CHAPTER

4

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Stories of resistant and resilient women in the protected areas of the Central Apennines, Italy

By

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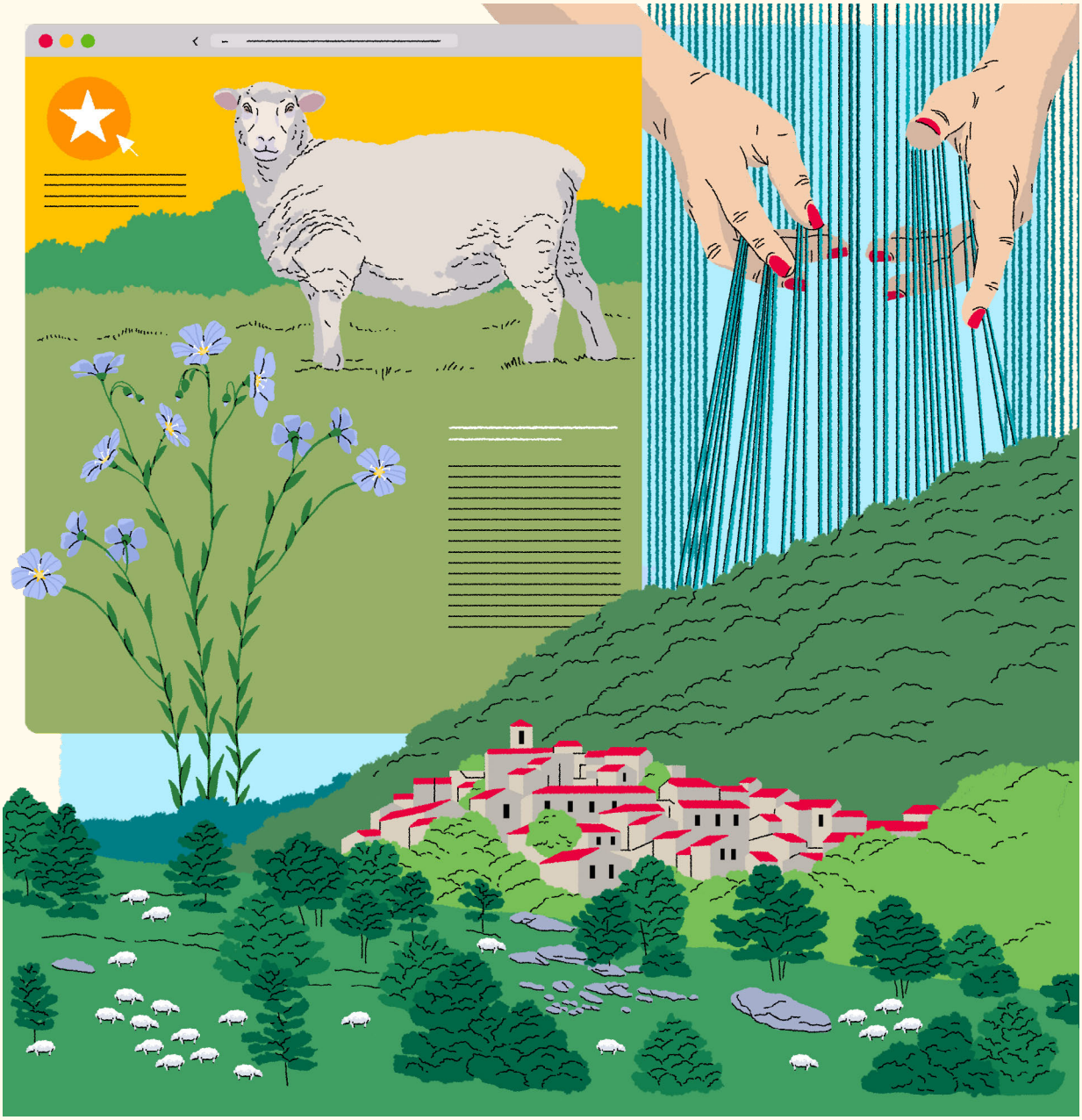

About the authors

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, the women's movement has been at the forefront of the debate around a new development model centred on sustainability, which generated ecofeminism. Recently a wide debate across the women's movement has centred the concept of empowerment as a common feature of gender and sustainability discourses, stressing the importance of balancing powers and participation in decision-making. The decline of pastoralism and mountain farming, and the subsequent problem of land abandonment, has been identified as threats to many species of concern for conservation efforts. Despite nearly three decades of policies that supposedly couple conservation and local development, communities are still declining in the inner territories, marked by ageing and depopulation. Here we present three case studies from the Central Apennines area, a mountainous territory characterised by a long history of pastoralism and the presence of big national parks and other forms of nature conservation. The first case study illustrates the issue of the representation of women's visions and perceptions in mountain communities. The second showcases women as agents of innovation in their communities. The third discusses the importance of cultural, social and community aspects other than innovation. All three highlight opportunities for fostering improved landscape stewardship approaches by local mountain communities, using a gender-sensitive approach.

Keywords:

women's rights | resilience | local communities | women-driven innovation

Introduction

The feminist movement can be conceptualised as an organised and politically conscious endeavour to overcome gender inequalities and support women's rights to self-determination and freedom. In Italy, the feminist movement has deep historical roots, despite the systematic erasure of women's critical contributions from history and collective memory. Even a rudimentary search reveals the names of countless women's groups and movements, which at various historical moments have urged society to improve the female condition, producing written documents or organising actions to claim women's right to a free existence (Biblioteca delle Donne, 2018).

