

WOMEN SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING RELATED TO TERRITORIAL DIMENSION: CASES OF LITHUANIA AND POLAND

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Abstract

The article aims to characterize women's subjective well-being (SWB), focusing on the territorial dimension in Lithuania and Poland. The problem is that the gender related SWB evaluations considering the urban and rural perspective is often overlooked or omitted from SWB assessments. European Social Survey (ESS) round 10 (2021) data were used for research. Descriptive statistics and comparison methods revealed that women's SWB is evaluated differently in both countries. However, the assessment of happiness and satisfaction with life increased from a territorial point of view. The research results are important for scientific knowledge and local politicians to understand the SWB of women, especially those living in rural areas, and to provide appropriate measures to achieve higher well-being.

Keywords: *women, subjective well-being, gender, territorial dimension, Lithuania, Poland.*

JEL Codes: *D690, I310, R1, R5.*

Introduction

The issue of population subjective well-being (SWB) has already become one of the most important in modern societies to achieve not only the overall well-being (WB) of societies but also the advanced lives of countries. It is recognised that people's attitude toward the future depends on how residents of separate countries feel about their lives and how happy they are. Various international studies and organisations (WHO, 2016; Eurofound, 2023) emphasize that SWB promotion is the key aim of the EU and has gained prominence in social policy in the last decade. Notably, the SWB of particular social groups becomes an even more important issue, e.g., with a focus on gender. Women's SWB, including the territorial dimension, is still a question that receives little attention in some countries (e.g. Lithuania and Poland). SWB research directed at the gender and territorial aspects is mainly associated with political agendas (Hasan and Tasar, 2016; Eurofound, 2023) but is not always focused on evaluating

the SWB of the local population. Ivanović (2022) noted that the level of WB is grounded in the living place, especially the environment. Even though the social and economic living environment in urban and rural areas has its characteristics, it is still appropriate to analyse both their similarities and differences, including the international context. Even more, higher well-being (WB), including the gender aspect, in any territorial unit contributes to many other important outcomes, such as better health and higher productivity at work. This promotes the understanding that various factors and conditions can differently shape women's SWB (Kazlauskienė et al., 2014; Sielska and Sielska, 2020).

SWB has been extensively analysed in many European countries (Ivanović et al., 2022), but this article focuses on the comparison of women SWB based on territorial dimension. The spatial scope of the study includes two countries, i.e. Lithuania and Poland. Literature studies from selected

countries (Vaznoniene and Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2020) disclosed information limitations about the public's perception of the SWB and its relation to gender and territorial dimension. In addition, the premise for SWB research was that there have been dynamic changes in women's roles in society in recent years, especially in post-communist countries and rural areas. Analysing the rural aspect of women's SWB is crucial not only from a scientific point of view but also from a political point of view. So, enhancing and strengthening the knowledge using a people-centred approach can deepen knowledge about specific social groups, in this case, revealing women's perspectives.

The research problem is: how do women's SWB assessments reflect territorial differences? *The research object* is women's subjective well-being. *The research aim* is to characterise women's subjective well-being from a territorial perspective in Lithuania and Poland. *The research objectives are*: 1) to conceptualize women's SWB from a theoretical aspect; 2) to determine and compare women's SWB in Lithuania and Poland related to territorial dimensions, i.e., urban-rural.

The study results are important for the academic community because they expand knowledge about women's SWB at the local level - this knowledge is inconsistent, and studies are very isolated. In addition, the study complements the research that is sorely lacking in this area and is conducted on a social group that is often considered vulnerable. From a practical point of view, the topic is important for local authorities, who can obtain knowledge about the situation of women's SWB in rural/urban areas, to provide appropriate measures that would contribute to higher WB for women.

Research methodology

Lithuania and Poland, as selected countries for the research, were chosen following such criteria: geographically, countries are neighbours; close historical experience and development - these countries present a close socio-economic situation; comparative analysis of SWB from a gender perspective is rarely provided; both

countries participate in ESS for several rounds, so comparability is enabled by this international social survey.

