acts of criticism and opposition.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the hardship and fatigue associated with constant uncertainty and risk led women to describe their daily lives

<sup>13</sup> G. Kubica, *Działka w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu. Czyli kulturowa historia pewnego kawałka ziemi w Beskidzie Śląskim* [in:] M. Szczurek, M. Zych (eds.), *Dzielo-działka*, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> P. Worytkiewicz, *Armata w cieniu pomidorów* [in:] M. Szczurek, M. Zych (eds.), *Dzielo-działka*, op. cit., pp. 144–145; E. Dunn, *Prywatyzując Polskę...*, op. cit., pp. 199–200.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 200.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> A.C. Bellows, *One Hundred Years...*, op. cit., p. 260.

<sup>18</sup> K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, *Deprivation of Everyday Life...*, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> D. Kałwa, *Na peryferiach peryferii? Codziennosc PRL w polskiej historiografii – przegląd badań*, “Rocznik Antropologii Historii” 2012, vol. 1 (2), p. 190.

as “different shades of grey” (in interviews conducted in 1970s, according to the accounts of one of the research participants).<sup>20</sup> Standing in lines, long hours in the kitchen, the randomness of menus – all these factors were perceived as frustrating and overwhelming. They contributed to the creation of “crisis gender identity” (in Polish: *kryzysowa tożsamość genderowa*),<sup>21</sup> which can also be applied to women living in rural areas. As the study of the School of Agricultural Sciences revealed, the working hours of female farmers remained almost unchanged between 1945 and 1989.<sup>22</sup> In the early 1970s, a 23-year-old female resident of a village in the Wielkopolska region wrote in her diary:

Machines took over the men’s work, but the life of a rural woman has not changed much. A woman has to feed the family, take care of the children, and the effort it takes to do the laundry, because not all houses have washing machines, the difficulty of milking cows when the heat is so intense, carrying heavy baskets of potatoes, steaming and carrying buckets of feed to the pigs. On top of that, you have to go into the fields with your father and brother to harvest, plant, dig potatoes, dry and clean hay.<sup>23</sup>

The mechanization of agricultural work usually involved larger-scale crop production, which at that time was handled by men. Women carried out the remaining agricultural and livestock-related work, took care of the house, children and elderly parents, gardened and worked in the fields. In the crisis years of the 1980s, they additionally returned to old labor-intensive customs and strategies, such as baking bread.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, it was not uncommon for homemade goods and agricultural products to be given to family or friends living in the city. This was a valuable solution since the countryside was eventually excluded from the rationing system. The transfer of food from the countryside to the city was part of a social circuit based on trust and quality control, on getting “one’s own” food from a “trusted source”.<sup>25</sup>

## “Everyone Prefers to Eat Their Own Food”

Urban dwellers still get produce from people living in the countryside or exchange food within the urban-rural family. “After all, everybody has some relatives in the

<sup>20</sup> M. Mazurek, *Keeping It Close...*, op. cit., p. 301.

<sup>21</sup> K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, “*Jak związać koniec z końcem*”..., op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> M. Fidelis, *Równouprawnienie czy konserwatywna nowoczesność? Kobiety pracujące* [in:] K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, P. Perkowski, M. Fidelis, B. Klich-Kluczevska, *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989...*, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158.

<sup>24</sup> E. Szpak, *Mentalność ludności wiejskiej w PRL. Studium zmian*, Wydawnictwo Scholar, Warszawa 2013, pp. 129–134.

