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SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN LITHUANIA'S AND POLAND RURAL AREAS

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The article aims to identify the social and economic factors and their relationship with SWB from a gender perspective in Lithuania and Poland. The problem is that the gender aspect in SWB assessments in the countries studied is often omitted and studies are underrepresented. Furthermore, there is little and inconsistent research on women's SWB in rural areas, resulting in a serious lack of knowledge on this topic. It should be noted that previous studies on the well-being of residents of Poland and Lithuania reveal differences in various dimensions, where gender is identified as an important factor. European Social Survey (ESS) round 10 (2021) data were used to assess women's level of life satisfaction and happiness. There were used such methods as descriptive statistics, correlation and multiple linear regression. Multiple linear regression showed that women's age and health, despite the territorial area, remain the most important factors of women's SWB, satisfaction with life, and happiness both in Lithuania and Poland depend little on the selected socio-economic variables, so it is appropriate to consider other factors in future research.

Keywords: *subjective well-being, gender, women, socio-economic factors, rural areas, Lithuania, Poland.*

INTRODUCTION

The question of subjective well-being (SWB) of societies is a key issue from the point of view of the functioning of modern societies, aiming at achieving general well-being (WB). SWB as a multidisciplinary concept is studied from different perspectives, using knowledge from many fields, including economics and sociology. It is recognized that people's attitudes towards the future depend on how people in individual countries perceive their lives and how happy they are. It should be noted that various international organizations emphasize (WHO, 2016; Eurofound, 2023) that the promotion of SWB is a key objective of the European Union, indicated in social policy and gaining importance in recent years. The article focuses on the study of SWB from a gender perspective and examines the assessment of SWB of the local population. The existing studies related to SWB focused on gender and territorial aspects are mainly related to political agendas (Cevik and Tasar, 2016; Eurofound, 2023). Data on SWB, if applied from a gender perspective, can be an important complement to other indicators already used to monitor SWB and compare countries' performance (European ..., 2015b). Understanding SWB from the perspective of women is particularly important because in recent years there have been dynamic changes in the roles of women in society, including in the labour market, which is especially visible in post-communist countries and rural areas.

SWB has been widely analyzed in many European countries (Ivanović et al., 2022), but this article focuses on the comparison of gender-related SWB in Poland and Lithuania. This issue has not been widely analyzed in the selected countries either individually or in a comparative aspect. In addition, the article identifies socio-economic factors determining SWB, which is also a research gap that this study tries to fill (Degutis and Urbonavičius, 2013; Telešienė, 2015). The emphasis in the study is on SWB from a gender perspective in two countries, Lithuania (LT) and Poland (PL), which results from the following premises: geographically, the countries are neighbors, have a close historical experience and development path, and present a close socio-economic situation. Moreover, the review of SWB studies shows that the analyzed subject of the article is not widely developed in Lithuania and Poland, especially considering the local aspect. In both countries, studies are based on different data sources and use different indicators, which may limit the conclusions regarding well-being (Rėklaitienė et al., 2009). The article is based on ESS data, in which both countries participate, which allows for a detailed comparison of women's SWB. Previous studies on the WB of people from Poland and Lithuania reveal differences based on various dimensions (Vaznoniene and Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2020), pointing that gender is perceived as an important factor differentiating its level.

The study made a scientific assumption that the SWB of rural women is related to certain socioeconomic factors. Accordingly, the research problem is - what are the socio-economic factors associated with SWB from the gender

perspective. The research object is socio-economic factors of SWB from a gender perspective. The research aim is to identify the social and economic factors and their relationship with SWB from a gender perspective in Lithuania and Poland.

Socioeconomic factors related to subjective well-being - a literature review

Analysing the literature, it can be concluded that individual authors emphasize the importance of gender as one of the factors determining SWB and, at the same time, refer to the territorial context. Collecting robust data on SWB, e.g. how people evaluate and experience their lives, is essential to understand which features or factors are most likely to contribute to higher WB (European..., 2015a, b) (Table 1).