ESS data analysis in this article used descriptive statistics and comparison methods. The comparison method was used to compare Lithuania with Poland, women with men, and rural and urban areas.

The research findings of this article are based on using ESS data from round 10 (2021) as the latest available for both countries. According to ESS methodology (European..., 2015b), territorial units are classified into a big city, the suburbs or outskirts of a big city, a town or a small city, a country village, and a farm or home in the countryside. As the sample of ESS based on territorial approach is quite detailed, some territorial units were combined: rural areas include a country village and a farm or home in the countryside, whereas urban areas include both a big city and the suburbs or outskirts of a big city (Table 1). Towns or small cities were also analysed. SWB in the ESS questionnaire is measured using two questions, which were also applied in this research: 1) *All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?* 2) *Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?* In the case of the question about satisfaction with life and happiness, answers were analysed on a Likert scale, from 0 to 10, where 0 means: extremely dissatisfied or unhappy and 10 means extremely satisfied or happy. To obtain the best clarity of presentation of the results, the answers were combined as follows: scores 1 and 2 (very dissatisfied/unhappy), 3–4 (rather dissatisfied/unhappy), 6–7 (rather satisfied/happy), and 8–9 (very satisfied/happy). People who rated their satisfaction with life and happiness at 5 scores were considered as people who could not decide how to evaluate their feelings.

As the data taken from ESS round 10 (2021), accordingly important to describe the research sample. The sampling method is described in the ESS sampling methodology (European..., 2023). Important thing is that respondents in ESS are perceived as persons aged 15 and over with no upper age limit (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample of the research based on ESS data from round 10 (2021)

Indicators	Lithuania	%	Poland	%
<i>By gender</i>				
Men	638	38.5	998	48.3
Women	1021	61.5	1067	51.7
Rural women**	236	23.1	381	37.3
Urban women**	279	27.4	296	28.9
Women in town or small city**	505	49.5	345	33.8
<i>By territorial unit</i>				
Urban areas (A big city+Suburbs or outskirts of big city)	477	28.8	571	28.7
Town or small city	772	46.6	678	34.1
Rural areas (Country village+Farm or home in countryside)	407	24.6	740	37.2
<i>General sample</i>				
Total	1659	100	2065	100

*Source: compiled by the authors.

Note: * sample size according to different indicators differs from total sample due to fact that some respondents were missed or not answered; ** women percentage from total women sample (for LT ESS10 1 woman answer was missing, PL ESS10 - 45).

IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0.0.0 and MS Excel programs were used for calculations and visualisation of the data.

Research results and discussion

Analysis of women's subjective well-being from theoretical aspect

The tradition of SWB studies is based on a strong philosophical tradition (since Aristotle) that proposed that eudemonic WB, or flourishing (i.e., living in accordance with your true self, should be seen as a core concept (Quick, 2023). WB research transformed into an issue in economics (Voukelatou et al., 2021), psychology (Diener, 2000), sociology (Veenhoven, 1995), neuroscience, and human needs theory (Shuessler and Fisher, 1985), SWB became a central question in connection with social policy (Tóth, 2024). In recent years, the concept of SWB has also attracted much attention from social scientists (Arrondo et al., 2021), who emphasize its great importance in human life in various spheres of life: social, material, and cultural.

Existing international surveys on SWB explore diverse findings, including the perspective of gender as well. Analysing various WB studies and reports (e.g., European Social Survey, European Values Survey, Scandinavian Well-being Survey, etc.), a transition phase from international to national, regional, or local level studies can be observed. The mentioned

