

WOMEN'S EDUCATION, EMPOWERMENT AND RURAL INNOVATION

Ana María Porto Castro

Departamento de Métodos de Investigación y Diagnóstico en Educación. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
anamaria.porto@usc.es

Montserrat Villarino Pérez

Departamento de Geografía. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
montserrat.villarino@usc.es

Mireia Baylina Ferré

Departamento de Geografía. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
mireia.baylina@uab.es

Maria Dolors Garcia Ramon

Departamento de Geografía. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
MariaDolors.Garcia.Ramon@uab.es

Isabel Salamaña Serra

Departamento de Geografía. Universitat de Girona
isabel.salamana@udg.edu

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of a rural environment, educated women initiate innovative projects. Their initiative is important not only for the practices they develop and for the effects they generate in the area but also because they achieve the permanence of a particular social group that has been threatened for decades. Their projects show ideas, knowledge, information, strategy, organizational skills, high work capacity and social networks. In their ability to initiate professional projects, education and training become crucial resources. Their knowledge empowers them as professional women and enables them to overcome gender barriers. This article tries to delve into the role of education in the lives of professional rural women in Galicia and Catalonia and to examine how education may determine the revitalization of these areas.

II. METHODOLOGY & STUDY AREAS

This research is based on the experience of 60 women from Catalonia and Galicia who decided to develop their life and professional projects in a rural environment. Most of them (66,6%) were born in a rural area but have generally lived in urban environments at some

point in their lives; some (8.4%) were born in urban areas but had rural family ties; and a quarter of them (25%) come from urban areas. The profile answers to 30 - 60 years old women, with a college degree (74.6%), married or in a heterosexual relationship (83.3%), and for the most part with children (72.2%). Slightly over half of these women run their own companies or are self-employed (52.6%) and most of them work in the service industry (72.9%) followed by the agrarian sector (20.4%). A qualitative methodology was used through in-depth interviews (30 per region) which were recorded, transcribed and encoded by using the Atlas.ti program, plus participant observations. In addition, 20 semi-structured interviews were carried out (10 per region) to qualified informants.

Catalonia & Galicia are two Spanish contrasted regions. Catalonia has been an economic engine in Spain given its industry, while Galicia has had a traditional-based economy and endured a strong migratory process. Today, in both regions the economy depends on the service sector, even though in Galicia employment in the primary sector is of a significant relevance.

III. EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

III.1. Gender Stereotypes

Social & psychological factors differential gender socialization, traits & role stereotypes regarding dominant men and women within a culture, or cultural norms, among others are essential to explain people personal & professional development. Consensual beliefs about the different traits of men & women in our society imply the existence of a dichotomy of personality traits, roles and occupations which are traditionally associated to men & women and have great influence on the individual, on his/her perception of the World, of himself/herself and of his/her behavior. Therefore, the traditional gender stereotypes & roles shape the perception of the choices we make.

Quite generally, the women that were interviewed regardless of where, their social or economic status portray the female stereotypes when answering to the question 'What did you want to become when you were growing up?'. In their choices they opt for much feminized professions, associated with the care and welfare of others, matching the social representation of female roles; professions such as teachers, hairdressers, pediatricians, nurses, veterinarians or dressmakers appear among their youth choices.

III.2. Building Expectations

Expectations, understood as the subjective probability that certain actions will produce certain results, are psychological processes that affect motivation and play an important role when it comes to choosing a profession. In this regard, success expectations, confidence in one's own abilities to achieve success and the perception of competition are acknowledged as significant variables in the decision-making process. In this process, men and women have different expectations, and in different knowledge areas.

Also, parent expectations greatly determine women's expectations and the concept they have of themselves. Parent wishes are also influenced by the family's socioeconomic status

and the socio-cultural environment in which they develop. During this research, for the most part, it is noted that fathers & mothers support and encourage their sons & daughters to acquire an education, and the higher the better.

However, arguments from the mothers and the fathers offer different nuances. Mothers urge their daughters to get an education as a way to become independent while, on the other hand, fathers expectations more often show the feminine stereotypes when it comes to the profession itself or the potential capability of their daughters.

IV. EDUCATION AS AN INNOVATIVE PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL ITINERARY

At the beginning of 20th century in Spain, among the deciding factors to the incorporation of women into the educational world were the desire for intellectual cultivation and the need to count on an economic security for the future. With the 1970 General Education Act schooling will become compulsory, coeducational and free up until 14 years of age. Later, during the nineties of the last century, the changes in education which had been experienced during the two preceding decades will be strengthened with the extension of the educational levels of women towards a higher education, the universalization of high school and the expansion of non-compulsory education standing out.