Tab. 1. Selected socio-economic factors of SWB from gender perspective (made by authors)

Authors	Gender related SWB factors									
	Age	Urban	Rural	Unemployment	Family status	Education	Socializing	Social trust	Marital status	Health
Ivanović et al. (2022)	+	+	+	+			+	+		+
Becchetti, Conzo (2022)	+			+		+	+		+	+
Milovanska-Farrington, Farrington (2022)					+					+
Kim et al. (2021)	+			+		+		+	+	+
Joshanloo, Jovanović (2020)	+			+		+			+	
Rajendran et al. (2020)		+	+				+		+	+
Caiquan et al. (2019)		+	+				+	+		
Cevik and Tasar (2016)				+		+				
Rėklaitienė et al. (2009)	+	+	+		+	+				+

The table provided some main, but not complete existing list of socio-economic factors of SWB. It is understood that gender-related SWB is highly dependent on internal and external factors that directly or indirectly affect a person's WB, and in each individual case, life satisfaction and happiness are determined by subjective circumstances. It is noteworthy that the urban-rural aspect, according to some scholars, is included in the socio-economic factors influencing women's SWB (Bai et al., 2019; Ivanović et al., 2022). The other research also considers other factors, e.g. including income, household size (Becchetti and Conzo, 2022; Milovanska-Farrington and Farrington, 2022) and religion (Joshanloo, Jovanović 2020; Kim et al., 2021), which may confirm the importance of the territorial context when considering SWB factors.

When discussing about SWB, gender has been found to be a good predictor of SWB (Cevik and Tasar, 2016; Ivanović et al., 2022) in some studies where women tend to achieve higher levels of SWB. Similarly, was pointed by Bai et al. (2019) that gender is a good determinant of SWB, and women usually have higher SWB level. At the same time, researchers point to gender effects on changes in SWB (Arrondo et al., 2021), which may suggest an increase in women's expectations about their own lives in recent times. On the other hand, Rajendran et al. (2020) emphasized the role of social and spatial parameters in determining people's health and WB in relation to spatial aspects. It is essential to understand how the spatial aspect (urban/rural environment) influences health and WB for achieving national and global health goals. Researchers point to clear, bidirectional relationships between SWB and health perception (Leite et al., 2019; Delhey et al., 2023). However, SWB is a multidimensional concept, which means that each dimension, especially the territorial one, may have a different impact on health assessment (Leite et al., 2019). In turn, demographic factors influence the perception of health, and age is one of the most important (Leite et al., 2019). This allows us to realize that knowing the SWB situation at the local level can expand not only the knowledge but also identify the importance of the SWB factors of residents and thus strive for their higher WB.

According to Ivanović et al. (2022), SWB in rural and urban areas of Central European (CE) countries results disclosed that CE countries have relatively high and improving Subjective Well-being Index (SWI) scores, but stable relational position over the ten years (ESS data in 2008 and 2018). Reflecting the territorial dimension, in the rural-urban subsamples, all countries scored higher on the SWI in urban areas in 2008, with significant positive changes in the rural areas of more affluent EU countries by 2018. Also, almost all countries differed significantly from each other in both years across both urban and rural subsamples. Exploring urban-rural differential, in one's SWB tended to disappear with economic development (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt, 1995; Ivanović et al., 2022). Shucksmith et al. (2009) noted that the more developed countries in the European Union (West and North) show little evidence of significant urban-rural differences in SWB. But Čaplikas (2006) revealed that significant differences exist even between rural areas themselves, based on their proximity to urban (e.g. cities) and more developed centres.

Research quite often show differences in SWB between women and men. As noted in the "European Charter for the Equality of Women and Men in Local Life" (Europos..., 2006), equal opportunities for both gender (women and men) became one of the fundamental values of democracy in all spheres of life, especially in social and economic life. Moreover, it also recognizes that ensuring equality between women and men is important in spite of where a person lives - at the local and regional level, including rural communities.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data. The study concerns two neighbouring countries – Lithuania and Poland that have experienced a similar economic development path from a centrally planned economy to a market economy and joined the EU together in 2004.

The research data are based on using ESS data from round 4 (2008) and 10 (2021), which is known as one of the most qualitative and methodologically sound surveys in Europe.

In the comparative analyses of the urban-rural context, territorial units were used, in accordance with the ESS methodology (European..., 2015). To obtain more general assessments of urban and rural respondents, some territorial units were combined: rural areas include a country village and a farm or home in the countryside, while urban areas include both a big city and the suburbs or outskirts of a big city. Towns or small cities were also analysed.

Seeking to answer the research question of this article, such ESS questions (these questions are a part of the ESS questionnaire) were taken into account:

1) All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays? Please answer using this card, where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely satisfied.

2) Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are? 0 means extremely unhappy and 10 means extremely happy.