international surveys, as a background, include respondents' socio-demographic and socio-economic profiles, which allow us to compare the tendencies and changes in different countries over time, also they are relevant determinants that can positively or negatively affect human WB (Voukelatou et al., 2021). Gallup (2010) data showed that WB evaluation was measured following daily positive and negative experiences, where differences were mostly seen at the national level. Still, not much attention was given to the local level or differences between genders. WHO (2016) reported that women SWB had consistently worse self-reported health than men, even where levels were high. Also, it was observed that if female employment is low – it affects women's WB; women with low education levels and socio-economic status are more likely to be not so satisfied with their lives as those with high education levels. Also, these women who live in remote and rural areas also face barriers to achieving higher WB. The OECD (2020) reported that differences existed in average levels of SWB across a range of different demographic groups, including gender. On the other hand, more urban populations were experiencing higher SWB compared to rural. Eurofound (2023) revealed that WB differences

for key demographic and socio-economic factors according to gender were diverse, e.g., for Lithuania and Poland comparing women with men, there were some differences, while in other European countries, there was a large or no significant difference. The report revealed that women had significantly lower hedonic WB than men.

Discussing SWB, gender has proved to be a good predictor of SWB (Hasan and Tasar, 2016) in some studies where women tended to achieve higher SWB levels. Often research approaches show differences in SWB between women and men. As stated in the “European Charter for the Equality of Women and Men in Local Life” (Europos..., 2006), equal opportunities for women and men become one of the fundamental values of democracy in all areas of life, especially in living social and economic life. Moreover, it also emphasized that ensuring equality between women and men is important regardless of where a person lives. Most scientific insights regarding women's SWB in Lithuania and Poland show not entirely favourable assessments towards women and especially concerning rural areas. Often found that Lithuanian women in rural areas consider themselves unhappy and not satisfied with their lives; rural residences negatively affect women's SWB; married or partnered women were more satisfied with life than unmarried; the main changes in the lifestyle and life events affect women SWB; women living in rural areas had poorer physical health and better mental health compared to women living in cities (Štreimikienė and Barakauskaitė-Jakubauskienė, 2012; Ruseckienė et al., 2021). SWB of women in Poland often concerns their quality of life and the perception of their health; Polish women are in many respects unfavourable compared to men; increasing social inequalities influence rural women's SWB; decline in the status of women compared to men; rural women poverty makes

their SWB lower (Zelinska et al., 2021; Lopuszanska-Dawid, 2023). However, women's evaluations of their SWB, as seen in scientific literature, have changed over the years and become increasingly positive. Various studies on women's SWB emphasize that both countries are based on different data sources and use different indicators, which may limit conclusions about rural women's SWB. It should be added that previous research on the WB of residents of Poland and Lithuania reveals differences in its various dimensions (Vaznoniene and Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2020), where gender is indicated as an important factor differentiating its level.

Findings on women SWB in Lithuania and Poland according to territorial dimension

In order to present women's SWB from a territorial perspective, a comparative analysis of satisfaction with life and happiness was conducted, as not much was analysed according to territorial units in both countries (Lopuszanska-Dawid, 2023). According to Fig. 1, it is observed that in both countries, women were more satisfied rather than dissatisfied with their life. In Lithuania, women were more satisfied with their lives than in Poland, regardless of the type of territorial units. In general, women in all territorial units in Lithuania in the assessment of satisfaction with life gave mostly 8 and 9 scores, while in Poland a bit lower - 6 and 7 scores. Only a small percentage of respondents indicated to be extremely dissatisfied. There were fewer rural women in Lithuania than in Poland who reported scores of 8–10. It can be assumed that the characteristics of life in different territorial units influenced the different assessments of life satisfaction. Although the countries are neighbours, specific objective and subjective reasons determine such assessments.