The evolution of the feminist movement has been more and more linked to debates on alternative models of development, which take into account environmental and social justice aspects of development in addition to narrower economic considerations. In particular, since the 1960s, debates on inclusive development paradigms have brought women's needs to the forefront. This renewed attention to women's experiences has fostered diverse ecofeminist traditions, which gained strength in the 1980s as a social and political movement.

Research by eco-feminist groups (EcoPol Atelier, 2017; Provincia Autonoma di Trento, 2005) has produced a series of commentaries on the negative impacts of gender exclusion on the environment and resource use. Generally speaking, these reflections lead to the following conclusion: if the profoundly different (but equally important) female point of view on democracy is not taken into account, there will be consequences for the environment. The exploitation of natural resources, climate change and environmental degradation, which are the result of a gender-biased status quo, will continue to accelerate, leading to greater damage and greater social and economic inequalities, further widening the gender gap.

Unfortunately, even some 40 years later, these insights have not been well integrated into political, economic and social decision-making towards meaningful change. Approaches such as WID (Women in Development) and later GAD (Gender and Development) have only marginally taken up the range of solutions and insights offered by feminist traditions, and they have instead opted for the use of fixed gender categories.

There exists a lack of analysis on the lives of women in mountain regions in Italy and beyond (Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2012). It is pertinent to the conversation on gender and ecosystems to investigate the roles women

perform in mountain communities, and whether specific relationships between women and mountain ecosystems can be observed.

In the cases we present in this chapter, we talk about resistant and resilient women. We understand resistance as "the refusal to accept or comply" or "the ability not to be affected by something, especially adversely" (Oxford English Dictionary). By this we mean the perseverance shown by women to remain in place in marginal mountainous territories despite difficult conditions. We are also drawn to their proactive strategies and efforts to adapt to both ongoing and sudden environmental and social changes.

In the domains of sociology and ecology, "resilience" is more or less understood as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties or stress. This is general enough to apply to individuals, communities and ecosystems. From a feminist perspective, however, we wish to emphasise the need to go beyond depoliticised understandings which consider resilience merely as the ability of women to recover from abuse and violence. Resilient women are a positive autopoietic force, capable of generating or strengthening networks and bonds within their community; they are not principally vulnerable and in need of protection. In this chapter, we highlight how resilient women can be a resource and a strength for the whole community, particularly in times of crisis.

Women and empowerment

Dissatisfied by the slow uptake of gender in discussions on development, a range of women's groups have developed the concept of "empowerment," which has now become an essential lens for viewing intersections between gender and sustainability. As a concept, empowerment is powerful precisely because it aims to address power inequities by demanding the increased participation of women in decision-making, among other things. Despite the move towards empowerment, sustainable development continues to adopt a tokenistic approach towards gender, rather than robust forms of analysis, evaluation and effective action (Provincia Autonoma di Trento, 2005).

Beyond the concept of empowerment, which may refer to the individual dimension only, in Italy some women's groups are starting to reflect on the social concepts of space and place, focusing on women's points of view. For example, The Italian Association of Women Philosophers (IAPH) issued a report that proposes to "redesign territories as spaces in which women and all subjects may live according to their own wishes

and freedom... to restore the political centrality of social reproduction and of collective care practices." These statements underline that the collective care of a territory is not exclusively a task for women, but rather a society-wide concern. This statement also points out that the wider concept of "care" should pertain to the human being in general not just to women, thus challenging a common assumption (EcoPol Atelier, 2017); therefore, the aim of territorial planning should be to ensure that spaces and places are adequate to address the specific wishes and needs of women and various sectors of society.

In our research, we start from the fact that gender differences influence the reification (i.e. the concrete representation of an abstract concept) of a territory, a multilayer of terrain, ecosystems, heritage and community. Research must not be neutral; rather, it is necessary to acknowledge, in an inclusive way, multiple gendered views of space and place, in line with the concept of "sharing the world" expressed by feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (2009). Irigaray argues that the adoption of environmental, social and economic sustainability practices must first take into account gender difference and the possibility of sharing between genders. Irigaray's worldview is based on the concept of 'breath' as a flow of energy that feeds the exchange between the inner and outer worlds, thus enabling communication and encounters between different entities.

According to Irigaray's vision, this debate can be overcome by encouraging dialogue between genders, allowing concrete actions towards collective care of the environment, which can lead to social and economic sustainability. In an essay published in the book *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, the Italian geographer and journalist Claudia Bruno (2013) wonders whether there could be a world capable of including a variety of cultural approaches to 'nature,' even among women from different cultures. She frames this idea as a 'desire for sustainability' that needs to be shared in order to be realised, to give birth to communities not rooted in exploitation (Bruno, 2013).

The commitments and norms in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN CEDAW) clearly state that development will only be sustainable if its benefits accrue equally to both women and men; crucially, women's rights will only become a reality if they are part of broader efforts to protect the planet and ensure that all people can live with dignity and respect. Although the most severe disadvantages in the lives of women accrue in less developed countries, many aspects of the Western world also lag behind. For example, in Italy, women's wages are on average 23% less than their male counterparts (UN Women, 2018).