<sup>25</sup> J. Strączuk, *Modernizacja wzorów żywienia w PRL wobec wiedzy potocznej i codziennych praktyk* [in:] J. Kurczewska, M. Karkowska (eds.), *Przemiany kulturowe we współczesnej Polsce: ramy, własności, epizody*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2016, pp. 208–209.

countryside,” concludes one of the women interviewed by Agnieszka Pajączkowska and Aleksandra Zbroja for their book: *What Were You Even Thinking? Meetings with Women from Mazovian Villages* (in Polish: *A co wyście myślały? Spotkania z kobietami z mazowieckich wsi*).<sup>26</sup> The titular meetings constitute encounters with representatives of different generations, professions, and lifestyles. One of the interviewees talks about preparing vegetable preserves for winter and swapping recipes with her neighbors. She meticulously writes them down in a notebook, combining new trends (e.g. powdered soups) with old, traditional customs. She mentions cooking for a multi-generational family, including a neighbour, and preparing her own inexpensive substitutes for commercially available products, such as flower honey from dandelions. Another interviewee criticizes the dishes she was served during a trip to Warsaw and announces that next time around she will bring her own food. She states firmly that she will not let “anyone trick [her].”<sup>27</sup> “Everyone prefers to eat their own [food],” says another woman’s husband, while serving a homemade cake with equally homemade cream to the guests. After a moment, his wife adds that “everyone” also stocks up at the discount store.<sup>28</sup> Today’s contrasting approaches to food, as well as alternative strategies of ensuring food quality are also evident in the practices of female farmers from the western Podlasie region interviewed by Anna Jakubowska. As the researcher points out, almost all of the women she talked to reserved a section of their garden or field for “chemical-free” farming methods, which involved demanding manual labour (connected with fertilization and pest control). Conventional “spraying” of croplands was seen as an economic necessity, but elicited mixed opinions. Maintaining crops without industrially produced “chemicals,” on a small scale, for household needs, became a source of pride, and a cause for criticism of intensive agriculture.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, alternative plant protection methods, such as nettle manure, garlic water, or diluted gray soap, are also used in urban allotment gardens which are still treated as spaces of experimentation. Separate pots or pieces of land are set aside for testing. Allotment holders propagate plants on their own by grafting, and combine different plant species, for example, pear and quince.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, allotments are increasingly used today for recreational purposes. A 2011 study involving more than half of the users of Family Allotment Gardens (in Polish: *Rodzinne Ogródki Działkowe*, ROD) in Poland showed that almost 60% of allotment holders use their allotments for recreation and cultivation, and another 20% use them

<sup>26</sup> A. Pajączkowska, A. Zbroja, *A co wyście myślały? Spotkania z kobietami z mazowieckich wsi*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2019, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 258.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 272.

<sup>29</sup> A. Jakubowska, *Moralna ekonomia pestycydów. Opowieści o agrochemikaliach na zachodnim Podlasiu* [in:] A. Krzyworzeka (ed.), *Praca na wsi. Szkice etnologiczne*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2020, pp. 156–160, 165–166.

<sup>30</sup> A. Chwoła, *Co z tego wyrośnie? Ogród działkowy jako pole eksperymentów* [in:] M. Szczurek, M. Zych (eds.), *Dzielo-działka*, op. cit., pp. 230–232.



exclusively for cultivation, as a source of food.<sup>31</sup> Another survey, conducted among allotment holders from the Wielkopolska region of Poland, confirmed this trend, indicating that most respondents chose to grow ornamental plants that contribute to creating the relaxing atmosphere on their allotments.<sup>32</sup> The Polish Allotment Federation (in Polish: *Polski Związek Działkowców*, PZD) sees these trends as potentially threatening for the future of allotments, as they contradict the objectives of the Act on Family Allotment Gardens. The Federation calls for an increase in cultivation of edible plants. Increasing biodiversity in gardens and “natural” cultivation methods are also promoted among allotment holders.<sup>33</sup> As the above-cited study from Wielkopolska revealed, nearly 60% of those surveyed believe that their work on allotments contributes to greater biodiversity and just over 70% of them believe that their crops are organic.<sup>34</sup>

