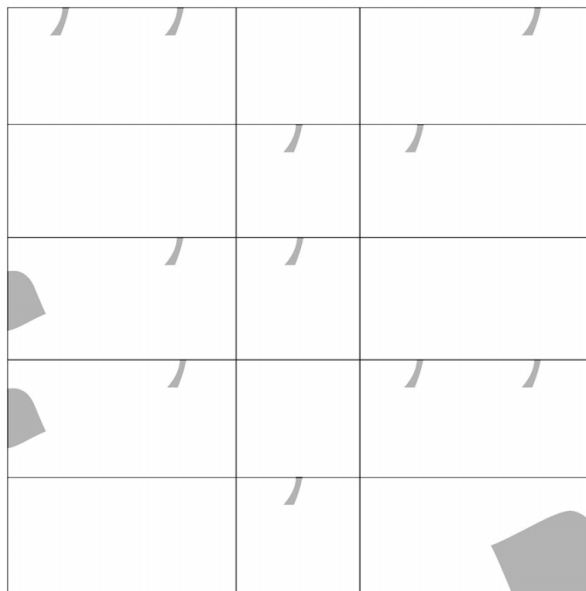


Extended abstract

*Women and Tourism in Rural Areas:
Diversity and Convergence (Alpujarra, Spain)*



María Cristina Gálvez García, Esteban Ruiz-Ballesteros

Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Sevilla, Spain

DOI: 10.4422/ager.2026.09

ager

Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

Highlights:

1. Tourism is a flexible tool in the life strategies of rural women.
2. Community based tourism is important for women's settlement in rural areas.
3. Rural women exercise their agency to adapt tourism to their priorities.
4. New rural contexts present a greater diversity of female profiles and life strategies.

Abstract: Masculinization remains one of the main concerns in areas affected by the rural crisis. This selective emigration is related to the lack of job and personal opportunities that meet women's expectations. We aim to examine the strategies rural women use to live in rural areas and the role that tourism plays in these strategies. Through ethnographic fieldwork in a village in the Alpujarra region (Andalusia, Spain), we show the diversity of strategies that women use and how they use a community-based tourism model to do so, combining economic, identity and family motivations. The results show the significant role of this type of tourism in articulating the life strategies of diverse profiles of rural women. We conclude that community-based tourism is a flexible tool that, although with limitations, facilitates both the permanence and the arrival of new female profiles in the rural world, and may be relevant for the settlement of women in rural regions.

Keywords: Masculinization, rural crisis, community-based tourism, ethnography, Alpujarra.

María Cristina Gálvez García. <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7396-9954>
E-mail: mcrisgalvez@gmail.com
Esteban Ruiz-Ballesteros. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6270-0593>
E-mail: eruibal@upo.es

Extended abstract

1. Introduction

The masculinization of rural areas has been a recurring concern in rurality research over the past few decades. It mainly affects municipalities in deeply rural areas (with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants) and jeopardizes their demographic and social sustainability. The reasons for this selective out-migration are largely linked to the lack of employment and life chances that meet women's expectations.

Over the last few decades, rural tourism has been promoted as a strategy to supplement household incomes and fix the female population to the territory, fostering women's autonomy and visibility while also confronting them with new challenges. Today, women play a leading role in the sector: according to data from the Rural Tourism Observatory in Spain, in 2020, 58.2% of tourism businesses were led by women. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of in-depth studies on how tourism integrates into women's life choices and whether it effectively improves their living conditions.

The diversity of women's experiences in today's rural areas—shaped by new values and socio-spatial practices—demands a perspective that captures these nuances. Consequently, the relation between women and tourism must be addressed within the framework of emerging ruralities and the counter-movement of arrival or return among women observed in recent decades (Soronellas et al., 2013).

This article aims to analyze the role of tourism in the livelihood strategies of diverse profiles of women living in rural settings, their motivations for choosing it as a professional activity, and how they utilize it.