Territorial setting and context

We take the reader to the Italian mountain range of the Apennines, and particularly its central region, where its highest peaks (the highest being 2913 m asl.) are concentrated (Figure 1). Farming in these mountainous areas has gone uninterrupted since pre-Roman times. In particular, the strong altitudinal gradient offers the possibility of mitigating the extremes of the Mediterranean climate with seasonal migration, maximising the use of natural resources. While pastoralism has taken on a marginal role in local economies, it still has a strong identitarian role within Apenninic communities.

In alternating intensities, transhumance nomadism has been practiced almost continuously throughout the centuries. These human movements have deeply shaped local ecosystems, landscapes, settlements, communities and society, with impacts well beyond the borders of the mountain territories. Transhumance seasonal movements follow specific paths (*tratturi*), leading herds and shepherds hundreds of kilometres away from home during the winter months ("horizontal transhumance"). More localised migrations take place between the main village and nearby uplands ("vertical transhumance," also known as *alpeggio*). Together with commercial routes stretching all the way to Tuscany (where wool was historically processed and traded with the rest of Europe), these migratory paths mark strong cultural linkages from Abruzzo down to Puglia in the extreme south east of the Italian peninsula, where the winter pastures are located and have been kept free of agriculture until very recently. Additional waves of migration triggered by the post-World War II economic crisis, overlapping with existing patterns of movement, have led to the depopulation and urbanisation of most of Apenninic communities.

Transhumance has contributed to the consolidation of a social, cultural and economic model that sees women as rooted at home, within the community and the territory, and men as outward-bound income-seekers for the household. Presently, horizontal transhumance has disappeared, but marginal vertical transhumance still occurs. Therefore, migration continues to have remarkable effects on Apenninic ecosystems.

As clearly summarized in a recent report (Bakudila, 2017), nowadays mountain farming (including shepherding, cattle raising and arable farming) is often economically non-viable, unless a strong product chain is in place. Wool, which was traditionally used in women's craftwork, lost its economic value (for a complex set of reasons), while meat suffers from the market competition of cheaper farms, thus eroding the viability of pastoralism. Over the last decade, in areas where these changes

had not yet taken place, mountain farming survived mostly because it was considered to be a family tradition. It was too painful for many to abandon the land over which their fathers and grandfathers had long toiled. Farming often survived alongside a nonfarm-based job that provided the basis for daily family subsistence. Even if both men and women worked outside the local community or in a non-primary sector, many families owned some sheep and/or cattle and maintained a few fields, mostly because to do so is part of the local tradition. However, this custom is declining, and younger families are unable to keep purchasing new animals or tend to family allotments.

A pilot study has highlighted how engagement in tending the land or using natural resources can influence the bonding attitude to place, also known as the "sense of place" (Scozzafava & Farina, 2006). Despite these changes, some young people are choosing to turn, or return, to full-time farming. Many have been able to trace and consolidate their family land, which is often fragmented and previously neglected, or even rent new land. Some of them are drawn to new market opportunities offered by sustainable farming as linked to "green tourism" or "zero-mile diets".

In recent years, Rural Development Plans have provided agricultural start-up grants to young women. Therefore, nowadays many farming enterprises are run by women, although in some instances this is only true on paper, as the farms are really managed by male family members. Nevertheless, a real increase in numbers of women who choose shepherding and farming as a main activity has been recorded (Bakudila, 2017). Despite these encouraging signals, mountain agriculture is still on the decline. Keeping this evolving context in mind, our study includes other activities that, while they do not directly impact local ecosystems in a significant way, appear to be linked to the general viability of mountain communities and, indirectly, in providing pastoralism with a viable social context.

Conservation and land management efforts today

Today the Apennines mountain range crosses several administrative regions in Italy, each having a certain degree of autonomy, especially with reference to development planning, funding mechanisms and protected area management. Therefore, there are significant differences in the availability of subsidies for farmers and communities depending on the administrative region they reside in. The variation also applies to Italy's "Natura 2000 sites," designated after the European Union's "Habitat" and "Bird" Directives, which depend on various administrative

region-specific rural development plans for conservation funding. At the same time, there are a number of national parks which fall under the directives of the National Ministry of Environment that are nevertheless subject to local regional laws and protocols. Decision-making and funding are especially challenging for parks and protected areas that span multiple administrative regions.

One important concern facing these mountainscapes is the urgent need to reconcile conservation efforts with the territorial claims and practices of indigenous and local communities (Beltrán, 2000). The decline of pastoralism and mountain farming, and the subsequent problem of land abandonment, have been identified as threats to numerous species of concern to conservation efforts (Keenleyside et al., 2014). Farming practices, therefore, play a crucial role in ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation. Most conservation initiatives targeting pastoralism in the Apennines are focused on aspects of sheep herding, especially defence from predators; national parks have devised compensation systems to offset losses of protected species due to predators, as well as subsidies for the installation of suitable protection measures (most often electrical fences or trained lifestock guarding dogs). However, these issues remain at the core of a bitter conflict between conservation institutions and local communities that regularly manifests as outright opposition to conservation policies in general. A series of EU-funded projects in mountainous areas in Italy between 2006 and 2017 highlighted the conflicting interests of different stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in conservation action and developed strategies to improve conservation and sustainable development policies (Bath, 2012; Calandra, 2017). This remarkable body of work is mostly reported in grey literature or on project websites. Data collected within these projects' frameworks and subsequent activities have allowed us to consider the dynamics of various stakeholders, including women.

