Women of the mountains: from silence to recognition

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Summary

Through the centuries, women have succeeded in surviving in environmental frontiers such as the mountains, exploiting natural resources while preserving and caring for the terrain. When women leave, the mountain dies, it is said, for large-scale migration depopulates the hills. Where the women stay, entire valleys are reborn and, today, a majority of the micro-economy and identity-economy initiatives are run by woman. Many women have revived traditional economic practices such as animal breeding, handicrafts, the harvesting and transforming of herbs, and hospitality, making use of new methods and managing them by means of the latest state-of-the-art methods of communication.

When the women left the hills, they set in motion a feminist protest against a culture that saw them as little more than useful tools to be used for work and procreation. They were relegated to the sidelines, repressed sexually, and denied opportunity for self-fulfilment. The exodus that began in the 1950s and became a cause for concern for the decades that followed had ancient origins, rooted in the condition of women in Alpine culture.

Among the mountain folk there is no single vision of the female world as the vision changes according to women's social condition and role, their life story, and economic function. The woman was regarded as the repository of ancient wisdom, and the woman-witch-matriarch is still believed to exercise power over nature. The life of the mountain woman, however, was, and remains hard.

Youth was a very short-lived period and single girls were watched over by parents and priests, the guardians of the family's good reputation. Peasant

women were held to a moral double standard which denied them their right to pleasure. From a very early age, priests would instil in them notions of sin and of duty. Everything, especially sexual 'transgression', was a sin, and transgression was often accompanied by great feelings of guilt. Social control exerted by the community was powerful and, even as recently as 30 or 40 years ago, women would be publicly scolded for not wearing socks or for going dancing on a Sunday afternoon. Any departure from their sobre attire constituted a provocation.

In the case of marriage, however, the family did not get involved in selecting a spouse, although many observers of the 19th and 20th centuries have pointed out that financial interest was always a greater factor in peasant weddings. Marriage often ratified an existing state of fact: pregnancies that occurred before the canonical blessing were frequent. After marriage, women's lives changed totally and their personal lives became less important. They had to be devoted wives, mothers, and work until they died. The testimonies and songs of women point to the trauma of separation from parents and of dependence on the mother-in-law. Invariably, the young bride felt she counted for nothing.

Once married, aspirations had to be suppressed, and it was sinful to talk about them. Working in the fields, taking care of the home, the husband, and the old folk gave no respite to the woman. Love, if it had ever existed at all, was gradually destroyed by exhaustion and hardship. Consider this testimonial:

"…The woman was simply an animal…Women worked sixteen hours a day, more than the men, in fact. Any intimacy was reduced to a mechanical act, without a hint of affection. The man was master, the man had the money, and the man had everything."

The woman had no rest. The man had his local tavern, which the woman was never allowed to enter. In winter when the man took rest from work, she had to work harder than ever. In times of economic hardship, women were forced to leave the village long before the men. There were also some extreme situations. In Alto Adige and in Tirol, within the hereditary farm system, daughters were forbidden from inheriting property if they had any brothers. They managed to get married to the owner of a farm or lived as servants in their fathers' homes or in houses far from their village.

Female protests were voiced through songs or the telling or rewording of legends and myths. Both song and story telling in the Alps became the main form of expression and cultural creativity. Through their songs and stories, women became custodians of memories, guardians of ancient culture and traditions, speaking for the frustrated aspirations of one half of the population.

In peasant society, the woman was the first to get up and the last to go to bed. Girls started working from the moment they could walk. However, despite this social inferiority, the financial standing of family, community, and village revolved around the female. In a society where the man is often away or has to do the hardest physical agricultural work, the woman looked after the family's economic resources – feeding and tending to the cows, sheep, and goats.

Young girls and the mothers had access to ancient knowledge, which allowed them to exploit the wealth of the forest – they sold medicinal herbs, small fruits, and mushrooms at the market. They worked at the loom and knitted to provide clothing and linen and, in this way, passed down ancient decorative motifs from generation to generation. Women have always attempted to make their homes warm and welcoming. The housewife would subsequently draw upon this heritage when renting out rooms or doing seasonal work in hotels.

The woman has looked after the mountains for millennia, alone. For long periods of the year the men were away working as shepherds, mowing hay in the valley, or travelling as commercial salesmen. If the woman suffered from loneliness, she managed to exorcise this 'pernicious' feeling. In fact, life often became more pleasurable after the man left. A widow was commonly considered fortunate if she succeeded in getting some time to herself and was no longer at her husband's beck and call. The truly unfortunate were those that grew old childless, or worse still, without even a daughter.

Women not only busied themselves in the day-to-day running of the farm, but also developed alternative forms of supplementing their income. This allowed them to deal with additional expenses and brought worthwhile features of renewal and quality of life to their own community. In Claut, in the Val Cellina, and in Friuli, women would leave home with their spoons and wooden ladles, carved by men during winter, and stay away for months, only returning in the autumn when their load had run out.

From medieval times onwards, right up to recent times, the Alps have always provided refuge to rebels and transgressors. According to contemporary accounts, bandits infested the roads and the pathways of the entire alpine region for centuries. Women, almost always servants that had fled their masters and occasionally prostituted themselves, joined these derelict bands, even taking part in robbery and pillage.

