
The Role of Leadership in Building Social Capital Through Rural Housewives Circles: Integrating Managerial, Psychological, and Empirical Perspectives

Submitted 03/05/25, 1st revision 20/05/25, 2nd revision 11/06/25, accepted 30/06/25

Marcin Janowski¹

Abstract:

Purpose: This article examines the multifaceted role of leadership in fostering social capital within Poland's Kola Gospodyń Wiejskich (Rural Housewives' Circles — KGW). Combining theoretical perspectives from management science, social psychology, and rural sociology with empirical evidence drawn from the IDEE przez wieś project (2023–2025) and national studies by the author, the paper develops a comprehensive conceptual and practical account of how local female leaders stimulate trust networks, civic engagement, and local innovation. In addition to articulating a refined theoretical model (the Leadership–Social Capital Cycle), the study presents detailed methodological reflection, comparative analysis across European contexts, and a set of twelve actionable recommendations for policy-makers, NGOs, and academic educators. The extended empirical analysis integrates qualitative narratives (interviews, focus groups), quantitative indicators (participation rates, partnership counts), and network observations, showing that leadership efficacy depends on a combination of emotional intelligence, managerial competence, and institutional brokerage. The conclusion stresses scalable intervention points, research priorities, and monitoring indicators suited to rural governance evaluation.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study employs a mixed-method approach combining qualitative interviews and participatory observation within selected Kola Gospodyń Wiejskich (Rural Housewives Circles, KGWs) in western Poland. The research framework integrates psychological dimensions of leadership (emotional intelligence, empathy, motivation) with managerial approaches (participatory governance, collaborative decision-making). The analysis was conducted using thematic coding and grounded theory to identify leadership patterns that foster social capital formation.

Findings: The results reveal that effective leadership within KGWs is primarily based on emotional intelligence, trust-building, and inclusive communication rather than hierarchical authority. Female leaders who demonstrate empathy, openness, and authenticity tend to generate stronger internal engagement and broader collaboration within their communities. Three mechanisms emerged as critical in building social capital: Emotional Connectivity, Collaborative Decision-Making and Trust and Reciprocity. Overall, KGWs act as micro-ecosystems of trust and empowerment, where female-led leadership transforms social relationships into tangible forms of local development and community resilience.

Practical Implications: The research provides valuable insights for rural development practitioners and policymakers. Leadership training for members of KGWs should emphasize

¹Ph.D., University of Szczecin, Institute of Management, marcin.janowski@usz.edu.pl;

emotional intelligence, participatory management, and collaborative decision-making. Empowering local female leaders can lead to sustainable community development and enhanced local governance. Additionally, municipalities and rural development agencies should recognize KGWs as key partners in implementing local innovation policies. Creating formal cooperation frameworks between KGWs, schools, and local governments could strengthen social capital and improve civic participation. Finally, incorporating findings into public education and leadership development programs may help replicate successful KGW models across different regions, thus fostering broader rural resilience and social cohesion.

Originality/Value: *This study contributes to the growing literature on leadership and social capital by offering one of the first empirically grounded analyses of gendered leadership within rural Polish organizations. By integrating theories of transformational leadership, participatory governance, and social innovation, it provides a novel analytical framework for understanding community-based leadership. The research also highlights the role of KGWs as micro-laboratories of rural development and civic participation, offering an alternative model of governance rooted in trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. The findings extend existing theories of social capital by showing how informal female leadership can act as a driver of sustainable community transformation, especially in peripheral and underdeveloped regions.*

Keywords: *Leadership, social capital, rural governance, participatory management, social innovation, gendered leadership.*

JEL codes: *M12, Z13, O35, R58, J16.*

Paper type: *Research article.*

Acknowledgement: *This research was co-financed by the Minister of Science under the “Regional Excellence Initiative.*



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

1. Introduction

Rural self-organization is undergoing a renaissance in many parts of Europe. In Poland, KGW — historically focused on rural culture and domestic knowledge — are now central to local development initiatives, diversifying into social entrepreneurship, cultural tourism, education, and small-scale production. The re-legitimation of KGW, supported by policy measures and civil-society programmes, raises theoretical and practical questions about durable community governance mechanisms. Who leads? How do leaders mobilize scarce resources? Which leadership practices lead to long-term benefits for social capital and local quality of life?

This article addresses these questions by combining three perspectives:

1. *Management theory* — exploring how leadership styles from transformational to participative apply in grassroots settings;
2. *Social psychology* — analysing trust, reciprocity, identity, and emotions as drivers of participation;
3. *Empirical evaluation* — presenting extended findings from the *IDEE przez wieś* project and related studies.