Throughout the years, the Gran Sasso Laga National Park (Figure 1) has been the forerunner in inclusive and participatory decisional processes. Several successful projects in the park have shed light on the human dimensions of conservation policies while also revealing the intertwining of various social dynamics pertaining to ecosystem functioning and conservation effectiveness (see Case Study #2 for more on the Park).

Figure 1. A map of the Apennines mountain range and the Gran Sasso Laga National Park. Regional borders are in light grey

Source: Provided by the authors

Surprisingly, many studies addressing the human dimensions of conservation practice fail to identify gender as a relevant factor in the shaping of collective attitudes towards conservation policies, despite the fact that it appears as a significant variable in some statistical analyses (Glikman et al., 2010). Less prominent among conservation professionals is the perception of pastoralism as a means of active landscape management within a multifunctional land use approach.

In the context of the Apenninic mountainous area, we encountered women's stories which we consider highly relevant to building a critical approach to gender in mountain ecosystems. Their stories show that indeed women are an active part of the recent attention to value ecosystems, not only as a source of income but also as a way to participate in a nurturing environment that offers opportunities for self-fulfilment. Their stories also clearly show the shortcomings of current policies that address gender in a non-specific way, as well as the inadequate attention being paid to ecological problems in mountain environments.

These women's stories helped us realize that the breadth and depth of the topic of gender in ecosystems management is most likely underestimated; thus, we seek to rectify this gap in literature and

practice through our case studies. We present some of the lessons that can be learnt from these valuable stories, followed by a description and discussion of the selected case studies.

The territory of (women's) dreams: analysis of an interview data subset

The National Park of Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga assigned the University of L'Aquila the task of carrying out a preliminary study, called "The territory of my dreams: Pathways and maps for the economic and social valorisation of the Park." The study was designed to assist in the preparation of the Socio-economic Development Plan, a planning tool that is demanded by the National Protected Areas Framework Law (L. N. 394/91). The study involved gathering hermeneutical interviews with residents in mountain villages about their expectations and visions for the future. The research was carefully planned and included both individual and group interviews. The interviews provided vivid descriptions or "dreams," in addition to maps illustrating the geographical scale of these "dreams." More than 600 "dreams" were collected, in which the inhabitants expressed visions and projects that would enable them to continue living in their villages (Calandra, 2018).

Despite efforts to speak with a diverse range of residents, an open-ended interviewing style and informal mode of contact, women respondents were a striking minority (Figure 2). Among the 428 people that took part in the interviews, only 94 were women. Of the 316 recorded interviews (including individual and group interviews), only 85 included at least one woman participant, and women-only interviews were even fewer, with just 59 (involving 63 women). The main reason for this lack of participation seems to be that women often do not feel entitled to speak for themselves or their community. When they did take part in interviews, it was mostly in women-only groups, while only a very small number of mixed-gender interviews featured women's voices. During the interviews, when men were present or nearby, women often called them in or let them answer for them even if directly addressed by the interviewer; this did not happen in women-only groups, where each woman answered freely on the basis of her personal knowledge and inclination.

The level of education of female interviewees is another interesting aspect: the vast majority had a secondary school diploma (51.65%) or a university degree (29.67%). Both percentages are remarkably higher than the average rates for the region's overall female population; the Abruzzo regional average is 30% for secondary school diplomas

and 13% for university degrees (National Institute of Statistics, 2011). Female respondents were highly educated, more than the regional average, which indicates to us that women with higher education, such as those in our study, are more likely to take an active part in their community's social and economic life and publicly express their views.