Answers based on the questions about satisfaction with life and happiness, were analysed on a Likert scale, from 0 to 10 (0 means extremely dissatisfied or unhappy and 10 means extremely satisfied or happy). In order to reduce data fragmentation, the scores 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). Respondents' answers for satisfaction with life and happiness rated at 5 scores were accepted as these who could not decide how to evaluate their feelings. The study analysed women's happiness, and satisfaction with life also including subjective health, which was measured (following ESS methodology) on a scale where 1 means very good, 2 - good, 3 - fair, 4 - bad, 5 - very bad.

Sample. The sampling method is described in the ESS sampling methodology where respondents are perceived as persons aged 15 and over with no upper age limit. The research focuses on ESS data from round 10 (2021), where for Lithuania the number of female respondents n=1021 (61,5% of the total sample) and for Poland n=1067 (51,7% of the total sample) (European..., 2023).

Methods. ESS data analysis was based on descriptive statistics and comparison methods, also correlation and multiple linear regression. The selected variables for correlation analysis were selected following analysed literature – whether to see if they fit to Lithuania and Poland cases: satisfaction with life, happiness, subjective general health status; relationship with the husband/wife/partner with whom he currently lives; highest level of education; age; territorial unit (place of residence); total net household income (from all sources). When performing multiple linear regression for Lithuania and Poland, two dependent variables were used separately: women's satisfaction with life and women's happiness, and such independent variables were used as subjective general health, age, and total net household income (others appeared not statistically significant). Two models were used for both countries, separately for the life satisfaction variable and the happiness variable. IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0.0.0 and MS Excel programs were used for calculations and visualisation of the data.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Changes of women subjective well-being in Lithuania and Poland

Firstly, the level of life satisfaction and happiness in the surveyed countries was analysed, considering changes over time and urban-rural context. Comparison of the mean of women satisfaction with life and happiness of both countries' evaluations is presented in Table 2.

Tab. 2. Mean of women satisfaction with life and happiness in Poland and Lithuania by rounds and territorial units (made by authors)*

Indicator	POLAND				LITHUANIA			
	ESS4 (2008)		ESS10 (2021)		ESS4 (2008)		ESS10 (2021)	
	How satisfied with life as a whole	How happy are you	How satisfied with life as a whole	How happy are you	How satisfied with life as a whole	How happy are you	How satisfied with life as a whole	How happy are you
<i>Total women</i>								
	6,87	7,15	6,23	6,51	5,02	6,25	6,67	7,12
Mean	<i>Rural women</i>							
	6,81	7,09	6,38	6,53	5,28	6,48	6,30	6,95
	<i>Urban women</i>							
	6,88	7,21	6,26	6,53	4,84	6,12	6,90	7,58
	<i>Women in town or small city</i>							
	6,94	7,17	6,05	6,45	5,00	6,21	6,71	7,18

*Note: included only respondents who answered to the analysed questions

Analysing the changes of mean, it is obvious, that in Poland comparing ESS round 10 data with round 4 - both indicators decreased regardless of the territorial units. Obvious decrease in the mean is seen in the evaluation of happiness in Poland. Polish rural women mean of satisfaction with life and happiness was the lowest in 2008, but the biggest for satisfaction with life in 2021. The opposite situation can be seen in the case of Lithuanian women, where mean of women satisfaction with life and happiness significantly increased comparing ESS round 10 data with round 4 in all territorial units. The mean of rural women satisfaction with life and happiness was the biggest in 2008, but became the lowest in

2021. Situation of both countries reveal that evaluations of women satisfaction with life and happiness potentially were affected by different factors concerning territorial units.

Statistical analysis of socio-economic factors of subjective well-being based on gender aspect

Reflecting on the literature review and research findings, some key insights about gender-related SWB were identified. Age, as a socio-demographic factor, is one of the most significant factors in a woman's life, that determines satisfaction with life (Rėklaitienė et al., 2008; Wąsowicz-Kiryló & Baran, 2013; Voukelatou et al., 2021). In the life cycle including the biological processes, satisfaction with life in different age stages is explored differently, e.g. young are more satisfied, have no bad life experiences yet, good health, and on the contrary, the oldest women face health issues, losing husbands, there is a transition from the labour market to retire age. According to Jivraj et al. (2014), a positive relationship between SWB and age reflects various transformations of socio-economic statuses and roles and belongs to various social groups (Fig. 1).