The working hypothesis is that leadership in KGW acts as a multi-level leverage:

- (a) it consolidates internal cohesion (bonding capital),
- (b) builds inter-group and external partnerships (bridging/linking capital),
- (c) translates social capital into tangible community benefits (projects, tourism, income generation).

This hypothesis is tested through careful triangulation of qualitative and quantitative secondary data.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Social Capital Revisited: Types, Measurement, and Functions

Social capital remains a contested but useful notion. The classic triad—bonding, bridging, linking—continues to inform empirical work (Woolcock, 2001; Putnam, 2000). However, operationalization matters; for rural organizations, social capital comprises (a) micro-level trust and reciprocity; (b) meso-level norms and networks enabling collaboration; (c) macro-level access to institutions and resources. Measurement challenges include reliance on self-reports, context-specific indicators, and temporal variability.

Recent adaptations (Onyx and Bullen, 2000) combine subjective surveys (trust scales) with objective proxies (number of partnerships, funds obtained, frequency of joint events).

2.2 Leadership Theories: Applicability and Limitations in Grassroots Contexts

While leadership studies in organizations typically draw on transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, and distributed leadership paradigms (Bass, 1999; Greenleaf, 1977; Avolio and Gardner, 2005), rural grassroots leadership exhibits distinct features:

- Relational legitimacy: leaders derive authority from communal recognition rather than formal titles.

- Role hybridization: leaders perform managerial tasks (budgeting, compliance) and relational tasks (care, moral authority).
- Temporal embeddedness: leadership cycles are long-term and intergenerational.

This necessitates extending standard leadership frameworks to include embedded leadership, a concept integrating emotional legitimacy with managerial capability.

2.3 Psychological Mechanisms: Trust, Emotions and Identity

Social-psychological processes are central: *trust* reduces transaction costs and enables voluntary cooperation; *shared identity* motivates participation beyond financial incentives; *emotional contagion* (e.g., enthusiasm conveyed by leaders) increases mobilization. Emotionally intelligent leaders (Goleman, 2018) can thus shape group norms and sustain involvement. Cognitive biases (status quo bias, present bias) explain resistance to change; successful leaders mitigate these via incrementalism and inclusive framing.

2.4 Gendered Leadership and Care-Based Governance

Gender matters not as an essentialist category but as an institutionalized pattern of interaction. Women leaders in KGW often foreground relational governance — care, reciprocity and moral stewardship — that is particularly effective in social capital formation (Eagly and Carli, 2018). This care-based governance yields both strengths (trust, inclusiveness) and constraints (role overload, under-recognition in formal policy channels).

3. Methodology

This section explains sampling, instruments, variables and analysis logic for the secondary-data synthesis.

3.1 Data Sources and Scope

- *IDEE przez wieś* project database (2023–2025): 50 community case studies, 120 semi-structured interviews with leaders, focus groups ($n \approx 30$), implementation reports, monitoring data.
- National surveys and reports (Janowski 2020–2024): aggregated KGW surveys ($n \approx 420$ groups), datasets on partnerships and grants.
- Regional reports: selected case evidence from Warmia-Mazury, Podlaskie and Małopolskie voivodeships (CWOP; local NGOs).
- Comparative literature: academic studies on *Landfrauen* (Germany), *Maaseudun Naiset* (Finland), and related EU policy briefs.

3.2 Analytical Variables

Primary variables included:

- Leadership competencies (experience in project management, training hours, number of leadership roles previously held);
- Social capital indicators (self-reported trust index, number of external partnerships, number of joint events per year);
- Outcome indicators (number of initiatives launched, funds attracted, local economic indicators such as micro-sales or tourism visits).

3.3 Analytical Strategy

- Thematic coding of interview transcripts for recurring leadership practices, conflict management strategies, and narratives of success/failure.
- Descriptive statistics of survey data to compute means, medians and regional differentials.
- Cross-case comparative analysis to identify enabling and constraining conditions (e.g., proximity to urban centers, presence of municipal champions, digital connectivity).

3.4 Validity and Limitations

Triangulation (qualitative + quantitative + documentary) strengthens internal validity. Limitations include reliance on secondary materials, potential response biases in self-reports, and heterogeneity of case contexts (which reduces external generalizability), (Babis, 2021). To mitigate these, author cross-checked reported outcomes with municipal records where available and used conservative interpretation thresholds.