According to Piotr Worytkiewicz, the plots which are not used for growing produce are referred to as “hungry plots.”<sup>35</sup> As Worytkiewicz concludes, “[t]he disappearing vegetable plots are also a sign indicating that the widowers, whose wives used to create dinners from the allotment vegetables, are not cooking soups.”<sup>36</sup> For older people, allotments constitute records of stories of successive generations of their families – reminders of the parents or grandparents who built the first gazebo and planted the trees, and the children who learned to recognize plants under their supervision. The gardens also “remember” difficult events – thefts, negligence, and deaths of their gardeners. When talking about the plot of land she owns in a small mountain village, Grażyna Kubica notes that nowadays the land is an organizational and financial problem for her family. The crops (now only fruit) are collected mostly in order to avoid leaving them to waste. The garden has lost its economic sense as well as its significance as a facilitator of reciprocal social relations. For example, grass from the garden used to be donated to the neighbors when they still kept farm animals.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Zenona Stróżyk-Stulgińska’s story also ends with her saying (or

<sup>31</sup> Komunikat dotyczący wyników przeprowadzonego przez PZD badania pt. „Kim są polscy działkowcy w 2011 roku”, Polski Związek Działkowców, 18.11.2011, <http://pzd.pl/artykuly/4329/188/Komunikat-dotyczacy-wynikow-przeprowadzonego-przez-PZD-badania-pt-Kim-sa-polscy-dzialkowcy-w-2011-roku.html> (accessed: 1.02.2023).

<sup>32</sup> B. Maćkiewicz, M. Szczepańska, E. Kacprzak, R. Fox-Kämper, *Between Food Growing and Leisure: Contemporary Allotment Gardeners in Western Germany and Poland*, “DIE ERDE. Journal of the Geographical Society of Berlin” 2021, vol. 152 (1), p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> Warzywniki muszą wrócić na działki, Polski Związek Działkowców, 17.02.2023, <http://pzd.pl/artykuly/27312/188/Warzywniki-musza-wrocic-na-dzialki.html> (accessed: 8.04.2023); Uwaga: nowa broszura „Działka bliżej natury”, Polski Związek Działkowców, 8.07.2022, <http://pzd.pl/artykuly/26687/188/Uwaga-nowa-broszura-Dzialka-blizej-natury.html> (accessed: 8.04.2023).

<sup>34</sup> B. Maćkiewicz, M. Szczepańska, E. Kacprzak, R. Fox-Kämper, *Between Food Growing and Leisure...*, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>35</sup> P. Worytkiewicz, *Armata w cieniu pomidorów...*, op. cit., pp. 145–146.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 146.

<sup>37</sup> G. Kubica, *Działka w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu...*, op. cit., pp. 98–101.



trying to say) her farewells to a garden that was flooded and suffered from recurring infrastructure failures. As its further maintenance seems beyond the gardener's capabilities, she takes photos of the things that haven't been destroyed in the flooding and gives away equipment that might still be useful to others.<sup>38</sup>

## Continuities and Transformations

Researchers of contemporary alternative food networks use the term “invisible alternatives” to describe every day, non-industrial, ordinary and traditional food production and consumption practices.<sup>39</sup> There were different motivations identified for producing these alternatives and for choosing them as “coping strategies”. Growing produce in an allotment garden, stocking up on food, or preparing preserves can be interpreted as a reaction to the non-transparency and complexity of the food industry and an attempt to maintain control over food quality. Urban consumers are generally disconnected from the global food production and distribution processes. As Justyna Straczuk points out, they develop individual learning strategies, navigating among various social and advertising campaigns, scientific research, and media messages, including non-scientific ones. Referencing the “Eating Patterns and Social Structure” study, conducted in Poland in 2014, Straczuk also notes that the respondents claimed they associated the greatest sense of security with food which they either produced themselves or received from people they trusted the most, i.e. their family and closest friends. This links back to the above-mentioned category of “one's own” (familiar) food which is perceived as free from “chemicals”, and, thus, as food that does not require reading the labels. It is associated with belonging to a community, good intentions, and trustworthy relations.<sup>40</sup> Cooking at home and sharing food in different ways can be linked to building social connections and caring relationships. As researchers note, women's food purchasing decisions are often based on the preferences of others.<sup>41</sup> The “Eating Patterns and Social Structure” study indicated also that meal planning and dinner preparation is still mainly done by women in Polish households, which reinforces the traditional divisions between female and male domains of activity.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, women might not perceive feeding others as physical and mental

<sup>38</sup> Z. Stróżyk-Stulgińska, *Spraw działkowych opisanie...*, op. cit., pp. 80–82.

