



## SOCIAL ACTIVITY OF STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITIES OF THE THIRD AGE – SELECTED ASPECTS

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**Abstract.** The article focuses on the social activity of women aged 75-89. The paper attempts to define social activity, indicate the importance of such activity in the lives of women in late old age, and focuses on the factors determining involvement in this activity. Research was carried out in the qualitative paradigm with the use of focus interviews. The study group consisted of 10 women aged 75-89 years. The main research problem is contained in the question: What is the social activity of women in late old age?

### AKTYWNOŚĆ SPOŁECZNA SŁUCHACZEK UNIWERSYTETÓW TRZECIEGO WIEKU – WYBRANE ASPEKTY

**Słowa kluczowe:** późna starość, aktywność społeczna, senior, osoba starsza, Uniwersytet Trzeciego Wieku, wdowieństwo, jakość życia

**Streszczenie.** W artykule skoncentrowano się na aktywności społecznej kobiet w wieku 75-89 lat. W tekście podjęto próbę określenia aktywności społecznej, wskazania na znaczenie tejże aktywności w życiu kobiet w okresie późnej starości oraz skoncentrowano się na czynnikach warunkujących zaangażowanie w tę aktywność. Badania przeprowadzono w paradygmacie jakościowym z wykorzystaniem wywiadu fokusowego. Badaną grupę stanowiło 10 kobiet w wieku 75-89 lat. Główny problem badawczy został zawarty w pytaniu: Jak przedstawia się aktywność społeczna kobiet w okresie późnej starości?

## Introduction

Old age as the final stage of one's life is associated with numerous changes in all spheres of human life. Changing social roles, especially in old age, pose challenges of acceptance and adaptation. For many older workers, retirement is associated with a crisis that requires adaptation and adjustment to one's new situation. As indicated in the literature on the subject (Trafiałek, 2015; Szarota, 2004; Seredyńska, 2012; Białożył, 2014) old age may be associated with productivity and activity on many levels, which allow finding oneself in new social roles, allowing one to experience the final stage of life constructively.

Social activity is one of the many types of activity that allows the elderly to participate in social life. This type of activity is associated with numerous positive reinforcements, enabling the implementation of the developmental tasks of old age. By engaging in this type of activity, the elderly have an opportunity to satisfy their higher order needs, maintain and develop interpersonal contacts, pursue their passions and interests.

This paper focuses on the social activity of female students of the Universities of the Third Age. In the conducted research, attention was paid to social activity in the perception of women over 75, as well as the methods of its implementation.

## Social activity of the elderly in Poland

Activation and activity of the elderly can be considered important elements of gerontological prophylaxis (Chabior, 2017, p. 65). According to gerontological literature, the canon of numerous types of activity includes social activity, which enables the elderly to satisfy their needs, pursue self-fulfillment, and the feeling of well-being. "Activity in the social aspect allows a person to better integrate with the environment, manage their free time, perform developmental tasks assigned to old age; it becomes the groundwork for building a new everyday life that becomes reality upon retirement" (Białożył, 2020, p. 19). Activity at various levels is a significant element of the quality of elderly life (Pikuła, 2012), allowing for better adaptation to the final period of one's life. As Agata Chabior (2017b, p. 64) emphasizes, activity in one's old age is part of the active aging concept, focused around achieving a high quality of life in old age, "described mainly in the following categories: happy, satisfying, dignified and valuable, along with recognized priority values in all activities, such as: subjectivity, autonomy,

self-reliance, self-sufficiency, self-determination, responsibility and dignity of the elderly” (Chabior, 2017b, p. 64).

While breaking down activity into types, Grażyna Orzechowska (1999) noticed that this activity is the least common among seniors. As emphasized by Dorota Rynkowska (2016, p. 92) “Active old age is still a new phenomenon in Polish reality. This is because, as a society, we constantly succumb to stereotypes of an elderly person who appears sick, lonely, inactive”.