2. Methodology

To this end, a case study has been selected from a rural area located in a mountainous region: the municipality of La Taha (population 789) in the Alpujarra region of Granada. La Taha is a peripheral but globalized area, where neorurals and

amenity migrants constitute 20% of the population. Tourism plays a significant role as an integral part of the pluriactivity that characterizes rural economies. There is a wide variety of profiles among female entrepreneurs and salaried employees in the sector. The municipality's tourism activity follows a community-based model driven by small-scale, homegrown management aimed at the reproduction of the domestic group.

The research adopted an ethnographic approach, combining participant observation within the municipality with 21 semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with women working in the local and regional tourism sectors, as well as key informants, including municipal tourism officials, the Local Development Group, and social workers. The interviewees were selected through purposive and snowball sampling until theoretical saturation was reached. Fieldwork was conducted between July 2024 and February 2025.

Data analysis was performed using the categories of livelihood strategies proposed by Moller (2012) in relation to tourism: a) survival strategies, b) place-oriented strategies, c) meaningful activities-oriented strategies, d) professional-oriented strategies and, e) family-oriented strategies. An initial analysis allowed us to outline a general overview of the relationship between women residing in the municipality and tourism activity. In the second phase, we selected five representative cases from all the interviewees to illustrate each of the aforementioned categories in depth.

3. Results and discussion

The findings reveal that, for various groups of rural women, tourism has become a form of "strategic attachment" to the local area. The livelihood strategies developed by the interviewees prioritize values linked to lifestyle, where child-rearing time, closeness to nature, and personal fulfillment through meaningful professional activities play a central role. Within these strategies, community-based tourism emerges as a versatile and useful tool for creating new opportunities and alternative ways of living in rural areas. The experiences gathered show that rural women's tourism strategies are not merely a reaction to a changing economy (Little, 2002); rather, they respond to concerns and needs driven primarily—and at times, exclusively—by personal life projects. These projects highlight women's lived experiences linked to contemporary family models—where single-parent or single-person households are increasingly prevalent—thereby reflecting a new dialogue

between women and rural life.

However, various factors influence how different groups of women integrate into and experience tourism activity, including age, place of origin, and social capital. Foreign women leverage their cultural capital (languages, international networks) to enter the labor market with greater autonomy, while local women rely on inherited assets and family support networks to balance or alternate their diverse economic activities. On the other hand, women over 60 demonstrate greater financial stability and control over their businesses, whereas those belonging to the generation between 30 and 50 experience heightened uncertainty and more intermittent engagement with tourism.

Tourism presents itself as an attractive employment option both for local women who wish to remain in their communities and for outsiders—often from urban backgrounds—seeking to settle in rural areas. Both scenarios are significant in addressing the rural demographic crisis, promoting either population retention or rural resettlement.

4. Conclusions

Today, many rural areas are no longer places of personal and professional constraint for women; instead, they have emerged as enabling environments in which to build meaningful lives. In these settings, tourism serves as a tool that women mobilize and reshape according to their interests and priorities. It is therefore crucial to change the analytical perspective, recognizing that women are not merely a resource for the tourism sector; rather, they actively leverage tourism as a means to inhabit and sustain rural areas.

This study highlights women's agency and their motivations when working in or managing tourism businesses, thereby challenging traditional capitalist indicators of success. This reveals a complex and heterogeneous rural landscape where very different profiles of women coexist, alongside emerging needs, representations, and female socio-spatial practices.

Lastly, this study suggests a paradigm shift in the demographic dynamics of specific deep rural settings. Here, the 'educated flight' (Camarero et al., 2006) is giving way to 'strategic attachment,' directly impacting the mitigation of the territories' endemic masculinization.

5. Future directions

Future research should examine in greater depth the impact that various socioeconomic variables (education, background, social class, age) have on women's unequal relationship with tourism and their respective role within rural areas—an issue we have only touched upon here in an exploratory manner. Furthermore, futures research must analyze how the role of tourism is evolving within contemporary, women-led rural development processes.