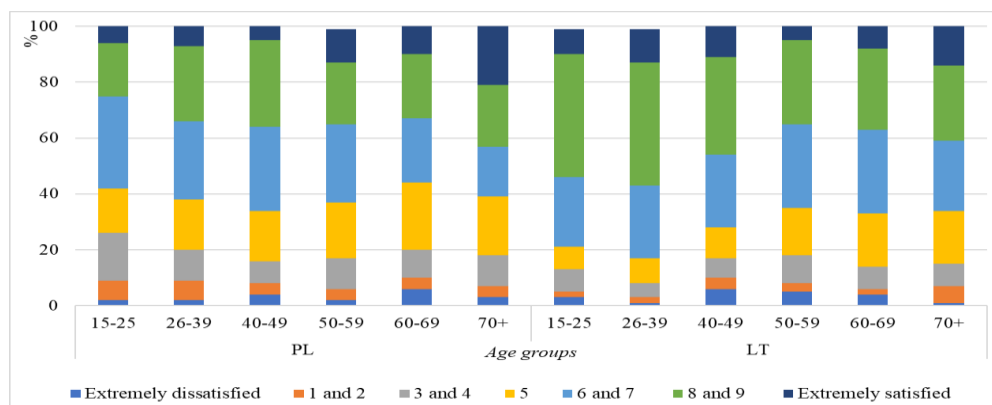


Figure 1. Women's answer to the question “How satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?” according to age groups in Poland and Lithuania, percent (ESS round 10 data)

Comparing Poland with Lithuania, the evaluations of women's satisfaction with life according to age groups differ. It was found that 26 percent 15-25 years Polish respondents stated that they are the most dissatisfied of all groups with their current lives, while the least dissatisfied (or the most satisfied, as even 66 percent agreed) with their lives were 40-49 years old women. It can be assumed that in this group, women who have a family, have already raised children, are working, and have more opportunities for self-realization than, e.g., 26-39 years-old age respondents. Looking at older age groups from 50 years old, it can be noted that women of working age (50-59 years old) are mostly (62 percent) satisfied with their lives; older women aged 60–69 were already less satisfied with life. This can be attributed to the fact that at this age most women retire, their status changes, and social ties and health weaken.

Figure 2 shows who is happy or not happy according to age groups in Poland and Lithuania. It turned out that Polish respondents aged 15–25 were the unhappiest.

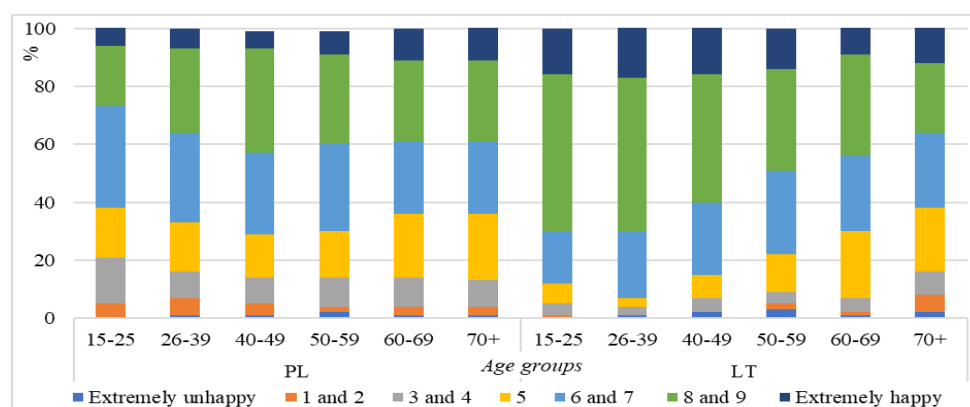


Figure 2. Women's answers to the question “How happy would you say you are” according to age groups in Poland and Lithuania, percent (ESS round 10 data)

The Polish representatives of the 70+ group stated that they were the least unhappy (13 percent). As previous data by age shows more than 62 percent of women indicated that they were happy in general, the happiest were 40-49-year-old women. It is worth noting that the variations in the evaluation of happiness according to age groups make it clear that each group has its factors that determine the evaluation of happiness, so it is necessary to go deeper into them separately. Common to all age groups of women in Lithuania was that only a small number of respondents indicated that they were unhappy. Most women in all age groups rated their happiness as good or very good (8–9). With older age, more women said that they doubted or were undecided whether they were happy, so the decline of happy women with older age is especially noticeable.

Health, as one of the most important factors of SWB, also overshadows the evaluations of happiness and satisfaction with life (Leite et al., 2019). The evaluations related to gender and *subjective general health* disclosed that poor health was characteristic of only a very small proportion of rural women in Poland (Fig. 3).