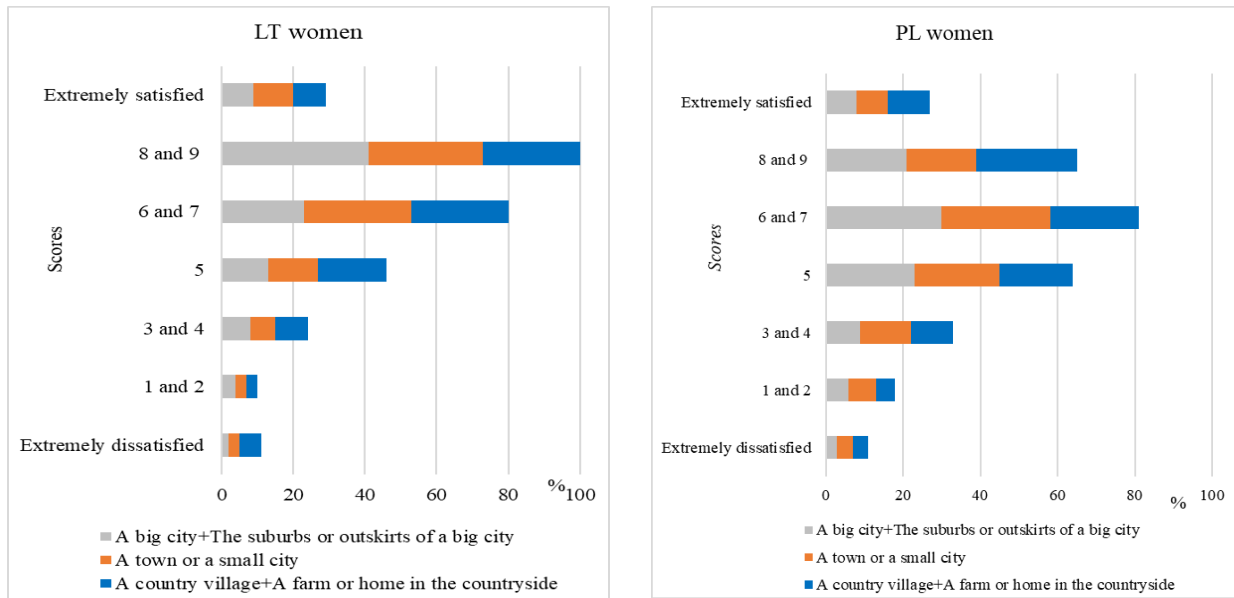


Figure 1. Women's answer to the question “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?” according to the living area, percent (authors' calculations based on ESS round 10)

In the last decade, it was observed that in Lithuania, the level of income has risen, the attitude towards the family has changed, with the possibility of being more active in social economic activities; gender-based career discrimination is decreasing, and leadership is increasing what means their personal freedom (Buelvas-Baldiris et al., 2023). The abortion law has recently been tightened in Poland, which caused women's dissatisfaction, and mass protests and may have had an impact on their sense of satisfaction with life. These

changes lead to the changing living conditions and characteristics of household, country affect the life satisfaction of rural women, their activities, also COVID-19 pandemic, etc. (Jantje et al., 2023).

The literature revealed a gap in comparing rural women's and men's satisfaction with life. Following ESS round 10 data, some insights were explored typical for Poland's and Lithuania's rural areas, comparing both genders' satisfaction with life (Fig. 2).

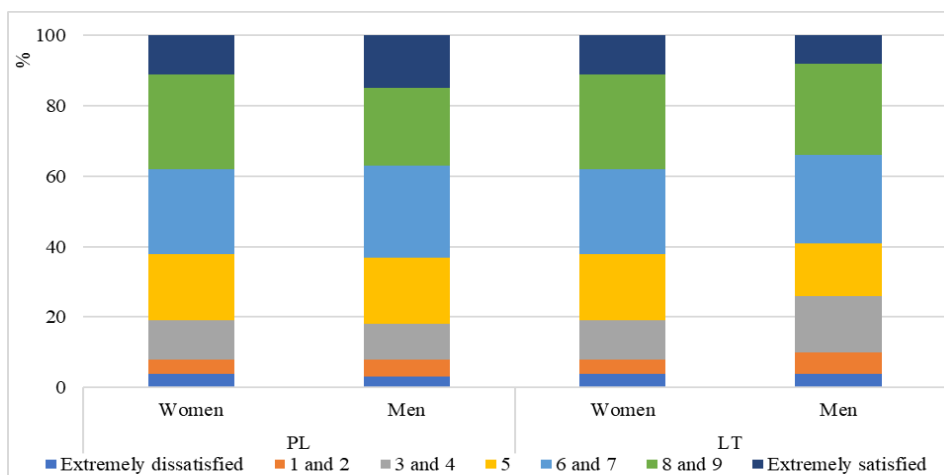


Figure 2. Rural women and men answer to the question “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?” by gender, percent (authors' calculations based on ESS round 10)