Women or 'witches' were often regarded as the main instigators of the rebellions. It was believed that they were specifically encouraged by the devil to rebel against their masters. The demands they made, or encouraged the men to make, on owners and employers, and in particular, attacks against property, were often branded as witchcraft. The woman-witch became the

symbol of the 'dark side' of nature, of all that is uncontrollable, wild, disorganised and violent. Witch-hunts were a most powerful weapon against any form of social insubordination.

At the end of the century, it is the women, not the men, that the various writers of the inquisition on the state of the campaigns (Jacini, Meardi, and so on) point out as the true enemies of the social structure. Women's love of luxury was cited as the primary cause of demands for altering existing production relationships. The obstinacy with which a woman forces a man to spend huge sums for his daughter's trousseau was seen not in an individualistic light but in a social one. It was an invitation to the husband to earn more, thus indirectly making the wife the agent of independence and demands.

Before getting married, Alpine women would traditionally work as domestic servants in the city, thus gaining a certain degree of personal freedom. They often resented their loss of autonomy on returning to the village. Wet nurses stayed away for years, only coming back to the village for the time it took to produce the children which allowed them to go on working. From the last century onwards, men emigrated en masse from the hills, leaving the women alone in poverty. Women's response to centuries of repression was to flee from the village in search of a better life in the cities.

In the last few years the situation, in places, has changed. Today, as never before, the job market demands that one is up-to-date, flexible, and capable of accepting new challenges. This must be combined with self-discipline, the ability to communicate one's own thoughts quickly and well, and to be able to start afresh, if necessary. Alpine women have begun to develop these qualities in order to survive and assert themselves. Not surprisingly, women run some of the more interesting economic initiatives of the region.

The economy of the Alps in terms of luxury hotels, industry, and tendering for public works are still securely in men's hands as is political power. But the economy of the valley and the family concerns that root a person to the land are once more being looked after by women.

In recent years, however, a new economic concept has begun to take shape, the identity-economy. These are businesses whose origins may date back to the remote past but are being developed with the help of modern technology. In addition to producing an income, these initiatives preserve and assist or 'launch' the traditional cultures, allowing them to become the base for production. Women, as custodians of memory, have been successful in discovering and utilising the unexpected resources within 'their' territory.

The women of the Alps have refused to resign themselves to the subservient role of the housewife. Since traditional alpine cultivation collapsed, they have reorganised and adapted family businesses. Women now provide for family

consumption – the wholesome foods, '*because if we were to look at the cost, we wouldn't save that much*,' the vegetable garden, the cornmeal for the polenta, the poultry pen, and the pig for making salami.

These parallel economies allow savings and sustenance from a single income, including at times the children's university education. They also allow the alpine territory to be constantly tended to and monitored, actions that otherwise would have placed a high financial burden on the tax payer who would have to pay through taxation, or, worse still, through natural disasters.

Even tourism, which has for a long time overtaken agriculture, animal breeding, and rearing as the main income earner in the Alps, is almost entirely run by women. They are the actual masters of the house who take care of the guests, even though tourism comes at a price. It can lead to social and cultural changes that foster psychological problems, the erosion of the environment, loss of privacy, a quiet life, and well-entrenched ideas and prejudices.

Conclusion

For a social policy for the mountains to succeed, it must address the needs and desires of women. To keep the population on the mountain, it is necessary to provide essential services. Women should have access to education and training courses and to gender-specific assistance relating to children, the family, and the care of the elderly. Professional organisers and motivators are needed to help the mountain people deal with their sense of isolation and to learn to appreciate their own cultural heritage. Development of tourism is particularly important in that respect, but it too requires an investment in quality training. Women are increasingly proving themselves as the emerging and innovative factor, both in professional agriculture and in those new and hybrid forms that link agriculture to tourism.

In 1931, women in Italy constituted 19% of the agricultural labour, 24% in 1951, 29% in 1971, reaching 36% in 1981, and a little above this figure in 1991. But such statistics are misleading. In real terms, the exodus of women (as of men) from the mountains has been considerable. The total of 2,033,000 farming women of 1951 fell to 589,000 40 years later. The drop in the female agricultural workforce, however, has been accompanied by a rising trend of women owning businesses. In 1970, at the end of an exodus that resulted in the near depopulation of many of the alpine valleys, the agricultural census apportioned 18.9% of businesses to women. But starting at the broad end of the spectrum with 26.9% of smallholdings with less than one hectare, it narrows down at the opposite end to 7.2% of medium-sized concerns of 10 or 20 hectares. Figures from the 20-year period that followed, however, show noticeable progress. Despite the overall drop in the number of businesses, those run by women rose from 18.9 to 25.9%. Moreover, the

increase is not centred on small holdings of less than two hectares but on those with 10 to 20 hectares that were run by professional men in 1970, but which were absorbed by women's part-time work.

In the earlier models of family structures, the wife undertook actual physical work on the farm. Women were exempted from working the fields due to consideration of their advancing years or of the economic importance of the business. In fact, the presence of the working wife was inversely proportional to the importance of the farm. More recently, that situation has begun to develop in the direction of a counter evolution. That is the challenge of the new rurality.