<sup>39</sup> W. Goszczyński, R. Śpiewak, A. Bilewicz, M. Wróblewski, *Between Imitation and Embeddedness...*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> J. Straczuk, *Risk and Trust: Food-related Concerns and “Good” Food Procurement Strategies. From Research into Eating Practices in Poland*, “Studia Humanistyczne AGH” 2018, vol. 17 (2), pp. 65, 69–71.

<sup>41</sup> P. Allen, C. Sachs, *Women and Food Chains: The Gendered Politics of Food* [in:] P. Williams-Forsion, C. Counihan (eds.), *Taking Food Public: Redefining Foodways in a Changing World*, Routledge, New York–London 2012, p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> H. Domański, Z. Karpiński, D. Przybysz, J. Straczuk, *Wzory jedzenia a struktura społeczna*, Scholar, Warszawa 2015, pp. 207–208, 209–210.

work, although it does require long hours spent on meal preparation and planning, obtaining the right nutritious ingredients, serving the prepared meals, etc.<sup>43</sup> The subject of relationship building is addressed by Agata Bachórz who interviewed (mostly) urban-dwelling mothers and daughters. They cook at home and share containers with food among family members. Such practices allow to maintain mutual and face-to-face relations within the family, despite differences in individual members' lifestyles. Mothers support their working children by investing their skills and time in cooking. This is how they express care and attention. At the same time, they apply a specific "food philosophy" to family members, referring to established, "natural" patterns and "proper" knowledge of nutrition.<sup>44</sup> As Ewa Kopczyńska's research indicates, women also develop their own pathways, connections and social bonds in consumption practices at the open-air food markets – ways of buying food from specific producers ("trusted sources") and places. They look for the best offers, identified, for example, through conversations with different sellers, and use this knowledge, as well as skills gained from past experiences, to evaluate the quality of available produce. This had been described as the "local know-how", and contextualized in the perspective of a prosumer who is competent in both food consumption and production.<sup>45</sup> Prosumers benefit from the experiences of past decades and revisit old habits. They make use of collected material resources, such as traditional kitchen tools or inherited recipes, and draw on the embodied knowledge, as described by Grażyna Kubica:

My body still remembers the different skills I have acquired over the years working on the allotment. When I climb the ladder to pick up cherries, I keep my balance by moving my body; it knows how to do it. When I pick up raspberries, I instinctively crouch down to see the ones hanging just above the ground, and I open the bushes with my hands to find other berries which are hidden behind the leaves. When I hold the digger, my hand makes optimal movements: short, steady, quick.<sup>46</sup>

The diverse food strategies of gardeners or non-farming households can lead to "quiet sustainability," characterized by researchers as the result of informal, unintended, consistently implemented actions that are not an official response to environmental policy, but contribute significantly to sustainability, for example, through the use of local resources or soil enrichment. These strategies, connected with growing food, foraging or distributing surplus production (instead of wasting it) within family, friends or co-workers, do not need to be designed and planned according

<sup>43</sup> P. Allen, C. Sachs, *Women and Food Chains...*, op. cit., pp. 25–26, 30–31.

<sup>44</sup> A. Bachórz, "It's Just a Constant Exchange of Containers": *Distribution of Home-made Food as an Element of Polish Family Lifestyles*, "Etnografia Polska" 2018, vol. 62 (1–2), pp. 132–136, 140–141; E. Kopczyńska, *Economies of Acquaintances: Social Relations during Shopping at Food Markets and in Consumers' Food Cooperatives*, "East European Politics & Societies: and Cultures" 2017, vol. 31 (3), p. 646.