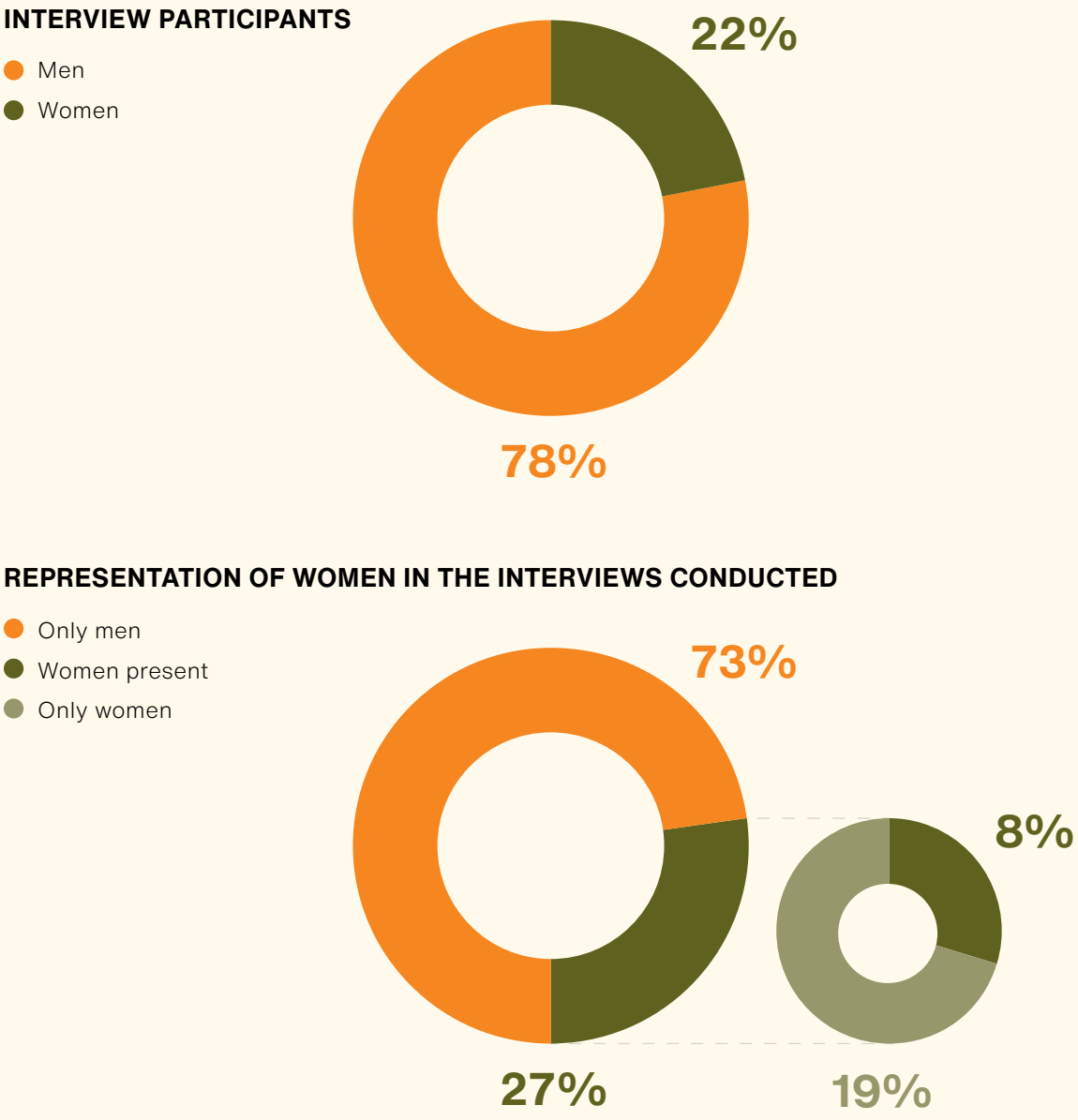

Figure 2. Women's participation in the interviews

Source: Provided by the authors

The words collected in the interview transcripts were processed graphically; the dimension of the font is proportionate to the frequency of the word in the transcripts (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Textual representation of women's "dreams"

Source: Provided by the authors

Visual processing of the interview data presents several interesting insights. The most frequently appearing word in the dream cloud is *fare* (to do), followed immediately by *parco* (park) and *territorio* (territory). This shows that women very clearly see their protected territory as an opportunity, although another rather significant phrase is *potrebbe/ dovrebbe* (could/should). The latter phrase represents the gendered histories of unmet expectations, the unquenched desire for improvement and the willingness to be an active part of the needed change. *Paesi* (villages) is the most mentioned geographical feature, and *turismo* (tourism) is the most mentioned economic activity, while natural and landscape elements are strikingly small: *montagna* (mountain), *fiume* (river), *lago* (lake) and *animali* (animals).

At first sight, this data can be interpreted as if women do not have much awareness of how specific ecological features of their territory fit into their vision for the future. But it may also mean that the symbolic value of these features is already embedded into the wider concept of "territory," showing a more holistic view of the environmental elements as part of a whole. The relative importance of the words *essere/creare* (to be/ to create) shows an important reference to the sense of identity that emerges which we also present in the case studies in the following sections. We also found remarkable the infrequent occurrence of the word *bambini* (children), indicating that the maternal aspects of their lives may not be at the forefront of the mountain women's dreams.

CASE STUDY

1

When women's heritage becomes central in a declining community

The following case study tells a story of resilience grounded in traditional culture and craft, which is strengthened by women's rights advocacy. We present the story of a woman archaeologist, Assunta Perillli, who decided to train as a weaver. She learned this ancient and complex craft from old women in Campotosto (L'Aquila Province) with the intention of reviving the spinning and weaving craft. Campotosto is a mountain village (1,400 m a.s.l.) already damaged by the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake and subsequently nearly destroyed by a series of earthquakes between 2016–2017. Unlike most residents who were forced to leave the village or preferred to be moved in emergency housing in other less remote areas, Assunta and a handful of residents decided to maintain their village life and activities. They took upon themselves the task of keeping mountain traditions alive, be it in the form of a small shop, a bed and breakfast, camping sites or the weaving of customary clothing and handicrafts using traditional tools and equipment.

The journey of Assunta Perilli is fascinating, starting when she found pieces of an old wooden loom in the cellar of her house and decided to put it together. This was a task far more complicated than she had expected: the knowledge of how to correctly assemble the pieces, how to thread the loom properly, and how to make it work to produce different cloth patterns all rested in the memories of her grandmother, her aunt and a few other elderly ladies from the village. For them, weaving connoted negative memories: working at the loom was not a choice for them; it was the only way to produce the *corredo*, the dowry that every woman needed in order to be able to marry. It was also a dire necessity in times of poverty, and it represented the only affordable way to make everyday clothes in communities where low cash earnings prevented the purchasing of pre-made clothing. Therefore, at the beginning the older women were unwilling to share any knowledge or skills, and they tried to discourage Assunta from carrying on this endeavour. They also felt that since Assunta is "educated," she should not waste her time in what they considered a "worthless" pastime, as education should have freed her from such ancient miseries.