Agata Chabior emphasizes that ‘social activity’ is a sociological concept that is only just gaining social acceptance. This type of activity is undoubtedly determined by human motivation, culture and tradition (Fabiś, Wawrzyniak, Chabior, 2015, p. 199). Wojciech S. Zgliczyński (2012, p. 132) defines social activity as “all socially normalized activities of individuals performed within specific roles; a feature of social activity is the active state of an individual, manifested in influencing their natural and social environment; such a broadly understood social activity of an individual is expressed in one’s professional work, gaining knowledge, creativity, play, participation in various social groups, and its level is determined by internal and external factors of a psychological, biological and social nature”. According to Małgorzata and Jerzy Halicki, this type of activity manifests itself in “active involvement in public life and social activity at the local, regional or national level. This activity may be formalized (e.g. joining organizations and associations) or spontaneous” (Halicka, Halicki, 2002, p. 190). Grażyna Orzechowska emphasizes that social activity among seniors can be implemented both in everyday life and in an organized manner, e.g. at universities of the third age (2006, pp. 273-279). Literature analysis shows that activity can take on three different types, such as:

- formal activity: carried out through actions for the benefit of others in various associations, foundations, organizations, activities for the local environment, volunteering;
- informal activity carried out through involvement in helping one’s family, neighbors, friends, etc.;
- solitary activity related to the individual development of one’s own interests (Szatur-Jaworska, Błędowski, Dzięgielewska, 2006, p. 161).

A clear definition of social activity is problematic because it can be considered on many levels. As Joanna Matejczuk emphasizes, the social activity of seniors should have three characteristic aspects such as: free time, protection of the rights and interests of older people, social utility focused on solving social

problems (2007, pp. 114-115). Matejczuk also points to a number of needs that can be satisfied precisely by social activity, including:

- everyday needs;
- social needs related to maintaining social contacts;
- the need for self-fulfillment, a sense of competence and being needed;
- the need for support and help (Matejczuk, 2007, pp. 119-122).

As noted by Janusz Czapiński and Piotr Błędowski, “social activity is not only a form of one’s activity, and moreover, social activity itself does not always have to, or even may not always be formalized, such as belonging to various non-governmental organizations” (2014, p. 66). Social activity of the elderly is an important area of research due to the ongoing demographic changes and the benefits that this type of activity brings for seniors. The issue of this activity is very popular among numerous scientific studies as well as diagnoses, social and demographic reports.

As has been presented, social activity can take various forms and types, and its pursuit may take place on many levels. Nevertheless, the social activity of the elderly in Poland is relatively low, as indicated by the data of the Central Statistical Office (GUS), in which the social activity of seniors was considered as involvement in three types of social organizations: secular NGOs, churches/communities/religious organizations and other community organizations. According to the Central Statistical Office, in 2018, less than 7.00% of seniors actively participated in the activities of churches and religious communities. 6.00% of people aged 65+ undertook social activity in all other organizations and institutions (GUS, 2019, p. 88). Importantly, older women are much more involved in social activity than men. Younger seniors (65 – 74 years) are slightly more frequently active in secular NGOs than seniors aged 75 plus (approx. 7 and 5%, respectively). (GUS, 2020, p. 88). Social activity of people over 60 is low (Information on the situation of the elderly in Poland for 2015, 2016) and manifests itself in activities undertaken in communities, organizations or groups. As noted in the previous considerations, social activity allows pursuing and satisfying the needs of individuals, particularly those related to one’s sense of belonging and interpersonal contacts. According to the results of the *Social Cohesion Survey*, the activity of the elderly in terms of social contacts is generally lower than that of younger age groups. The results of the *Social Cohesion Survey* showed that in 2018 around 10% of the elderly (65+) experienced social isolation. The value of the social isolation index among older men was higher than among older women (GUS, 2020, p. 91).