<sup>45</sup> E. Kopczyńska, *Economies of Acquaintances...*, op. cit., pp. 644–648; eadem, *Are There Local Versions of Sustainability? Food Networks in the Semi-Periphery*, "Sustainability" 2020, vol. 12 (7), p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> G. Kubica, *Działka w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu...*, op. cit., p. 100.

to the guidelines of ecological transformation. They are already present in concrete socio-cultural conditions, as an everyday practice and way of life.<sup>47</sup> Their “quietness” can also be interpreted as “invisibility”. As noted by Amanda Krzyworzeka, who conducted anthropological research in a rural community in Poland, “women’s work” on a contemporary farm often goes unnoticed. As Krzyworzeka writes, “it is telling that Ms. Ewelina’s father hired workers for the painting and repair work, but cleaning and window washing no longer qualified for outsourcing”.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, “[...] it is unthinkable to employ someone to make a supply of jams and other preserves from fruits, vegetables and mushrooms [...]”.<sup>49</sup> According to Krzyworzeka’s research, this attitude is related to the tradition of peasant self-sufficiency and autonomy, but also to the need to emphasize the housewife’s skills and resourcefulness, and with it, also the traditionally understood role of women in the household. As demonstrated in Joanna Mroczkowska’s ethnographic research, women’s work in the countryside includes tasks related to their homes and nearest surroundings. It includes tending to kitchen gardens and dealing with backyard livestock, with the produce obtained not for financial gain, but for the use of the family. Women’s work also consists of preparing daily meals and maintaining provisions, which entails a number of small activities, such as peeling vegetables or dishwashing. According to Mroczkowska, this kind of long-lasting manual labor is no longer seen as something that serves the economic survival of the household. On the other hand, women construct their family and social roles by feeding others. By taking control of family consumption, they may exercise some form of power.<sup>50</sup>

Joe Smith and Petr Jehlička conclude that the environmental and social benefits of “quiet sustainability” may not be fully recognized, not only by those who perform such sustainable activities, but also by research and policy communities. Narratives of food self-provisioning and food exchanges remain marginalized, although they should be protected and enhanced, as their importance is not limited to their function as “coping” or survival strategies. These sustainable practices draw on egalitarian values and ethical norms such as mutual aid, trust, sharing, and reciprocity.<sup>51</sup> Contemporary family and neighborhood distribution networks, described by Ewa Kopyńska in the context of official food assistance programs in Poland, highlight the

<sup>47</sup> J. Smith, P. Jehlička, *Quiet Sustainability: Fertile Lessons from Europe’s Productive Gardeners*, “Journal of Rural Studies” 2013, no. 32, pp. 148–157; B. Balázs, *Community Building through Food Self-provisioning in Central and Eastern Europe: An Analysis through the Food Commons Framework* [in:] J.S. Vivero-Pol, T. Ferrando, O. De Schutter, U. Mattei (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Food as a Commons*, Routledge, London 2019, pp. 297–298.

<sup>48</sup> A. Krzyworzeka, *Rolnicze strategie pracy i przetrwania. Studium z antropologii ekonomicznej*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2015, p. 186.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 187.

<sup>50</sup> J. Mroczkowska, *Praca w domu czy w gospodarstwie: wartościowanie zajęć domowych kobiet wiejskich* [in:] A. Drzał-Sierocka (ed.), *W garnku kultury. Rozważania nad jedzeniem w przestrzeni społeczno-kulturowej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, Gdańsk 2014, pp. 33–36, 38.

<sup>51</sup> J. Smith, P. Jehlička, *Quiet Sustainability...*, op. cit.

