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Life models and rural women: social and labour mobility in Sierra del Segura (Albacete, Spain)

J. Escribano, N. Vercher, D. E. Valero, J. Esparcia⁴⁰

Abstract-This work employs qualitative techniques and a case of study in Spain to analyse the main life models of rural women today. More evident patterns can be grouped into two blocks. First, patterns implying local trajectories anchored at the rural world and the maintenance of gender roles, although showing important divergences regarding social and economic participation according to a generational component. Second, models connected with urban experiences that suppose updated socio-cultural frameworks, higher education level, and which could promote socio-economic initiatives and help to fix the population.

INTRODUCTION

The stereotype of women who stay in rural areas tends towards a suggestion that they adopt traditional roles. Avoiding traditional roles has meant emigration to cities. The relative higher emigration of women in rural areas has been explained mainly by the hypothesis of *enlightened flight*: young highly educated women who emigrate because of their job aspirations which are strongly restricted in rural environments. A lower social recognition as individuals is one of the underlying mechanisms producing that *flight*.

Nowadays, female emigration and *enlightened flight* dynamics persist in rural areas but they do not represent the only choice. Despite higher female emigration and masculinization in Spanish rural areas, there are many women who feel rooted to their villages and try to build a space of rupture with traditional rural women frameworks. These women remain in rural areas and adapt their spaces to their personal life trajectories, as for instance, commuting strategies (Camarero & Sampedro, 2008).

However, other rural women inhabit life models which are little or not linked with socio-cultural transformative schemes and, even, maintain discourses of resignation and indifference (Sampedro, 2008). Between these extremes, there are many positions to be identified and characterised.

So, this research aims to determine the main life models configured by rural women today. Life models refer to different life style pattern' of women in relation with the diverse dimensions of life (economics, politics, society, gender roles, family, etc.) which can be explained through dynamic

elements such as age, education level, residential trajectory or sociocultural schemes.

METHODS AND DATA

This work is configured as a qualitative case of study in Sierra del Segura (Albacete, Spain) and is based on the content and discourses analysis of 35 interviews which were recorded during July 2016. The interviewees were mainly women (two men) who were selected according to their profile and following intentional and snowball criteria. Thus, we have collected testimonies from nine economic actors, nine politicians, eight professionals or practitioners and nine representatives of the civil society and social organisations.

Sierra del Segura is a region located in the south-west of the Albacete province (Castilla-La Mancha). It includes 12 municipalities, 105 hamlets and signifies a low population density (6,42 inhabitants per square kilometre). Nowadays, this area is facing four major challenges: a) depopulation processes (it has lost more than a quarter of population during the last two decades), b) masculinisation (105,5 men for every 100 women), c) high unemployment rates (an increase of more than 40% during the period 2007-2015; in 2015, 56% of unemployed people were women), and d) ageing (more than 30% of population is older than 65 years in 2015).

MAIN RESULTS

The case of study shows four different major life models for rural women. First, women who have never lived out of rural environments, who assume domestic roles and sporadically participate in economic activities in order to contribute to the

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household economy. These women need women's associations to disconnect from the domestic atmosphere, and to improve their self-esteem and socialisation, but they are not implicated in politics or social movements.

A second option is represented, mainly, by a younger generation of women, very heterogeneous, who do not play an exclusive role of family care. Nevertheless, they are anchored to the rural world, without urban experiences or high education levels. Their situation implies precarious work trajectories and weak perceptions of gender roles. Nevertheless, these women carry out a relatively strong social participation regarding conventional organisations (women's associations, local festivities...) and leisure. Moreover, sometimes they hold posts as politicians in the local council.

The third life model implies urban trajectories and it includes young women who have returned to the rural villages after finishing their university education at cities and in a context of economic crisis. Their situations are characterised by swinging among jobs, which not always are connected to their careers. Consequently, they have a vulnerable rural future. These women participate in the social life and they also show quite interest in local issues such as forums for citizen participation or activities related to Local Action Groups (LAG). As women from new generations, they are concerned about gender roles and inequalities and their bigger presence at rural areas.

Finally, a fourth option could be identified with the *new rural women*. We refer to women who have an urban experience and a high education level, and who are protagonist of a wide range of self-employment initiatives related to local resources and supported by significant local networks. These women perceive strong gender roles in their rural life but they usually have more tools and resources in order to overcome these obstacles than other women from previous models. Their social life is quite similar to urban women and they are extremely involved in social movements and political matters.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

If the women's development with equal opportunities is vital for the future of rural territories, public policies should strengthen those women life models with most

potential. On the one hand, having young and high educated women represent an opportunity for rural areas (third life model). These young population should be rooted to the area throughout programs focused on new rurality activities (ICT, professional services, e-commerce, social and ecological agriculture...) and services (leisure, culture, communications, housing, e-learning...).

On the other hand, it is essential to consolidate and to expand those life models configured by entrepreneur women (fourth life model). They are higher-educated women with strong roots in rural territories and key urban experiences. Their trajectories bring socio-cultural frameworks which imply the reconsideration of traditional gender roles and the full participation of women in rural life. So, we propose improving women participation, stimulating local leaderships, cooperative networks with institutions and better services to facilitate women entrepreneurship both from a business point of view and from a personal point of view. Also, there is a need for tougher actions for the overall social development of rural areas, especially those regarding gender roles and equal opportunities between men and women.

To sum up, rural world still keeps resistances to social and female development, which are more or less present depending on the life trajectories, educational level or sociocultural schemes assumed by women. This work makes visible the heterogeneity of rural women contributing with four life models that facilitate the analysis of rural areas with gender perspective.

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