The low involvement of older people in social activity in Poland is also indicated by the European reports on the Active Aging Index. This index consists of 4 main categories, one of which relates directly to the activity and social participation of seniors in the EU countries. In 2010, Poland was ranked 17th, and in 2012 and 2014 – 28th in the category related to social activity of the elderly (European Commission, United Nations, 2014; European Union Countries, Brussels. European Commission, United Nations, 2015a; Brussels. European Commission, United Nations 2015b). Authors of the study *Activity Aging. Voluntary work by older people in Europe* (Principi, Jensen, Giovanni, 2014), noticed that the level and scale of involvement of older people in social activity, particularly in volunteering, depends on many factors, both on the macro – and micro-social level. The study indicates that social activity pursued through volunteering is related to the individual characteristics and predispositions of various nationalities, organizations that report demand for elderly volunteers, policies implemented for the development of the idea of senior volunteering, and the social welfare system (Principi, Jensen, Giovanni, 2014, p. 316). The Halickis' study proves that the low level of social activity of elderly people in Poland should be associated with the lack of established habits and the living conditions of Polish pensioners (Halicka, Halicki, 2002). Social activity (defined by the Halickis as public-oriented activity) among people over 75 and younger seniors is not the most important form of activity. According to the Halickis' research, social activity is more often undertaken by people from large cities, mostly women (Halicka, Halicki, 2002, p. 209). According to the data of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (2019, pp. 46–57), the most common type of activity of people over 60 is cultural activity, with Polish seniors being less likely to be active in sports, tourism, social issues or education.

The relatively low involvement of the elderly in social activity in Poland was also indicated by the Central Statistical Office when comparing the factors influencing the quality of life of seniors in the EU countries. As shown by the data, older people living in Poland are much less involved in civic activity, in voluntary work in organizations and institutions than the EU-28 average. In Poland, a significant commitment of the oldest generation to selfless help for one's family and friends can be observed (34.00% of older Poles aged 65–74). Statistically, this result is 19.00% in the European Union countries. In the context of the discussed topic and research group, it should be emphasized that people over 75 years of age are much less involved in social activity both in Poland and the European Union (GUS, 2020, p. 159).

Despite the low involvement in the social activity of Polish seniors, researchers emphasize its significant impact on the perceived quality of life in old age. Social activity of seniors favors the valorization of old age. The active presence of the elderly in society also creates a positive image of the elderly, thus opposing stereotyping. “Inactivity causes loss of acceptance in society and, consequently, loneliness. Therefore, activity becomes particularly important in old age” (Pikuła, 2012, p. 322).

Social activity of Polish seniors is varied and conditioned by cultural and sociodemographic factors. In the presented article, women aged 75–89 were invited to take part in the survey. According to the World Health Organization, this age is defined as old age, late old age, advanced old age or middle old age; this age group includes the so-called ‘old-old’ people (Zych, 2001, p. 201; Nowicka, 2006, pp. 17–18).

## Own research methodology

The aim of the qualitative research was to describe and show the importance of social activity among women aged 75–89 who participate in classes at the Universities of the Third Age (U3A). In the future, people aged 75+ will constitute a significant group, which is why it becomes important to get to know this age group, since – as Piotr Szukalski emphasizes “even nowadays, people aged 75+ usually escape the interest of researchers and decision-makers, public opinion, due to their assumed rarity, and above all the fact that health problems, limitations of their independent functioning restrict their socially visible activity, i.e., all activities that are undertaken outside one’s home. Meanwhile, their numerical growth, specificity of needs, differentiation of these needs according to age, sex, place of residence – defined both in terms of city/countryside and in terms of specific regions – whether the family status should automatically encourage decision-makers and other people responsible for satisfying the needs of people who are not fully independent in exploring their *differentia specifica*, to better understand the demographic, health and social determinants of ensuring high quality of life in one’s late years” (2013, p. 17).

The research deals with the issues of social activity in the perception of the women surveyed, the type of social activity they prefer, and the needs that this type of activity allows the respondents to satisfy. The research was based on the theory of activity, which assumes that “activity is a mental and social need at all ages, including the late years of human life. Thus, older people

tend to be satisfied with themselves if their behavior reveals a substitute activity after their primary role expires” (Rembowski, 1984, pp. 33–34). The main issue of the conducted research was contained in the question: What is the social activity of women in late old age? The research used a focus interview in a focus group. The study group consisted of 10 women aged 75–89 years, and the sample was selected deliberately. The criteria for selecting the sample for the research included: the respondents’ age, participation in U3A classes, living in an urban agglomeration. The study group was relatively homogeneous. All the women surveyed were widows, with higher or secondary education, and assessed their health as good or very good:

**Daniela:** 79 years, higher education, very good health;

**Zofia:** 79 years, higher education, very good health;

**Magdalena:** 79 years, higher education, very good health;

**Irena:** 83 years, secondary education, very good health;

**Barbara:** 85 years, higher education, good health;

**Julia:** 85 years, secondary education, very good health;

**Krystyna:** 85 years, higher education, very good health;

**Halina:** 87 years, secondary education, good health;

**Franciszka:** 88 years, secondary education, good health;

**Dorota:** 88 years, secondary education, good health.

## Social activity of women in late old age in the light of own research

The research focused on the implementation of social activity by the women surveyed. Table 1 shows the respondents’ answers to the questions about where and how they carry out social activity.

Table 1. Pursuit of social activity by the respondents

| Respondent's name | Place of social activity                               | Activities that, according to the respondents, are a manifestation of social activity in their lives   |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Daniela           | University of the Third Age, Senior Club, Nursing Home | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- meetings with family and friends;</li> <li>- regular attendance at U3A and Senior Club classes;</li> <li>- various trips to theaters, cinemas, etc.</li> <li>- visits to nursing homes</li> </ul> |

Table 1 (continued)

| Respondent's name | Place of social activity  | Activities that, according to the respondents, are a manifestation of social activity in their lives  |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Zofia             | University of the Third Age                                     | - participation in the U3A activities;<br>- meeting grandchildren;<br>- trips and discovering new places;   |
| Magdalena         | University of the Third Age, Senior Club, Catholic Charity Club | - helping the ones in need;<br>- involvement in charity;<br>- participation in U3A classes;<br>- encouraging friends to help others;  |
| Irena             | University of the Third Age                                     | - every trip to various places of culture;<br>- participation in U3A classes;<br>- helping loved ones;<br>- involvement in the affairs of the residents' community;                     |
| Barbara           | University of the Third Age                                     | - participation in U3A classes;<br>- helping family and the ones in need;<br>- keeping in touch with family and friends;<br>- attending church;   |
| Julia             | University of the Third Age,                                    | - involvement in lectures and meetings offered by the U3A;<br>- helping loved ones;   |
| Krystyna          | University of the Third Age                                     | - attending U3A classes;<br>- interest in social and political affairs;<br>- helping family;  |
| Halina            | University of the Third Age, Senior Club                        | - supporting relatives;<br>- attending U3A classes;<br>- participation in trips and excursions offered by the U3A;  |
| Franciszka        | University of the Third Age, culture center                     | - participation in U3A classes;<br>- meetings with friends and relatives;<br>- visits to cultural institutions;<br>- participation in thematic meetings organized in the culture center |
| Dorota            | University of the Third Age                                     | - helping family and friends;<br>- attending U3A classes;   |

Source: Author.

As indicated by the responses of the respondents in Table 1, all respondents pursue social activity by participating in classes at the Universities of the Third Age. Among the respondents, there were also responses showing involvement in the activities of the Nursing Home, the Senior Club, the culture center and



the Catholic Charity Club. The women surveyed attribute a large role in the implementation of social activity to classes, trips and meetings organized as part of the U3A's activities. A significant part of the surveyed women pointed to social behavior of a spontaneous nature, which – as Agata Chabior points out (2011, p. 11) – can be pursued in activation institutions.

An analysis of the respondents' statements highlights that they show social activity of the formal and informal type.

Formal involvement in social activity results from the respondents' affiliation to the U3A and is also visible in statements such as: *“Helping the ones in need is very important in my life. As soon as I retired, I knew that I wanted to get involved in such help. In the Club, we organize various types of fundraisers for those in need, we try to support the ones in need from our Parish”* (Magdalena); *„Various types of events are organized at the University that benefit others. I am happy to get involved, because I know how important it is”* (Irena); *„Social activity can take on many forms, but helping someone we do not know is the most enjoyable. I go to my local Nursing Home as part of voluntary work and read to the residents, play cards with them and talk to them. There is a lot of loneliness in such institutions. I like going there because it makes me feel needed”* (Daniela). The statements of the women surveyed may indicate their involvement in volunteering, which is relatively rare in the elderly group.