importance of community and mutual support in food practices. People who receive food packages from food banks tend to share their surpluses. For example, they pass the products on to an elderly woman living in the neighborhood or prepare meals for their grandchildren. In addition, they try out new recipes based on ingredients they did not choose themselves, and they subject food with a short shelf life to intense processing. Food waste and monotony are avoided. At the same time, sharing food sustains social networks and self-help channels.<sup>52</sup> Nowadays, food banks define their goals in broader and more sustainable terms, defining themselves as institutions promoting food security and elimination of food waste.<sup>53</sup> This shift draws attention to the changing characteristics of food crises. They remain linked to national and global food policies and tend to get exacerbated by socio-economic crises, as evidenced in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the period of state socialism in Poland, people struggled with food shortages and dietary deficits, as well as restricted access to food and ability to purchase quality food products, caused largely by the post-war infrastructure devastation (limited access to gas, electricity, and running water) and the system based on the central planning. Nowadays, large-scale food production co-exists with food loss and waste. Still, food banks remain inextricably connected with the (risk of) hunger and malnutrition. According to Kopczyńska, “[i]n 2019, food banks in Poland donated food to 1.6 million people, a total of 67,000 tons.”<sup>54</sup> Access to adequate food – in terms of nutrition, as well as specific needs and preferences – continues to be a problem. As food banks respond to food insecurity, they also point to the need for a thorough transformation of the food distribution system. Individual households and local initiatives are spaces where the extensive and logistically complex activities of food banks (which are actively involved in influencing and changing policies at the state and international levels) get translated into socially and culturally appropriate food practices.<sup>55</sup> One of such bottom-up initiatives focusing on food security and food waste elimination, is Long Table (in Polish: *Długi Stół*), an organization created in Poznań, in direct cooperation with the local community. It was founded by a group of activists, including members of the Green Group association. Each week, the Long Table volunteers pick up unsold but edible fruit and vegetables from local open-air markets and transport them to the Neighborhood House (in Polish: *Dom Sąsiedzki*), where they prepare packages for people, offering both food support and saving the produce from being thrown away. A number of food package recipients are actively involved in the group’s activities. They pick up, transport, and sort the produce. By building horizontal, non-anonymous relationships, they become part of a learning collective. Ula Ziober, one of the initiative’s organizers, describes it as follows:

<sup>52</sup> E. Kopczyńska, *Jedzenie i inne rzeczy. Antropologia zmiany w systemach żywnościowych*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2021, pp. 144–146.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 105–106.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 106.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 102–105, 154–156.

When we meet every Saturday for food sorting, the atmosphere at the Neighborhood House is really great, and there's space for dialogue between people from completely different worlds. We exchange recipes for various dishes made from the rescued vegetables. We talk about what can be improved in our operations, where to look for new sources of food, but also about the concept of zero waste in everyday life, composting and air-purifying plants, sometimes politics and the pandemic that makes our lives difficult. And sometimes we just joke about rotten carrots and giant potatoes.<sup>56</sup>

Within the Long Table, individual food self-provisioning has been replaced by community-based food self-provisioning. The table, a piece of furniture which in typical kitchens is used mostly by women, became a symbol of collaborative work in the Neighborhood House, involving different actors in the processes of food preparation and distribution.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The crises of food systems, related to the availability and accessibility of food, as well as its loss and waste, are intertwined with the difficulties which women describe as personal experiences – fatigue, resignation, and insufficient support. The analyses highlight the significance of resourcefulness, understood as “the ability to take action and shape one's life situation”, which is determined by living conditions and culture and based on one's social, economic and cultural capital.<sup>57</sup> Under state socialism, women's food-related activity constituted a thoughtful and creative response to systemic constraints which required various social skills, also in relation to traditional models of womanhood. Women engaged both in traditional ways of handling food and created their own food strategies. They brought rituals and rules to the family table, expressing their opinions and civic attitudes through food production and consumption practices. Their inventiveness was part of “family-centered resourcefulness”<sup>58</sup>, whereby household members produced food and took paid professional jobs, but money was no longer the only viable currency, as shown in the data collected by Małgorzata Mazurek. One of the men interviewed for the research had the following to say about the 1980s and his work as a waiter in a Bydgoszcz restaurant: “If I happened to have meat, I could go to a cake shop and get sweets. If I had sweets, I could have both coffee and something else, a refrigerator or a washing machine”.<sup>59</sup> Such informal practices involved various family members and generated broader exchange networks.

<sup>56</sup> “Urządzić świat trochę lepiej” – o inicjatywie Długi Stół Poznań opowiadają Maria Ratajczak i Ula Ziober, *Kultura Użyteczna*, 24.11.2020, <http://www.kulturauzyteczna.pl/index.php/2020/11/24/urzadzic-swiat-troche-lepiej-o-inicjatywie-dlugi-stol-poznan-opowiadaja-maria-ratajczak-i-ula-ziober/> (accessed: 4.02.2023).