Yet the beauty of the traditional clothes, the complexity of their specific patterns and features, and all the feminine culture linked to them were entwined with the history of the local villages. These elements enticed

the archaeologist Assunta, and they gave her the motivation to persist with the women until they gradually disclosed various techniques and tricks to her.

As the years went by, the older women understood that Assunta was pursuing the loom freely, that she really treasured their disregarded skills and art, and that she had additional skills and knowledge that could bring this ancient craft forward into the present-day. They realized that Assunta's project could be the unexpected acknowledgement of the wisdom and skills possessed by women that were once taken for granted or considered trivial and were now disappearing with them, forever. Her success became a source of pride for them. After years of teaching and coaching Assunta, eventually they became her greatest supporters, endorsing her in front of the whole community. Sadly, one by one, all the senior women passed away.

The old loom was not the only treasure that Assunta's grandmother had kept for her: she had also stored away a handful of seeds of an ancient linen variety that used to be widely cultivated in the area before the surrounding arable land was permanently flooded by a hydroelectric basin. However, her grandmother continued sowing it as a flowering plant in pots on the windowsill. For several years, cultivation of this linen variety was restarted on a broader scale and was honoured in the form of a local "linen festival" that demonstrated all the steps of linen cropping, mashing, spinning and weaving.

Assunta was able to add a broader view to these practices by participating in an international archaeological project on ancient textiles led by the University of Cambridge and the University of Copenhagen. The project carried out genetic studies on ancient linen varieties from archaeological findings across Europe. Assunta worked on making replicas of spinning tools found in ancient tombs and was an invited speaker at the final project conference in Copenhagen. Her efforts were supported by a more coherent project of development, including systematic seed saving, before the second earthquake swept away this fragile "cultural agriculture." The linen seeds are presently still kept by the local women, waiting for better times and a new sowing season.

Assunta's success in reviving and carrying on these traditional practices of textile craft, and bringing them to national and international attention, is not by chance. It occurred because she did not mount her loom and use it just for leisure. She started from the strength of the women's network in her family and community and added to it her knowledge and ability.

There now exists significant and high quality anthropological and historical research on the local textile craft. These studies trace the entire supply chain, down to the raw material and its production from farming. Through saving a variety of linen, the biodiversity aspect of the craft was taken into account, again thanks to some old women who perceived its value without being really aware of the whole picture. Assunta bridged the past and the present in an innovative way. Her craft activity is a catalyst for new models of community.

Assunta's reputation has grown in the community. She even helped to fundraise and organize activities for a "Women's House" in the nearby village of Amatrice, a village destroyed by the 2016 earthquake. The motto of this Women's House was *fare*, again, "to do," and its activities revolved around craft. She became the symbol of a territorial identity going beyond administrative borders (Amatrice and Campotosto are in different provinces and regions). Assunta was already a national celebrity in her field and willingly disseminated her skills to make the villagers' voices heard. On the occasion of the humanitarian visit of Prince Charles to Amatrice, she wove a kilt as a present for him, and this had great resonance in the media. However, as the spotlight faded, the earthquake-struck communities returned to their everyday struggles. Presently, Assunta's biggest fear is that her 20 years of hard work, now overly exposed in the national media, may be reduced to some shallow icon of the "Weaver of Campotosto," losing all the deeper social and cultural meaning attached to these traditional weaving practices.

The network of social relationships Assunta has woven is much more important than the clothes she weaves and sells; this is why she chooses not to sell her crafts on the internet, as she wants her activity to be an attractor of visitors to the local villages, and to provide a boost to the local economy. She participates regularly in national craft and sustainability fairs, where she always brings other villagers' products with her. For Assunta, these occasions serve as a platform to amplify villagers' voices, which she values over their economic benefits. She wishes to share "the burden of mediatic exposure" (her quote, translated) with her fellow villagers, who she acknowledges are fully part of the values she stands for. She has a clear perception of being part of a local network and reaching out to others. In nearby villages, up-and-coming women entrepreneurs such as Antonella, a restaurant and campground owner in a village by the lake, consider Assunta to be an inspiration. Assunta serves as a mentor to her, providing her the support which remains lacking in her own family. Antonella's story is also that of a return to her mountain traditions. Together they share the dream of creating a training and educational centre in the mountains where weaving and crafts will have a central place.

CASE STUDY

2

Pecunia – Opening new perspectives on pastoralism through women-driven innovation

In 2010, the Pecunia project started as a partnership between the National Park of Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga and the Biella Wool Company, a private enterprise in Northern Italy which aims to recover traditional wool production by strengthening the value chain. The Park offered to cover the transport costs of raw wool bales to the processing centres, where they were washed, sorted and evaluated for sale in bulk on the international market. The entire process was tracked so that each wool lot remained linked to its producer up to the final selling stage. This allowed each producer to get a share of income proportionate to the final quantity and quality of their wool. The innovation of the project lies in the fact that the private partner did not directly buy the raw wool from the farmers; its role was just to attend to its processing to improve its final market value. The final price was entirely paid back to the producer (after subtracting processing costs). After the sale, each producer also received detailed feedback on the quality of their raw product and specific tips on how to further improve product value. The feedback was crucial, as it encouraged farmers to pay attention to how they carried out the “in-stable” steps of production (especially shearing, but also selection of breeds) so that the following year they could increase their earnings.