The socioeconomic improvements of the last years have changed the way the younger population think . If education was used initially to ascend socially by escaping from the countryside, now this escape is not so clear. It is not as straightforward that educated women want to live in the city and this approach may only happen when there isn't a correspondence between the educational level and work opportunities in the rural environment. The material conditions have made life in the rural environment more plausible by offering various options of work, and the construction of a more positive rural image from an urban point of view has brought up new feelings of attachment. The women related to this research are an example of this situation.

Three quarters of the women interviewed have achieved a college degree and some of them even a masters or doctoral level, even though life around them has been an obstacle that has certainly conditioned their careers. Therefore the virtual space has been essential in their education and professionalization. Nevertheless, and despite the gender stereotypes and their own initial expectations, these women have developed professions which have challenged women's role in the sphere of productive labor.

IV.1. Self-concept & the capacity for innovation

The concept that women have of themselves, obstructed by their family and social environment, largely explains their capacity for entrepreneurship and innovation. Women see themselves as *curious, willing to know more, to start new projects, and be open-minded and creative*. That attitude allows them to see the possibilities that the rural area has in order to be able to live in it and leads them to explore what is done elsewhere and what they may be able to adopt for their areas. In addition, women also define themselves as *enterprising, willing to do things, bold, and willing to do whatever it takes to thrive*. Finally, they also describe themselves as *hard-working, very hard-working, unafraid of work and positive*.

These characteristics that they see in themselves give them the drive and ability needed to lead projects and face new challenges. And education continues to be their engine, starting point and source of security.

IV.2. Impact on the environment

Women use their position as entrepreneurs to change their lives and the lives of others, and in this process they change the places that they live in. In some cases by creating jobs, quantitatively irrelevant but very important to areas with low population and a high level of family multiactivity.

The fact of being a businesswoman or of working in a very masculinized activity is a transgression of gender stereotypes and therefore a change factor by having a proving effect. And that proving effect moves from businesswomen on to other women who from their work earn authority inside & outside the family, increase their spatial mobility, improve their economy, and what is more important increase their self-esteem, their empowerment. It's a process that leads to change in gender relations.

Besides, an important and innovative local change factor is the creation of exchange networks between businesses, an exchange that has a lot to do with these businesswomen who, of course, are interested in their own companies, but who also view these proximity networks as a way to create an outward-looking intelligent territory.

And education has surely allowed them to create innovative professional projects by reinventing traditional activities. The acquired knowledge and ongoing education allow them to keep innovating for the future a key factor for the continuity and dynamism of the rural environment.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The role of education has proved itself to be vital when addressing both the labor & life projects of these women in the rural environment. It has allowed them to place themselves as models of "today's rural woman" in the rural environment of the 21st Century.

The evolution of educational legislation in Spain resulted in most of the women involved in this research (according to their age) gaining access to a compulsory basic education. Later, the influence of their families and especially their mothers guided them to continue to secondary & higher education, something referred to, in most cases, as a means of social improvement.

Gender stereotypes are absolutely internalized in these women, as demonstrated by the professional expectations they had when they were little. However, the educational stage and the fact of having lived in other places start changing these stereotypes in such a way that these women engage in a very diverse education sometimes far away from what is classified as feminine.

This idea is reflected in the concept they have of themselves, as they see themselves able to tackle innovative work projects, in a sometimes hostile environment, and manage to overcome gender barriers and social control which are very intense in rural areas.

The idea supporting that education has been for rural women an element of rootlessness and detachment from rural environment and, definitely, the reason for abandoning it, now is reversed precisely because education becomes an indispensable factor to build new rural female identities.

Slowing down the depopulation, and its effects in terms of products, resources, services, knowledge, relationships networks and employment are essential to rural environment, as much as the proving effect they may exert its actions on other women and generations. Women transgress gender stereotypes by being at the forefront of initiatives and businesses, often in masculinized sectors, and in their path they also contribute to change gender relations in other families and the rural community.

Although the context has not been favorable to them, women have faced a major challenge as women. And this challenge would have not been possible without the self-esteem and empowerment granted to them by education in an urban environment. With this power they have consolidated themselves as professionals and have overcome gender barriers. And in that education we find personal motivation, decisions and events that can only be explained from certain gender relations within the household in which they have grown up.