<sup>57</sup> M. Mazurek, *Spoleczeństwo kolejki...*, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Eadem, *Keeping It Close...*, op. cit., pp. 299–300.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 312.

“Family resourcefulness” and the maintenance of regular contacts between urban and rural residents (through family or neighborhood ties) during the period of state socialism are key to understanding how contemporary forms of AFNs – networks that assume dialogue between food producers and consumers – are perceived and developed. Their “embeddedness” in social life refers to situated knowledges and micro-history research. It may also involve exploration of the rural (and peasant) origins shared by the vast majority of Poles,<sup>60</sup> as well as moving beyond simplistic and idyllic images of the contemporary Polish countryside in recognition that it includes both farmland and supermarkets, both large-scale production and home cultivation. Using local, available resources and relying on their own labor, women make efforts to build sustainability in their immediate surroundings. From both rural and urban perspectives, these efforts include care work, maintenance of social networks, and preservation of places that allow for autonomous and experimental activities (gardens, allotments, entire farms).

Presentation of the food stories of urban and rural women requires an ongoing effort to reach the invisible, silent, unwritten and unspoken narratives. Domesticated ways of producing, distributing, and consuming food function as alternatives to the scarcity economy of state socialism, as well as to contemporary anonymous mass production. Being resourceful in the kitchen or garden also means taking responsibility for the material reality of our surroundings. Feminist scholars draw attention to the special role of women in the co-creation of the commons, both material and immaterial, through reproductive work aimed at maintenance, sustenance and preservation. Academic works address also specific nature of women’s involvement in communal practices and reaching long-term goals.<sup>61</sup> With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, women reported that a desire to build a community and help its members was one of the main motivations for them to get involved in a network of voluntary self-help groups created in 2020 in Poland. According to the founder of the group called “the invisible hand”, the initiative attracted more than 90,000 members in its first month of operation, of which up to 80% were women. The participants provided both food (groceries, home-made dinners) and other forms of support to those in need.<sup>62</sup> Their “invisible hand” reached beyond the circle of family and friends.

Inter-gender relations, in which different actors participate, in different roles and scopes, in shaping food practices, would be an issue worth further analysis in the

<sup>60</sup> J. Wasiewicz, *Gdzie jest miejsce chłopów w pamięci zbiorowej współczesnych Polaków? Przypatrując się pewnej starej fotografii*, “Kultura Współczesna. Teoria. Interpretacje. Praktyka” 2014, vol. 2 (82), p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> See: b. hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Routledge, New York 2015, pp. 104–105; S. Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, Oakland, CA 2019; Z. Łapniewska, *Analiza instytucjonalna wspólnot z perspektywy społeczno-kulturowej tożsamości płci*, “Ekonomia Społeczna” 2016, no. 1, pp. 66–68.

<sup>62</sup> Z. Łapniewska, *Solidarity and Mutual Aid: Women Organizing the “Visible Hand” Urban Commons*, “Gender, Work & Organization” 2022, vol. 29 (3), pp. 8, 10–11, 18.



context of the reproduction of the commons. It has already been touched upon by, for example, Stańczak-Wiślicz who writes about the greater involvement of men in household management during the crisis years of the 1980s and them taking up additional jobs, such as repair services.<sup>63</sup> Krzyworzeka's research indicates that the jobs performed by men, e.g. bargaining while shopping in the village, repairing farm machinery, and adapting and modifying equipment, were not only part of the economic calculus, but also a testament to the farmers' creativity and their desire to maintain social relationships.<sup>64</sup> Such practices opens multiple avenues of further exploration related to both the relational nature of the gender perspective and the phenomenon of collective resourcefulness, involving friends, neighbors and family circles. Community-based food self-provisioning can be even more socially inclusive – reaching beyond the closest networks and involving direct interactions between food producers and consumers. Contemporary examples of community-based food self-provisioning are particularly noticeable in large cities. Poznań, Cracow, and Warsaw are known for community gardens in which diverse groups cultivate the same plot, share the harvest, and learn about urban farming. Citizens often operate on previously unused or neglected land, but, at other times, they work within and on behalf of vibrant cultural institutions. There are also places like Ołbiński Open Garden, located on the premises of the Family Allotment Gardens in Wrocław. The issue of community gardens' accessibility to people from diverse communities – individuals of different gender, race, age, social class or socioeconomic status – requires further research. It would also be worth looking into grassroots women's collectives, such as Hotbed (in Polish: *Inspekty*), that share their gardening knowledge through workshops, publications, courses or community events.<sup>65</sup> Simultaneously, rural residents' engagement in the collective action gives rise to such initiatives as the Sudeten Community Seed House, initiated by women from Nowa Wieś Wielka.<sup>66</sup> Seed activism, based on education and the preservation of local plant varieties, can be interpreted as a response to the corporate power and loss of biodiversity in agriculture.