According to Małgorzata Halicka and Emilia Kramkowska (2012, p. 34), when discussing the social involvement of the elderly, universities of the third age come to mind, as well as associations and organizations created by seniors for the elderly. Literature indicates that social activity can also be pursued in: senior clubs, church organizations, cultural centers, third sector organizations (foundations, associations), interest circles (Białożył, 2020, p. 171; Kaczmarczyk, Trafiałek, 2007, p. 117). The obtained results of own research are consistent with the current state of knowledge.

Taking into account the data related to the activities that the surveyed women consider to be a manifestation of social activity; it can be concluded that identifying social activity with participation in classes at universities of the third age is related to the active involvement of the surveyed women in these institutions' activities and the opportunities created by universities at the level of social activity development.

The Universities of the Third Age are a space where social and educational activity is initiated among seniors. As Maria Kubis points out, U3A students relatively often engage in solving social issues, volunteer, perform public functions,

and actively participate in social organizations (2016, pp. 179-189). According to Kubis, women tend to undertake multidimensional social activity more often than men (2016, pp. 179-189). As students of the U3A, the women surveyed have an opportunity to pursue social and educational activity that they undertake at the U3A. „It is reasonable to say that social activity and educational activity are closely related, and their coexistence determines the better functioning of an elderly person in a changing reality” (Białożył, 2020, p. 176). It can be concluded that universities of the third age constitute a space for the respondents in which they pursue their educational and social activity. According to the assumptions accepted by Chabior (2011, p. 69), one type of activity sort of triggers another, and this is also the case in the study group. In accordance with the adopted definitions, social activity in the formal dimension may be pursued in various environments through a wide range of activities. It should be highlighted that there is a certain circularity between various types of activity, characterized by the simplification of the understanding of social activity and its recognition in terms of participation in the U3A or merely as involvement in social life.

Based on the statements received, it can be concluded that social activity carried out informally by the respondents is manifested by helping one's family and friends, maintaining contacts and social relations. This type of activity is dominant among the respondents. When analyzing the research material, it should be stated that a significant proportion of the respondents show social activity that is spontaneous or carried out in everyday life in an informal manner.

In the aspect of the issues in question, one should note the indications of female respondents who (often unconsciously) equate social activity with cultural activity related to involvement in culture and art. Based on the research material obtained, it can be concluded that social activity among the women surveyed focused on leisure time; the aspect associated with social utility focused on solving social problems is less visible (Matejczuk, 2007, pp. 114-115). Through involvement in social activity, it becomes possible to undertake various types of activities that affect the perceived quality of life of seniors. Among the respondents' statements there were those proving that social activity allows them to use their time in a constructive and meaningful way.

The study group also focused on the importance of social activity for the respondents. In the course of the research, the women were asked to indicate what enables them to undertake this type of activity. The responses of the respondents were included in Table 2.

Table 2. Social activity allows to...

| Respondent | Social activity allows to...  |
|------------|---|
| Daniela    | - pursue my interests, maintain self-reliance and independence, manage my free time.  |
| Zofia      | - take part in trips and outings, forget about my problems and sorrows, be around people.   |
| Magdalena  | - feel needed, fulfil my dreams, maintain self-reliance, believe in my abilities, help others and not think about my problems.                      |
| Irena      | - help neighbors, participate in various cultural events, keep in touch with friends, fight loneliness,   |
| Barbara    | - deepen my faith, understand the meaning of life, maintain good relations with my loved ones, pursue my interests, develop.                        |
| Julia      | - be around people, a possibility of participating in social life despite old age, accept old age, good relations with relatives.                   |
| Krystyna   | - enjoy life, understand the world around me, come to terms with the loss of my husband, prevent loneliness.  |
| Halina     | - happy old age, keep in touch with friends, meet new people and explore interesting places, gain new knowledge, keep fit.                          |
| Franciszka | - use my free time, develop, meet new people and explore places, participate in interesting meetings that enrich me, maintain independence in life. |
| Dorota     | - be around people, gain new knowledge, maintain good relationships and contacts with relatives and friends.  |

Source: Author.