4. Findings

4.1 Quantitative Patterns

Aggregating project and national data yields the following indicative patterns:

- Leadership training prevalence: 58% of KGW reported at least one formal training in project management or fundraising within the past three years; post-intervention (IDEE/Pozytywnie) this rose to 72% for participating groups (Janowski, 2023).
- Partnership counts: median external partnerships per KGW increased from 1.2 (baseline) to 3.0 (post-intervention) in project areas.
- New initiatives: participating KGW launched on average 2.7 new local initiatives (range 0–6) within 12 months after training.
- Trust indices: average self-reported trust in leadership (Likert 1–5) increased from 3.4 to 4.2 post-initiative.

These indicators confirm the positive association between capacity-building interventions and measurable outcomes.

4.2 Qualitative Themes: Illustrative Vignettes

From interviews and focus groups, five recurrent themes appear:

- Narrative framing: leaders who use local narratives (history, craft tradition) to frame projects achieve higher buy-in. One leader from Róžańsko described how reintroducing an old pottery fair increased attendance by 40% year-on-year and shifted local attitudes about heritage as an economic asset.
- Inclusive facilitation: leaders who practiced rotating roles and transparent accounting reported lower levels of intra-group conflict.
- Municipal brokerage: success often depended on a municipal ‘ally’ — a mayor or culture officer willing to provide space, small funding or logistical support.
- Digital amplification: groups that paired traditional events with social-media campaigns saw wider participation and micro-sales beyond the village.
- Burnout risk: role hybridity led to role overload for some leaders, especially when administrative tasks multiplied.

4.3 Network Observations

Social network snapshots (based on project mappings) show core-periphery patterns: a small subset of leaders act as brokers linking multiple local groups and institutions — these individuals are crucial for bridging capital. Centrality measures (degree, betweenness) correlated with higher success in fundraising.

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1 Institutional Contexts

Polish KGW operate amid a mixed institutional landscape: supportive but uneven public funding, variable NGO infrastructure, and new EU programming. In contrast, German associations benefit from stronger state-NGO cooperation; Finnish networks emphasize environmental sustainability and digital services. These contexts influence leadership strategies: when institutional support is weak, leaders focus on internal mobilization; when support exists, leaders pursue scaling and policy advocacy.

5.2 Cultural Mediation

KGW leaders frequently act as cultural mediators, translating external funding opportunities into culturally acceptable activities (e.g., transforming a grant for

“rural entrepreneurship” into a festival emphasizing local recipes and handicrafts). This capacity to culturally reframe external incentives is a crucial leadership skill not often captured by standard managerial curricula.

5.3 Transferability and Constraints

While the KGW model shows transferability in terms of principles (participation, trust, brokerage), contextual constraints (demographics, transport, broadband) limit scalability.

Comparative cases from Slovakia and Latvia show similar patterns: where broadband and transport are poor, leadership relies more on place-based activities; where connectivity is strong, hybrid digital approaches flourish.

6. Discussion

6.1 Revisiting the Leadership–Social Capital Cycle

The extended evidence supports and refines the previously proposed cycle:

- Initial engagement (awareness-raising through local stories/events).
- Trust development (through transparent practices and repeated small wins).
- Capability building (training, co-learning, mentoring).
- Network expansion (partnerships, municipal alliances).
- Institutionalisation (procedural routines, small revenues, formal recognition).
- Sustainability (capacity to reproduce activities and train successors).

This extended cycle emphasises the *iterative* nature of leadership work and the need for feedback loops (monitoring, reflexive learning).

6.2 Management Theory Implications

- Distributed leadership: KGW reveal that effective decision-making is often distributed rather than centralized; leadership development programs must thus target team processes, not just single ‘leaders’.
- Emotional labor as management resource: the affective investments of leaders (care, narrative work, conflict resolution) produce measurable organizational returns. Management curricula should therefore include modules on emotion work and community facilitation.
- Boundary-spanning capability: successful leaders combine inward-facing social cohesion work with outward-facing negotiation and advocacy. Training should build both competencies.

6.3 Policy-Level Synthesis

Policies that assume monetary inputs alone will produce civic outcomes miss the complex social processes that leaders manage. Supporting leadership means long-term investment in trust-building infrastructures: meeting spaces, seed microgrants, mentoring networks and sustained training.

6.4 Conceptual Model of Social Capital Formation

The findings suggest a five-stage process of social capital creation through leadership:

Engagement → Trust → Collaboration → Innovation → Sustainability

Each stage reinforces the next, forming a virtuous cycle. Emotional engagement initiates trust; trust fosters collaboration; collaboration leads to innovation; and sustained innovation produces durable social capital.

7. Recommendations, Operational, Detailed Analysis

Below are twelve concrete recommendations derived from analysis, ordered by actor and timeframe.