Finally, recognizing women's food strategies means taking a critical look at various organizations, initiatives, and ways of ensuring food security. Analyses indicate that this is the field in which rural women are particularly proactive and resourceful, taking responsibility for supporting their families in crisis and emergency situations. They are primarily the ones who apply for benefits, contact assistance centers, take out loans, and fill out the paperwork required by these offices to receive support.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, "Jak związać koniec z końcem"..., op. cit., pp. 147–148.

<sup>64</sup> A. Krzyworzeka, *Rolnicze strategie pracy i przetrwania*..., op. cit., pp. 232, 265–266, 291.

<sup>65</sup> See: *Inspekty*. Pierwszy w Polsce portal o miejskim ogrodnictwie, <https://inspekty.pl/> (accessed: 4.02.2023).

<sup>66</sup> See: *Sudecki Dom Nasion już działa*, Gmina Paszowice, 15.03.2021, [http://www.paszowice.pl/aktualnosc-1284-sudecki\\_dom\\_nasion\\_juz\\_dziala.html](http://www.paszowice.pl/aktualnosc-1284-sudecki_dom_nasion_juz_dziala.html) (accessed: 4.02.2023).

<sup>67</sup> S. Michalska, *Tradycyjne i nowe role kobiet wiejskich*, "Wieś i Rolnictwo" 2013, no. 2 (159), pp. 132–133.

Just as in the turbulent periods of the past, women keep engaging in a number of activities that remain outside the framework of the systemic solutions. When describing “hunter-gatherer” strategies of earning a living in the context of Poland’s post-transformation impoverishment and unemployment, Tomasz Rakowski points out that some of the overgrown arable land became a source of herbs and medicinal plants, which were collected and sold mostly by women, including unemployed and retired individuals.<sup>68</sup> The examples cited, related to both food security and food justice, emphasizes the socio-economic divides that overlap with the gender perspective. A further cross-sectional analysis of the transformations and continuities of food practices is needed – one which will bear in mind that “crisis food strategies” also relate to the phenomenon of feminization of unemployment and feminization of poverty.<sup>69</sup> Searching for new dimensions of food practices may mean exploring the “second social life”,<sup>70</sup> as well as looking at every day repetitive activities – the ordinary life that needs to be reordered every single day.

When discussing women and men’s role in society, feminist scholars also postulate that essentialist and homogenous gender identities should be abandoned and gender should be considered as a complex, heterogeneous cultural construct which is performatively produced and embodied through repetitive activities, combined with particular cultural systems.<sup>71</sup> In turn, the ambiguous and implicit rules of such systems can be identified by describing and critically analyzing women’s diverse, situated experiences.

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<sup>68</sup> T. Rakowski, *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy. Etnografia człowieka zdegradowanego*, Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2009, EPUB, section 2, *Nowe oblicze bezrobotnych wsi*.

<sup>69</sup> See: S. Michalska, *Tradycyjne i nowe role...*, op. cit., pp. 129–132.

<sup>70</sup> T. Rakowski, *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy...*, op. cit., section 5, *Konsekwencje*.

<sup>71</sup> See: J. Butler, *Uwikłani w pleć*, trans. K. Krasuska, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2008.

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