Extended abstract

Reprogram the Countryside. Migrations of Women to Rural Areas in Spain

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**Highlights:**

1. Current rural development has to be considered with the presence of women in the agricul-
tural sector.
2. Rural women guarantee the new forms of relationship that go through innovation and digiti-
zation.
3. Society must take advantage of the economic, social, and cultural wealth.

**Abstract:** Women have always been present in the countryside despite being an invisible popula-
tion group. Several evidences show that women are entering the agricultural field in a full way, with equal
rights and duties as their male counterparts. Based on this situation, the objectives of this work are, to know
the personal trajectories of women who migrate to the countryside to carry out agricultural activities and,
to analyze their role and impact as agents of development and modernization. A qualitative methodology
is used, through in-depth interviews with 27 young-adult women who have been incorporated into rural
areas of Castilla and León, Spain. The results show that rural women use associations and social networks,
both to train themselves and to develop their own gender struggle. It shows the need for their role as active
agents of social transformation to be incorporated into the political agenda. The conclusions indicate that
it is not possible to deal with rural development without counting on the presence of rural women.

**Keywords:** Rural development; Ethnography; Gender; Social sustainability.
Extended abstract

1. Introduction and rationale

Despite being invisible in the statistics, women in rural areas have always participated in production and labour. With today’s shifting social and economic landscape, their situation remains critical.

The structure of rural populations and territorial uses has changed as a result of population mobility, the loss of family farms, deagrarianisation and a correlative increase in agricultural productivity, understood more as a readjustment than as a decline.

Beyond its traditional role, the rural world is now viewed as a way of examining the urban experience, as a framework within which to analyse the economic development model and the basis for making new demands for quality of life. In parallel, women have begun to return to the countryside, seeing it as a space for social life, political development and above all, production. In this scenario, ecofeminist proposals offer a response to a global problem that affects gender inequality, the ecological crisis and agricultural systems as we currently know them.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The first aim of this research was to study women’s migration to rural areas, learning about the personal experiences and trajectories of women who have moved to the countryside and determining the motivations, incentives and situations surrounding their decision to relocate to a rural area. The second goal was to assess the role of these women as agents of rural development and modernisation, specifically as regards maintenance of local institutions, elements of the rural fabric and relations with the surrounding environment, as well as their strategic role in the survival of villages. The third and final objective was to contribute to the debate on women’s migration to the countryside.

This study was based on social anthropology methods. Specifically, an ethnographic approach was adopted, using qualitative techniques such as open and semi-
structured interviews with women involved in the experience of migration to the countryside. Twenty-seven women who had migrated to and were living in a rural area in Castile and León participated in this research. They presented a wide age range of between 22 and 55 years old, and all of them were engaged in agricultural production. They described themselves as businesswomen, shepherds, livestock farmers, farm workers and farm owners (in this latter case, generally in shared ownership with a partner or family member).

3. Results

Four key themes emerged from an analysis of fieldwork data: motivation to relocate and work in the countryside; cooperation, training and social networks; recognition and innovation; and appreciation of the situation in the countryside.

The results indicate a variety of motivations and previous activities prior to migration to a rural area. Women who had formerly worked in the service sector in a nearby city formed the largest group, and motivations included seeking employment, feeling weary of urban life and liking the countryside. Their arrival in a rural area was generally marked by learning about a new professional environment, aided by community engagement as a key means to obtain peer support and recognition, as well as the use of networks to share experiences, knowledge and learning.

Their relocation was preceded by an assessment of the needs and potential of each area and a search for a sector that would be feasible, either because their partners had previous knowledge of it or because it was viable or attracted subsidies, such as breeding endangered livestock species.

The role played by these women was recognised within the local community itself and in national or European-level communities where this activity has repercussions within the productive sector. Such recognition in the agricultural sector is critical because it helps create role models for younger women farmers and acts as a major incentive for innovation.

The participants’ general assessment was favourable, although the conditions and difficulties encountered along the way had prompted constant questioning of the work they were doing, especially if their activity was hindered by administrative obstacles. Better quality of life rather than economic gain – which seemed minimal – was generally a major factor in the decision to relocate to a rural area.
4. Discussion

The life stories of women who migrate to the countryside indicate that they assess and perceive rural life in contradictory and conflicting ways, and that this is inherent to the process of putting down new roots, maintaining connections, transferring ideas about experiences, undertaking training and adapting to social practices in regions other than their own.

Although women and men are both involved in rural development, it is women who are spearheading the creation of value-added activities and new social relations through active political and civic participation, and who are driving entrepreneurship and innovation actions through participation in online forums and social networks.

This process of migration to the countryside has been accompanied by re-feminisation and a reassessment of gender role dynamics in areas such as work, attitudes and strategies for setting up agricultural businesses, shared ownership of farms and agricultural innovation.

In addition, there has been a return to the use of endogenous resources in local economies, previously abandoned as a consequence of industrialisation and depopulation, and these now exert a considerable influence on local development.

The goals established by European rural development programmes and their recent incorporation of the gender perspective will entail laying the foundations for a more dynamic agricultural model where women and men can pursue their respective life projects in a suitable setting, guaranteeing generational renewal and creating sustainable systems embedded in a circular economy that facilitates innovation and the digitalisation of production processes.

In theory, the application of a gender perspective should function as a force for change that challenges the status quo; in practice, however, it has been used to attempt to change women, urging them to adapt to a situation rather than transforming the situation itself. Thus, institutions have adopted gender mainstreaming in the form of a policy framework that depoliticises gender equality and fails to address critically urgent problems, whereas rural women have adopted feminism as a tool to advocate for and transform rural life.