ESS round 10 data revealed that comparing Polish rural women with Lithuanian satisfaction with life, those who were more dissatisfied with their life accounted for 19 percent, but comparing women with men. There were fewer dissatisfied women than men in both countries, though there were more dissatisfied Lithuanian men compared to Polish men. Moreover, those who indicated rather high scores or positioned themselves as satisfied with life - accounted for 62 or more percent in both countries. Only rural men in Lithuania indicated lower

satisfaction with life – 60 percent of men were satisfied with their lives. The data also shows that men living in rural areas in Poland were the most extremely satisfied compared to both women and rural men in Lithuania.

Analysing how women perceive their happiness (Fig. 3), the results seemed to be close to the evaluation of satisfaction with life, which was also confirmed by other authors (Štreimikienė and Barakauskaitė-Jakubauskienė, 2012).

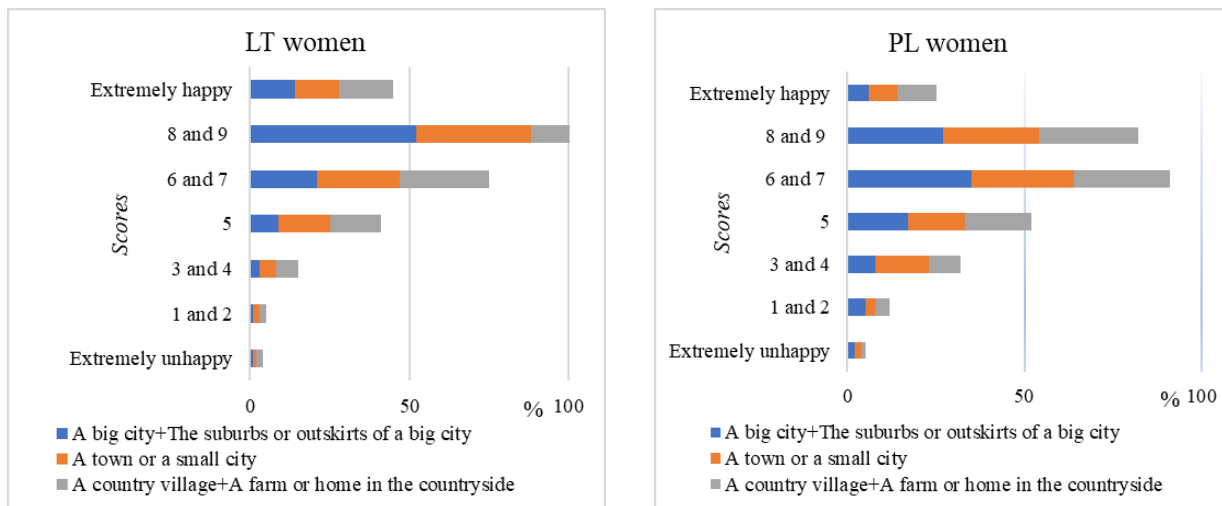


Figure 3. Women’s answer to the question “Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?” according to the living area, percent (authors' calculations based on ESS round 10)

In both countries, regardless of where women lived, their evaluation of happiness was more positive than negative. It was observed that there were more happy rural women in Lithuania compared to Poland. Lithuanian women scored their happiness higher than Polish women in other territorial units. Both in Lithuania and Poland, regardless of where the women lived, the percentage of unhappy women was lower than 20 percent. This may be due to women's different socio-economic roles and positions in rural and

urban communities, which may also be culturally different in the countries studied. As recently explored by Kačerauskas and Valantinaitė (2023), women in Lithuania need several happiness-determining factors at the same time to feel happy. Good practice shows that various activities in rural Lithuania communities result from women's socio-economic activities because they give meaning to their lives.