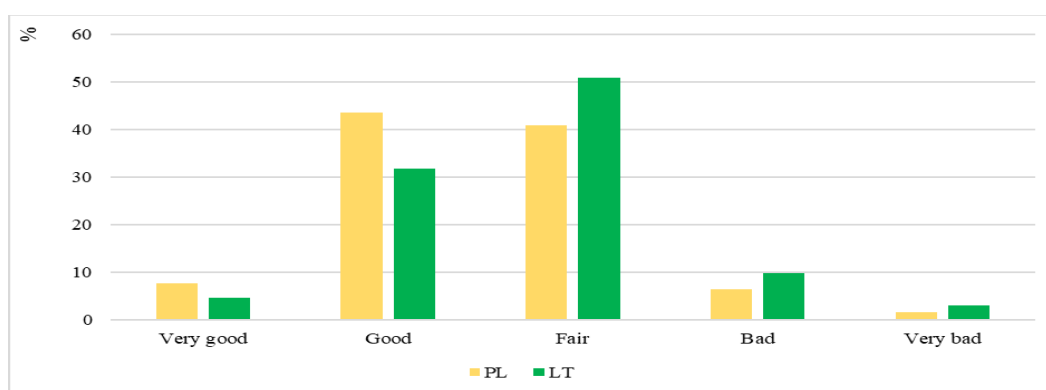


Fig. 3. Rural women opinion about their subjective health, percent (ESS 10 data)

In the case of Lithuania, compared with Poland, there were significantly fewer rural women who noted that their health was very good or good. Moreover, half of Lithuanian rural women perceived their subjective health as fair. As was found by Rėklaitienė et al. (2009) and later Kaliatkaitė and Bulotaitė (2014), specifically rural residence in Lithuania negatively affected both women's health and SWB, which mostly was related to difficulties in accessing timely and appropriate medical services. Explaining the subjective general health impact on SWB, it should be noted that 2021 was the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when the health of the population became very important and at the same time seriously threatened (Dymecka et al., 2021; Costarelli and Michou, 2023). It was determined that more than 50 percent of Polish rural women and 36 percent of Lithuanian rural women evaluated their health as very good or good.

To determine the relationship between women's SWB and individual socio-economic factors, the Spearman's correlation coefficient was used. The results for Lithuania and Poland are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Satisfaction with life correlation with socio-economic factors (made by authors)

Indicators		How satisfied with life as a whole	Subjective general health	Relationship with husband/wife/partner currently living with	Highest level of education	Age	Territorial unit	Total net household income
POLAND								
<i>How satisfied with life as a whole</i>	Spearman's rho	1	-.337**	-.077	.079*	.018	.045	.124**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	.058	.012	.570	.156	<.001
	N	1053	1046	606	1018	1004	1012	772
	LITHUANIA							
<i>How satisfied with life as a whole</i>	Spearman's rho	1	-.293**	-.135**	.152**	.110**	-.091**	.255**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	.003	<.001	<.001	.004	<.001
	N	992	990	484	987	992	991	849

In the analysis of life satisfaction of women in Lithuania and selected socio-economic variables, a weak but statistically significant correlation was found ($p < 0.001$; correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)). There is a relationship between Lithuanian women's life satisfaction and their subjective general health, education, age, and total net household income (Table 3). In the case of Poland, however, a relationship was found between women's life satisfaction and subjective general health as well as household income. It is appropriate to note that the correlation shows that neither in Lithuania nor in Poland in the territorial unit (urban-rural living) had a statistically significant relationship with women's satisfaction with their current lives.

In turn, when examining the relationship between happiness of women in Lithuania (Table 4) and selected variables, a significant, although not very strong statistical relationship was revealed between happiness and all the variables examined, except for the relationship with the person women live with and their education ($p < 0.001$; correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)).

It turned out that in Lithuania there is a correlation between women's happiness and the following variables: general subjective health, age, territorial unit, and household income. In the case of Poland, a statistically significant correlation was found between women's happiness and subjective general health, education, and total net household income. It is worth pointing out that in Lithuania the territorial unit (urban-rural living) had a statistically significant, but very weak relationship with women's happiness. So potentially analysing other factors or specifics of territorial units it would be possible to provide a more in-depth explanation of women's SWB regarding urban and rural areas.