In 2014, a consortium of local farms was created to manage the collection and transportation of raw wool, which provided independence from the Park’s subsidy. Two women from two different farms took the lead: one, a young animal production technician, and the other, an Economics graduate. They took up the challenge of innovating the sheepherding world in order to save it from extinction. They both saw the great opportunity this project was offering to the pastoral system, and they were more than willing to engage with the necessary innovations to maximise the income their farms earned. They were also aware that this was not a one-person-show, and that collective action could multiply benefits for all stakeholders.

In 2016, a few association members, mostly women, received training in wool sorting techniques. A sorting and packaging centre in Castel del Monte, a village with very strong pastoral traditions, was set up to be run by the association. Local farmers could now bring their wool to the centre, where it was sorted and packed in pressed bales, further saving

transport costs. Community members readily adopted new processing techniques, thus allowing the wool collection to become more cost effective and more accessible to other farmers in the area.

Initially a heavily subsidized activity, the Pecunia project is now growing on its own and generates sufficient revenue. Some farms have made wool their core business, shifting to superior breeds and adopting all possible innovations to maximise the quality of the product, including marketing nationally and internationally through social media and selling online. Other farmers have joined the wool collection project as a way to supplement their incomes based on the awareness that even a small contribution can help to reach the bulk quantity that is needed to gain access to international markets.

The wider results of the Pecunia project extend beyond wool. Not only did it transform a burdensome material (raw wool was considered as waste) to a significant source of income for farms; the project became a source of encouragement for innovation and opened the farmers to the world (e.g. through the wool craft, knitting communities in big cities, etc.). The project had the multiplier effect of improving other farm products as well, such as ancient arable crops (pulses and cereals), while others chose bakery products or agritourism. Overall, the project resuscitated declining human activities with high ecological significance such as sheepherding. Two women catalysed the revival and became leaders in their community.

Despite repeated attempts, these two women were not available for interviews. Unlike the other people we contacted, they were only marginally curious about the scope of this work and were not particularly willing to share their personal views on the theme of gender in mountain ecosystems, although on other occasions they stressed the difficulties of being a woman in a traditionally male business. What we reported here, therefore, is what we were able to glean from project documents and other available sources.

CASE STUDY

3

“Adotta una pecora” (“Adopt a sheep”) – A forerunner approach to ecosystem service payments

Manuela Cozzi is an agronomist from Florence who started as a consultant at the Ministry of Agriculture. Her job in the early 1980s led her to Abruzzo, where she met a local cooperative that was determined to farm sheep. She decided to join the enterprise, turning it into a remarkable entrepreneurial success. The enterprise, named the ASCA Co-op, precedes by some decades the rise of concepts such as Ecosystem Service Payments, in which people that live far away acknowledge the ecological value of an activity and willingly pay for it.

The ASCA Co-op adopted all possible innovations: from the diversification of activities by starting agritourism (among the first in the region), to a mobile dairy room that milks sheep while in the *alpeggio* (upland pastures), to improvements to wool processing and an in-farm butchery. They successfully set up a new multifunctional model of responsible social agriculture that did not exist before (EU agro-environmental measures were drafted in the 1990s).

Their greatest innovation has undoubtedly been the “Adopt a Sheep” project,[1] which began in 2000. The project encourages customers to do more than just purchase sheep products. It enables customers to “adopt a sheep” by paying a fixed annual amount. This guarantees constant cash flow, which the customer recuperates through products and other complimentary bonuses that are provided throughout the year as they become available.

An important factor for the project’s success is its clear communication and global marketing strategy which attracts customers from all over the world. The primary goal of the project is clearly communicated to customers: sheep farming preserves the pastoral ecosystem. The challenges and costs of sheep farming are also clearly communicated, as well as the unique features of all edible products, which are marketed along the lines of the “slow food” movement. This is a perfect example of an *ante litteram* Ecosystem Service Payment system, in which people

1 For more information refer to the website: http://laportadeiparchi.com/adopt-a-sheep/?lang=en

pay for the ecological value of an economic activity. It is common knowledge that organic products garner a higher price, and the “Adopt a Sheep” project motivates people to join and support landscape stewardship efforts.

In her leadership role, Manuela also maintains networks with other enterprises in the farming, tourism and education sectors, and she keeps close collaborations with relevant public offices such as the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment, the regional government, park administrations and local municipalities. Manuela continues to be an active professional in the field of rural development, which provides her a broad view of the policy context in which she operates.

We asked Manuela to share her views on how regional rural policies incorporate gender. The management of the Rural Development Funds in its previous programming periods always parsed recipients into “weak” categories, such as “young people,” “women” and “mountain areas,” and simply assigned bonus points in the evaluation procedures to these “disadvantaged” categories. The result was that many enterprises were fictitiously transferred to a woman in the family (wife, daughter, sister) in order to heighten the chance of getting financial support. This happened especially in the earlier programming periods, after which women started to become more aware of their potential and started to take control. Over time the number of women-led ventures have increased such as educational farms, forest kindergartens and social farms, although most are small-scale. These initiatives have rarely tapped into the full potential of the market. Multifunctionality and an Ecosystem Service Payment system are necessary for them to have broad positive impacts on their community and territory.

There is also untapped potential in the social dimensions of mountain farming to be accounted for. By acknowledging the health benefits that a rural context can provide to visitors coming from urban contexts, such as by comparing the expenses of medical treatments, another remarkable value of these ventures can become apparent.