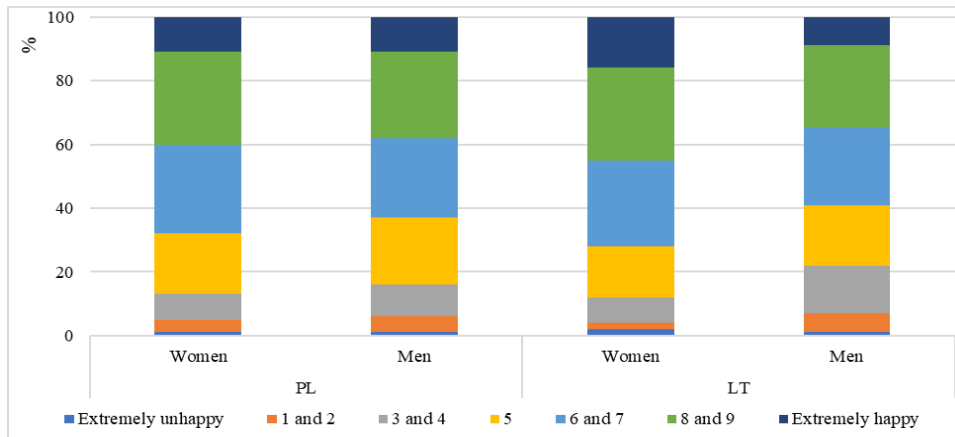


Figure 4. Rural women and men answer to the question “Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?” by gender, percent (authors' calculations based on ESS round 10)

A comparison of happiness perception by gender in rural areas of both countries is seen in Fig. 4. Data indicates that in Poland, there were more unhappy rural men than women. Lithuanian case revealed the same situation – more rural men evaluated their happiness with low scores. More rural women than men indicated they were extremely happy or happy in both countries. This implies that happiness concerning gender aspect differs in both countries – men rated their happiness with lower scores than rural women. This is often associated with the fact that men must take on more responsibilities to support the family and take care of the WB of others, which is not possible and bearable for everyone due to various life circumstances.

Conclusions

Literature studies have explored that there is a perceived lack of new knowledge about women's SWB in general, also comparing them with men and including urban-rural aspects. Despite the shortage of rural women's SWB research, the positive is that the gender aspect is increasingly being included in assessing the SWB.

Results disclosed that gender-related SWB differentiates comparing Lithuania with Poland. Respondents' opinions about satisfaction with life showed that men and women in both countries were more satisfied with their lives than dissatisfied. Still, these

ratings were lower than subjective happiness ratings in both countries. Results indicate that rural men in Poland were the most extremely satisfied compared both to women, and rural men in Lithuania. Comparing women with men's SWB is important, and it allows us to see not only the differences between genders but also their achievements and progress in life. The performed comparative analysis showed there were fewer rural women in Lithuania than in Poland who reported they were less satisfied with their lives.

In both studied countries, regardless of where women lived, their evaluation of happiness was more positive than negative. It was identified that more rural women were happy in Lithuania compared to Poland. Moreover, both in Lithuania and Poland, regardless of where the women lived, the percentage of unhappy women was lower than happy. It can be concluded that women's general happiness, especially for rural women in both countries, is determined by different factors.

The above-given insights emphasize that SWB should be systematically monitored not only in the entire society but also in certain groups of the population, e.g., women. The given comparison of neighbouring countries showed that the country's characteristics influence the SWB evaluations, and it also requires policy-related decisions directed at rural women's position.

Considering the limitations of this research and future research, it should be noted that this study considered more general attitudes to women's SWB, and further analysis of various socio-economic factors of gender-

related SWB could be included. That could cover social relations, socio-economic status, family, employment, and a deeper analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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