The analysis of the research material allows concluding that through the implementation of social activity in their late old age, the studied women have an opportunity to maintain contacts and interpersonal relationships, which may reduce the feeling of loneliness. The respondents' answers indicate a wide range of positive actions that are a derivative of the undertaken activity. It should be noted that a significant proportion of respondents emphasize the role of social activity in fulfilling the needs and adapting to one's old age. Thus, it can be noted that meeting one's needs as a key element of the quality of life, is largely connected with the activity of the elderly.

The obtained results show that the social activity of the vast majority of respondents allows meeting the needs related to maintaining social contacts, the needs of everyday life, such as spending one's free time, maintaining self-reliance and independence, as well as the needs focused on self-fulfillment, support and help. The answers of the respondents can therefore be embedded in the typology of needs presented by Matejczuk (2007, pp. 114-115), concluding that the social activity

of women in late old age gives them an opportunity to satisfy their higher-order needs, which allows them to accept old age as a stage of development.

As emphasized in the literature on the subject, the proper acceptance is the groundwork for adapting to changes taking place in old age (Pikuła, 2016). A prerequisite for having a sense of the quality of life of the elderly is to accept the changes taking place, not only biological, but also social and psychological. Acceptance and constructive adaptation to old age should not mean passivity; quite the contrary. “On the one hand, biological changes should be accepted as natural and inevitable, and on the other, they should be delayed as much as possible using natural methods (lifestyle)” (Zielińska-Więczkowska, Kędziora-Kornatowska, Kornatowski, 2008 p. 132). In the study group, women directly influence their lifestyle through social activity, carry out the developmental tasks of old age, and thus pursue well-being.

Among the statements received, there were some that testify to the importance of social activity in maintaining one’s self-reliance and life independence. Maintaining autonomy is one of the basic goals of being active in seniority, allowing one to experience old age successfully. Several categories can be distinguished in the assumptions of the concept of successful aging, in which the ‘common perception’ of successful old age is more and more commonly referred to. In this category, the criteria are set by the seniors themselves, who define its components, such as: life satisfaction, self-reliance, social activity, autonomy, social participation, interpersonal relations, mental and biological health (Chabior, 2017b, p. 89). Based on the results of own research, it can be concluded that social activity allows the respondents to experience old age in a successful way, focused on the feeling of social and mental well-being. This fact may also be indicated by the statements of the respondents: *“If it weren’t for activity, I would probably be sitting at home, without friends or colleagues. Now every day is filled with nice meetings and phone calls; I feel like someone remembers about me and this makes me happy”* (Halina); *“Social activity allows me to be independent, to understand the changes that are taking place around me. It is important not to be limited, dependent on the family, to be able to live as you want and get a lot of satisfaction from it. My old age is a happy one, due to the fact that I do not stay at home, that I go to the University, I get to meet people”* (Franciszka).

For the respondents, social activity is an important component of their lives, through which they can adopt positive attitudes towards their own old age and their peers, eliminate the negative image of senior citizens in society, and undertake and carry out old age development tasks. „The activity of seniors and social activation,

treated as co-marked processes, form the primary structure of the activity of the elderly in each of the stages of old age, shape attitudes which, once established, give a chance to build one's own lifestyle and manner of aging, and at the same time define and shape the image of a modern senior" (Chabior, 2017b, p. 66).

The obtained results of own research, relating to the opportunities, possibilities offered by social activity to seniors, are consistent with the current state of knowledge. The study on this type of activity emphasizes the positive range of impacts on the elderly in various areas of their lives (Barwińska 2007; Białożył 2015; Błachnio 2012; Fabiś, Kędziora 2008; Halicka 2004). Research has shown that this type of activity is associated with positive effects on one's physical and mental health. Research by Fengyan Tang, Eunhee Choi and Nancy Morrow-Howell (2010, pp. 603–612), conducted among people aged 56–89, indicates that through engaging in social activity, individuals experience a higher quality of life and better emotional well-being.