According to Manuela, an interesting possibility is represented by the community co-operative format, a recent innovation to the co-operative society in rural contexts, where an entire village or wider community is involved in a multiservice co-operative. Community co-operatives offer a way of learning different skills and professional competences around a comprehensive farm-based social, recreational and educational activity system. Unfortunately, the present fiscal and administrative systems make this idea unpractical. Also, the growing “sectorialisation”

of economic policies makes it very difficult to engage and profit in multiple commercial sectors.

Manuela shows that environmental management need not conflict with income-generating activity. In fact, as her enterprise has demonstrated, through careful integration and local embeddedness, social enterprises can provide a range of multiplier effects including the protection and revival of ecosystems. Or put differently, environmental stewardship can be integrated within income-generating opportunities that holistically benefit local communities and beyond. Women leadership and insight seem to be a key factor uniting the three case studies presented.

Discussion

In addition to the women mentioned above, we met with a large number of women in Italy whose stories echoed similar experiences. We can only stress the fact that, contrary to common perception, the Western world is far from reaching gender equity. Nevertheless, women continue to achieve remarkable results in advancing new ways to cultivate sustainability in mountain communities.

Our cases show some common elements, and some significant differences:

- **Education**
  Education has a critical role in empowering women. Women with higher education are more likely to speak up for themselves, have the tools to identify innovative ideas and evaluate their feasibility. Competencies in Information Technology (IT) also appear to be crucial for the success of social enterprises. Similarly, knowledge of ecology and the environment is also vital for ensuring that all business choices made are sustainable.

- **Being an “insider” as well as an “outsider”**
  Being a native makes a tangible difference in mountain communities, as it gives access to local social networks and to the informal skills and knowledge that, in some cases, are at risk of extinction, together with the communities they belong to. Being an outsider is also a bonus, as it gives the possibility of a broader viewpoint, a fresh perspective that allows one to surpass local constraints and seek unexpected opportunities. In our stories, a dual identity is present: the women featured have either been away from their home communities or grew up outside the mountain community they presently are a part of.

- **Relationships among women, within the community and out into the world**
  Our study suggests that within women's groups, women are more likely to express their views. The cases presented support this assertion and highlight relationships to be a crucial element of success (and, when lacking, they may be the crucial element for failure). The positive relationships among women, such as sharing a common vision and common values, seem to be the most strengthening factor. Also, women's relationships with the community in which they are embedded are important in all stories, both for obtaining support and encouragement, and for scaling-up a small project towards bigger ideas of development for the entire territory. Relationships with the "outer" world act as an engine, not only in providing fresh ideas and perspectives but by providing a cash flow that is reflective of approaches to ecosystem services and their acknowledgement by faraway users. For instance, the fact that pastoralism is at risk of disappearing seems to matter more to an urban dweller than to a member of the local community, and that the latter is also willing to pay for it to keep the practice alive is an excellent example.

Mountain ecosystems are not yet widely seen as sources of ecosystem services for the wider geographical region. Rather, they are conceived by mainstream culture as a disadvantaged area, a view which stresses that mountain ecosystems lack compared to lowland areas. In other historical periods, mountains were often valued more than the lowlands, or at least just as much.

A mountain slope can be seen as a difficulty if the focus is on the hindrance to the movement of people, or as a resource, if the focus is on the potential energy of water along the slope. A mountain is a half-filled glass, and it is important to stay aware of the full half as well as the empty half. The diversity of mountain agriculture and social contexts needs to be recognized as worthy in itself as an agro-ecological system, and not pitied as an imperfect replica of existing development models.

The women in our case studies managed to find meaning, and a future, in things that were worthless to the mainstream, male-dominated views. These women identified hidden opportunities in mountain communities, a setting with reduced competition from the mainstream, male-dominated world. As shortcomings and negative externalities of mainstream development models are becoming increasingly visible, mountain ecosystems offer alternative and sustainable ways of economic and social organisation to those open to innovation.

Multifunctional farms are complex socio-ecological systems that need additional economic support due to the value of the ecosystem services they provide both locally and globally. The Common Agricultural Policy (Europe) should push towards the economic evaluation of ecosystem services that mountain agro-ecological systems provide. Moreover, the positive health benefits of these natural landscapes should be taken into account as positive externalities of sustainable agriculture. The national welfare system should recognize social agriculture as an effective and less costly way of promoting population health and general wellbeing, compared with other ordinary methods. We may define this approach as "responsible and ethical farming," a holistic approach that has seen women on the forefront and as leaders for sustainability traditions within mountain territories.

This holistic approach reminds us of a famous essay by Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, in which Woolf argues that the separation of women from the mainstream male society was an opportunity to develop their own values, through which a new political model of action could be founded ("finding new words and creating new methods"). It seems that the marginality of the mountain context gave women the opportunity to experiment with innovative ideas in practice. The three guineas that Woolf refers to – education, economic freedom and justice – may be transposed onto our case studies as pointing to IT, language and ecology as empowering tools for women, that allow them to make a tangible difference in their communities. The women who inspired this chapter seem to have found them, both Woolf's guineas and their modern equivalents.

The affirmation of women in the mountain farming world does not seem to be the product of a good gender policy, but rather the by-product of a bad mountain policy that totally disregarded whole sectors of activity, in which women autonomously saw opportunities and turned them into personal (and collective) success.

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