Table 4. Happiness correlation with socio-economic factors (made by authors)

	Indicators	How happy are you	Subjective general health	Relationship with husband/wife/partner currently living with	Highest level of education	Age	Territorial unit	Total net household income
<i>How happy are you</i>	POLAND							
	Spearman's rho	1	-.425**	-.012	.117**	.010	.034	.152**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	.763	<.001	.742	.279	<.001
	N	1055	1053	609	1023	1007	1016	773
	LITHUANIA							
	Spearman's rho	1	-.339**	-.074	.103**	-.244**	-.107**	.267**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	.099	.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	1014	1012	492	1008	1014	1013	869

To determine the relationship between selected socio-economic factors and women's SWB in Lithuania and Poland, multiple linear regression was used. Models were prepared for both countries, separately for the life satisfaction variable and the happiness variable. The multiple regression results are presented in Table 5, where 3 main predictors were included: subjective general health, age, and household's total net income. In the case of models describing the SWB of women in the countries studied, a low R^2 value was found, which results from the use of microdata in the study. Attention should be paid to the significant relationships between variables. In the case of the model describing the relationship between Polish women's life satisfaction (Model 1) and subjective general health status, age, and total net household income, the multiple linear regression model had a low R^2 (less than 0.25). However, it should be noted that for the listed independent variables $p=0.000$ ($p<0.001$), which shows that the relationship between the variables, although small, is statistically significant.

Tab. 5. Multiple regression coefficients

Predictors	Beta	t	p	R	R ²	Adj.R ²
<i>Model 1 for Polish women's satisfaction with life (dependent variable)</i>						
Subjective general health	-.352	-14.279	.000			
Age	.207	8.269	.000			
Household's total net income, all sources	.147	5.929	.000			
Model				.395	.156	.155
<i>Model 2 for Lithuanian women's satisfaction with life (dependent variable)</i>						
Subjective general health	-.294	-7.467	<.001			
Age	.160	3.955	<.001			
Household's total net income, all sources	.205	5.438	<.001			
Model				.351	.123	.120
<i>Model 3 for Polish women's happiness (dependent variable)</i>						
Subjective general health	-.444	-18.738	.000			
Age	.213	8.867	.000			
Household's total net income, all sources	.138	5.792	.000			
Model				.472	.222	.221
<i>Model 4 for Lithuanian women's happiness (dependent variable)</i>						
Subjective general health	-.303	-7.926	<.001			
Age	.001	.015	.988			
Household's total net income, all sources	.156	4.284	<.001			
Model				.395	.156	.153

When analyzing the relationships between happiness of Polish women and subjective general health, age, and total net household income (Model 3), a better model fit was found. A regression model can be said to be statistically significant because there is at least one independent variable that is required in the model. To determine which of the variables included in the model contributed to the prediction of the dependent variable, each of the independent variables must be evaluated.

Based on the Model 2 showing the relationships between life satisfaction among Lithuanian women and the studied socio-economic variables, it can be stated that there is an existing relationship between all the studied variables, i.e. health, age, and income. In turn, the model testing the relationship between the happiness of Lithuanian women and independent variables (Model 4) reveals that subjective general health and total net household income are related to happiness ($p<0.001$). However, it turned out that, age groups did not affect the level of happiness among Lithuanian women, because $p>0.988$.

Acknowledging the inadequacy of the models, there could be offered alternative for the future research. Accordingly, specific additional variables could also be included for future research such as social capital, religiosity, values, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the territorial (urban-rural) aspect, according to some scholars, is included in the socio-economic factors influencing women's SWB, scientific research shows that the rural aspect in particular is often not an important area of research. This means that the SWB of rural residents, including the gender perspective, remains little known.

It can be concluded that subjective general health in both countries, as well as age in Lithuania, were important socio-economic factors for women's life satisfaction. It was also revealed that in both countries' household income was significantly related to women's life satisfaction, which has been also indicated in other studies. Women's age and subjective general health, despite the territorial area, remain the most important factors of women's SWB. Based on the results of the study, it is clear that during the period under study, the Covid-19 pandemic also played as an important factor in SWB evaluations, especially for rural women. Restricted movement between municipalities, reduced access to health services, and restrictions on social contact have affected the health and overall well-being of rural women.

It was explored that in Lithuania there is a correlation between women's happiness and the following variables: general subjective health, age, territorial unit, and household income. In the case of Poland, a statistically significant correlation was found between women's happiness and subjective general health, education, and total net household income. The weak correlations between the selected socioeconomic factors suggest that satisfaction with life and happiness are potentially influenced by other factors that depend on the experiences and feelings of individual respondents, etc.

Results from multiple linear regression showed that not in all cases the models were suitable for further analysis because low R^2 value was found, though these models showed statistically significant relationship between the selected variables. So, it is appropriate to consider other factors in future research.

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