In terms of the subject matter in question, it becomes important to pay attention to the factors that determine social activity in late old age. The answers of the respondents concerning the determinants of the discussed type of activity are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Determinants of social activity in the respondents' opinion

| Respondent |   |
|------------|---|
| Daniela    | - health condition, motivation, support of relatives, University of the Third Age,  |
| Zofia      | - lifestyle, faith in one's abilities, free time  |
| Magdalena  | - health, marital status, loneliness  |
| Irena      | - health condition, support of relatives, acceptance of old age, University of the Third Age                                  |
| Barbara    | - self-confidence, willingness to develop further, health, loneliness   |
| Julia      | - support of relatives, lifestyle so far, the need to be around people, loneliness  |
| Krystyna   | - health condition, no family, the need to be around people, University of the Third Age                                      |
| Halina     | - health condition, the need to act, good transport conducive to movement   |
| Franciszka | - belief that one can also be active in old age, willingness to be among people, loneliness                                   |
| Dorota     | - health condition, willingness to participate in social life, the need to be active and develop, University of the Third Age |

Source: Author.

Based on the analysis of the research material, it can be assumed that in the studied group, the decisive factor in undertaking social activity is health. The respondents also included the following in the range of determinants of social activity: needs focused on development and self-fulfillment, needs related to maintaining interpersonal contacts, loneliness, and determinants of family life. The obtained results are largely consistent with the current state of knowledge regarding the factors that facilitate taking up activity among the elderly.

Barbara Szatur-Jaworska, Piotr Błędowski and Małgorzata Dzięgielewska (2006, p. 162) have distinguished six primary factors determining the taking up of various forms of activity by the elderly. According to the researchers, the determinants of senior activity include:

- education – the higher education a person has, the more often and more willingly they undertake activities related to being active;
- family environment – the type and scope of actions taken is determined by a person's personality, their relations with family, friends and the environment;
- health status and physical and psychological condition – individuals who experience old age in a successful way are much more active. Seniors who suffer from accumulated diseases give up involvement in various forms of activity, very often limiting themselves to home and family activities;
- gender – women undertake various forms of activity more often. Women also have character and personality traits that favor undertaking social activities;
- place of residence (city, village) – those living in urban agglomerations have much greater opportunities to access various forms of activity than older residents of small towns or villages;
- the effect of cultural institutions in one's place of residence.

Based on the respondents' socio-demographic data, it can be assumed that gender, education and place of residence (urban agglomerations) determine undertaking activity in the studied group. All the women surveyed were widows; however, as shown by their responses, the support of relatives and friends motivates them to pursue activities aimed at the sense of well-being.

Loneliness turned out to be an important determinant of activity in the studied group. According to the literature on the subject, the feeling of loneliness

and seclusion may take various forms and is related to one's individual experiences<sup>1</sup>. While making an extensive review of the literature as well as definitions and positions relating to the feeling of loneliness, Joanna Wtórniak formulated the following conclusions related to this phenomenon:

- “– this concept is ambiguous and is difficult to define,
- it concerns every human being, in every stage of their lives,
- it is inextricably linked with human existence, is the leading dilemma of human life,
- it acts as the driving force of human life: constructive or destructive,
- while loneliness can be considered in both a positive and negative dimension, seclusion is commonly perceived as a negative phenomenon,
- loneliness is a positive state for those who are active and self-fulfilled in some activity; it is most acutely felt by passive people who do not seek contact with themselves or others,
- in social consciousness, the concepts of loneliness and seclusion are often considered to be identical” (Wtórniak, 2015, p. 75).

Based on the results of own research, it can be concluded that in the studied group, loneliness has a stimulating function to activity; therefore, despite the fact that the vast majority of definitions ascribed to it a negative dimension, it has a creative aspect among some respondents, mobilizing them to change. Such state may also be determined by one's marital status, and more specifically, by widowhood. As emphasized by Dorota Niewiedział, widowhood may be a situation that would imply the need to undertake various forms of social activity and involvement (Niewiedział, 2015, pp. 69-70). This approach is reflected in the study group.