For policy-makers (national and regional):

- Create a National KGW Leadership Fund (seed grants for leadership training + micro-projects).
- Integrate KGW into local development planning by granting formal seats on municipal advisory bodies.

For NGOs and funders:

- Design blended leadership curricula (mixing project management, facilitation skills and wellbeing support).
- Support mentorship networks pairing experienced KGW leaders with novices; fund exchange visits.

For KGW and local leaders:

- Adopt simple governance practices: transparent accounting templates, rotating roles, written meetings' minutes.
- Use digital tools strategically: basic e-commerce for local products, event livestreaming, simple CRM for membership.

For Academia:

- Develop applied modules (service-learning) whereby students assist KGW with business plans or evaluations.

Cross-sector:

- Establish regional leadership hubs (one-stop resource centres offering legal, accounting and marketing support).
- Monitor leadership health: implement periodic wellbeing checks and access to counselling.

Evaluation and research:

- Implement longitudinal monitoring for leadership interventions (pre/post + 12/36 months follow-ups).
- Refine indicators: use mixed quantitative/qualitative indices to measure social capital growth (trust scales + partnership network density).
- Scale comparative studies across Central and Eastern Europe to identify transferable design patterns.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the breadth of secondary data, limitations remain: heterogeneous measurement instruments across sources, potential positive-reporting bias from project participants, and limited long-term (beyond 2–3 years) outcome data. Future research should:

- Conduct randomized controlled trials (where ethical) of different leadership training modalities.
- Undertake panel studies tracking KGW and leadership trajectories over a decade.
- Integrate economic measures (micro-income changes) with sociopsychological indicators to quantify the full value of social capital.

9. Conclusion

This extended study confirms that leadership in KGW is a potent engine for social capital formation and rural resilience. Effective leaders combine emotional intelligence, practical management, and institutional brokerage. Interventions that invest in leadership ecosystems — not just one-off workshops — are most likely to yield sustainable benefits.

The „*IDEE przez Wieś*” project exemplifies how participatory design, micro-grants and mentoring create the conditions for leadership to flourish. Scaling such models requires patience, context sensitivity and a recognition that trust — unlike funding — accumulates gradually and is difficult to substitute with top-down measures (Babis, Janowski, and Słupińska, 2023).

Finally, this article contributes methodologically by demonstrating how mixed secondary analyses can yield policy-relevant insights. Practitioners and researchers

should now collaborate to implement the twelve recommendations and to build rigorous, long-term evaluation frameworks.

References:

- Avolio, B.J., Gardner, W.L. 2005. Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315-338.
- Babis, H., Słupińska, K., Janowski, M. 2021. Portret własny Kół Gospodyń Wiejskich. Raport z ogólnopolskiego badania problemów i potrzeb kół gospodyń wiejskich. Polska Fundacja Społeczeństwa Przedsiębiorczego, Szczecin 202, p. 7-10.
- Bass, B.M. 1999. Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(1), 9-32
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. The forms of capital. In: J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, 241-258. Greenwood.
- Coleman, J.S. 1988. Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(Suppl.), 95-120.
- Babis, H., Janowski, M., Słupińska, K. 2023. Diagnoza kapitału społecznego we wsiach Różańsko (gm. Dębno), Chłopowo (gm. Myslibórz), Rychnów (gm. Barlinek). Polska Fundacja Społeczeństwa Przedsiębiorczego, 44-49.
- European Commission. 2023. *Women in Rural Leadership: Policy Perspectives 2023-2027*. Brussels, DG AGRI.
- Goleman, D. 2018. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (Updated ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Greenleaf, R.K. 1977. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Paulist Press.
- IDEE przez wieś Project. 2024. Polska Fundacja Społeczeństwa Przedsiębiorczego, Szczecin. <https://przedsiębiorczosc.org/idee-przez-wies/>.
- Janowski, M. 2023. Study on the Condition, Needs and Problems of Regional Social Economy Entities on the Example of Rural Housewives' Circles in Poland. *European Research Studies Journal*, 70-84.
- Janowski, M., Słupińska, K. 2023. Study on the Level of Social Potential of Rural Areas on the Example of Selected Villages in Poland. *European Research Studies Journal*, 945-953.
- Northouse, P.G. 2022. *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (9th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Onyx, J., Bullen, P. 2000. Measuring social capital in five communities. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 36(1), 23-42.
- Putnam, R.D. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.
- Smith, M. 2020. Resilience and adaptive capacity in rural networks. *Rural Sociology*, 85(1), 34-58.
- Woolcock, M. 2001. The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes. *Canadian Journal of Public Policy*, 2(1), 11-17.