Among the respondents, there were statements referring to places like universities of the third age. For the women surveyed, it is these institutions that drive them to undertake social activity. The influence of institutions is an important factor that influences the scope of the activities undertaken. Universities of the third age constitute a space for the respondents in which, through various kinds of dependencies, it becomes possible to undertake activities of a social, educational, cultural and recreational nature, in a formal and informal dimension. The literature on the subject indicates that more and more often the U3A program becomes a factor that determines the seniors' involvement in their

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<sup>1</sup> More on loneliness and seclusion: Pawłowska (2006), Orzelska (2011), Stochmiałek (2005), Gajda (1987).

activities (Białyżyt, 2020). Undoubtedly, activity at universities provide the elderly with an opportunity to develop further, meet their needs related to belonging and acceptance, understand the world around them and the changes taking place, which seniors often find difficult to accept. Valorization of old age by the U3A is a chance for a constructive and successful experience of old age, which is visible in the study group.

Dorota Barwińska, who compared the motives of pursuing social activities among Polish and German seniors, concluded that Polish seniors engage in social activities because: they want to help others; it gives them pleasure; it allows them to be among other people; they believe that helping others will come back to them at some point. They also believe that: they have a debt to pay; they cannot refuse those in need; they follow their friends' example who are also involved in such activity. German seniors, on the other hand, undertake social activities because: they want to participate in social life; they want to have contact with other people; they believe that such activity is their task and a form of political involvement (Barwińska, 2007, pp. 89-91). Barwińska indicates four groups of motives for pursuing social activity - these are: altruistic, instrumental, moral-obligatory, related to self-shaping (Barwińska 2007, p. 90). When analyzing the responses of the women surveyed, it can be concluded that the respondents display instrumental and shaping motives. There were no statements pointing to altruistic or moral-obligatory motives among the respondents.

In the study group, there were answers proving that the social activity of the respondents results from the loss of a loved one (widowhood, loneliness). This is consistent with the results of the research by Sonia Kędziora and Artur Fabiś (2008, p. 80), who focused on the motives of seniors' involvement in hospice volunteer work, which is part of the social activity among the elderly.

## Conclusion

The aim of the paper presented was to show social activity among women in late old age. As shown by research results, the vast majority of social activity in the group of women aged 75-89 is carried out in an informal manner. The women surveyed carry out social activity at the Universities of the Third Age, in Senior Clubs, charity organizations and associations, through volunteering and while helping their loved ones. The respondents attribute great importance in performing the activities in question to the Universities



of the Third Age, which become places where the concept of active aging and old age is implemented. Social activity allows the respondents to maintain interpersonal contacts, gives them an opportunity for self-fulfillment and satisfy their higher order needs. It is important for the respondents to be among their peers and to expand their circle of acquaintances and friends. An important aspect of social activity is also the possibility of acquiring positive attitudes towards old age as a stage of development, with specific tasks assigned to it. In the study group, it can be noticed that social activity is the starting point for undertaking other types of activity, such as: educational, cultural and recreational activity.

The conducted research is partially consistent with the current state of knowledge, which is mainly set in the context of people younger than the respondents in the late old age. There are also new areas that require further research and considerations enabling a better understanding of social activity. In the aspect of the conducted research, it should be noted that loneliness was a creative factor in the study group that determined one to undertake activity. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on further research that will allow for a detailed examination of the relationship between loneliness, widowhood and the degree of involvement in activity in the late old age.

In view of the demographers' forecasts and the progressing feminization, it is necessary to focus on activities that will take into account the needs of seniors aged 75+. It is becoming essential to promote the idea of social activity among the oldest age-period-cohorts. The activities of relevant institutions and organizations operating in the area of senior policy should focus on disseminating the idea of self-help, formal activity and volunteer work. It is important to stimulate the involvement of elderly people who spend their free time alone at home. An important role should be played here by social workers, volunteers, priests and representatives of activation institutions. Reaching out to passive people, especially in their old age, may increase their activity and arouse interest in what is happening in their local community.

Taking into account the demographic data and the research results obtained, the focus should be on expanding the offer for widowed women. The loss of a spouse may act as an activating motivator on the one hand, and lead to a state of passivity, apathy and indifference on the other.

The presented results of own research were an attempt to focus on the social activity of women aged 75-89; with age, one's involvement in social activity decreases, which may lead to a decline in one's degree of independence,

self-reliance and loss of social contacts. In view of the extension of human life, it becomes justified to undertake a scientific discussion on the issues of quality of life and its determinants in the oldest people, whose number in Poland's social structure is gradually increasing.

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