

Women, and reproductive Labour in alpine society

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ABSTRACT

In spite of cultural changes over the past decades, alpine society is still patriarchal. Women are expected to fulfil traditional aims regarding in particular children and old people care, family and house keeping, as well as subsistence farming. Nowadays most young women do not accept this culture, and decide to leave their home. As a consequence, depopulation leaves most of the settlement and surrounding landscape unattended by the traditional work necessary to maintain an ecological balance.

In 2003 the Centre for Alpine Ecology lanced a research project to study in depth the phenomenon of depopulation of women through the whole alpine area. For this purpose, a gender map was created in order to underline the differences between male and female depopulation patterns. A second step was to determine the destination of these women emigrating from mountain regions within a specific timeframe.

The evidence gathered reveals, as we expected, that in the reproductive generation of alpine dwellers, there are 1,2 men for every woman. More than 50% of women moved to towns in the vicinity of their original villages both for economic reasons and because social control is lower.

Recognizing the specific role of women in the entrepreneurial, social and political sector local authorities cannot permit depopulation in Alpine areas. Being aware of women's unique labour skills, it is adopting targeted gender policies as the only way to enhance alpine population growth and sustainable preservation of the local environment.

KEY WORDS: Alps – reproductive labour – discomfort – matrilocal self-sufficiency

The question of gender: as women leave, mountains die

Women are essential for the existence of alpine communities. Decisions on whether to have children and raise a family, and therefore to settle in a place, all depend on the women's willingness to do so. It is mostly women who devise new ways to do things, seek better standards of living, and strive to revive older traditions. Without them, no development is possible. This is why they are at the heart of an ongoing research project that has been undertaken by a team of anthropologists at the Centro di Ecologia Alpina (Centre for Alpine Ecology) and has already produced six international congresses and five major publications.¹

When women say no: traditional women's roles and their dismissal

What is the social status of women in the Alps and why is it such a rarely talked about issue, and one so difficult to grapple with?²

For centuries, women have managed to survive in limit-situations by keeping in touch with nature, using natural resources without depleting them, while protecting the environment, and cultivating a magic and poetic quality to life, while carrying out the task of recording the memory of past event. The Alps, that for centuries have been cut off from the main roads and development processes, have witnessed the emergence of a feminine culture and society, most of all because men were often absent, sometimes abroad, or anyhow worked somewhere else.

It is becoming increasingly evident that when women leave, because for instance, they refuse to marry a farmer, mountains die. If men cannot find a spouse from Latin America or Eastern Europe then they have to resign themselves to celibacy or resettle, as they grow old.

Women have been the first to leave, carrying through a feminist protest that, even though it has not reached international recognition, has not been less effective. It was a spontaneous reaction against a culture that regarded them as little more than servants and procreating machines, unworthy of any form of personal gratification. Their diaspora started in the '50s and has since reached alarming proportions. Today it is a fact of life.

This migration has ancient roots and it is to these roots that we should go back to if we want to better figure out how to reduce the likelihood that this phenomenon will occur or if, at least, we are determined to reduce its seriousness. In peasant societies, women were the first to wake and the last to go to sleep. Girls, like boys, would start working at an early age, for there was always something to do. Childhood in general was a very short period, carefully overseen by parents and priests, who acted as the custodians of morality.

Even though, compared to bourgeois women, peasant women enjoyed a certain measure of latitude, and could be promiscuous, conventional morality denied them the right to enjoy life's pleasures. From an early

¹ Michela Zucca (ed.), *Matriarcato e montagna I, II, III, IV, V*, Centro di ecologia alpina, Trento, 1995, 1998 e 2000, 2003, 2005

² Zucca, Michela, *Antropologia pratica e applicata*, Esselibri, Napoli, 2001, p.359

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age, they were constrained by religious prescription. Sexophobic priests inculcated into their minds and souls the concept of sinful behaviour and a sense of unbending duty. Nearly everything was reprehensible: as late as thirty to forty years ago, girls would be publicly reproached for not wearing stockings or for dancing on Sunday afternoon, when youngsters used to meet to play, sing and dance.

Transgressions existed, of course, but every action that broke the prescribed rules caused a deep feeling of guilt; social control was especially strong. Awareness and fear of sin were deep-seated and sexual transgressions were particularly chastised. By the same token, talking about sex was regarded as most inappropriate.

Predictably, their clothes would be chaste and austere, in both shape and colours, mostly dark, and fashion would not change appreciably over time.³ Once married, women's private feelings and aspirations were crushed. Their very existence was devoted to taking care of their husbands, relatives, children and of the household, till they died. They never really celebrated festivities. On Easter or Christmas, on Sunday, or on family celebrations, they were expected to work hard during the night to prepare special meals, and to clean, wash, mend, iron, etc. Everything had to look impeccable. They were forbidden from entering taverns, unless they had to bring their drunken husbands back home. In wintertime, when their husbands rested, they kept working and giving birth to babies. Virtually no money was left for anything other than the essentials and there was no real source of entertainment: women aged without having the opportunity to do something for themselves only, and they seldom experienced love or sexual bliss.

Anyhow, for all their socially disadvantaged status, the economy of the family and of the community revolved around them. Women kept the accounts of the family-farm but, because incomes were small, they had to do odd jobs to be able to deal with unforeseen expenditures. For instance, drawing on the knowledge and skills of previous generations, which could be traced back to the societies of hunters and gatherers, they would look for those berries, medical herbs, and mushrooms that they could sell on the market. They would also use the hand loom to make clothes, linen and other textiles with which they would decorate the household. Some rooms could be rented to tourists and, in summertime, if they lived near a tourist resort, many women would also have to work as chambermaids.

After all, one of the typical attributes of alpine people is versatility, because agriculture alone cannot support a family.

In the Alps, perhaps more than in the plains and in the cities, there seem to have existed two distinct, discrete societies, with little intercommunication: a male and a female society. This separation became dramatic during the nineteenth century, when men began to spend several months elsewhere, to earn more money, and their spouses remained alone at home, running the farm and handling the side jobs by themselves, with no prospect of seen their dreams come true.

The problem with all that was that, traditionally, before getting married, girls would work as housemaids in the cities and would get to know a different world and develop different needs, and perspectives on life and

³ In Campo, Val Tartano (So), in 1948 the priest refused to administer Holy Communion to a young woman who wore a black veil of the neighbouring villages instead of the local, traditional square scarf. See: Donata Bellotti, *Religiosità popolare in Val Tartano*, Quaderni valtelinesi n°7, Sondrio, p. 45 e 46.

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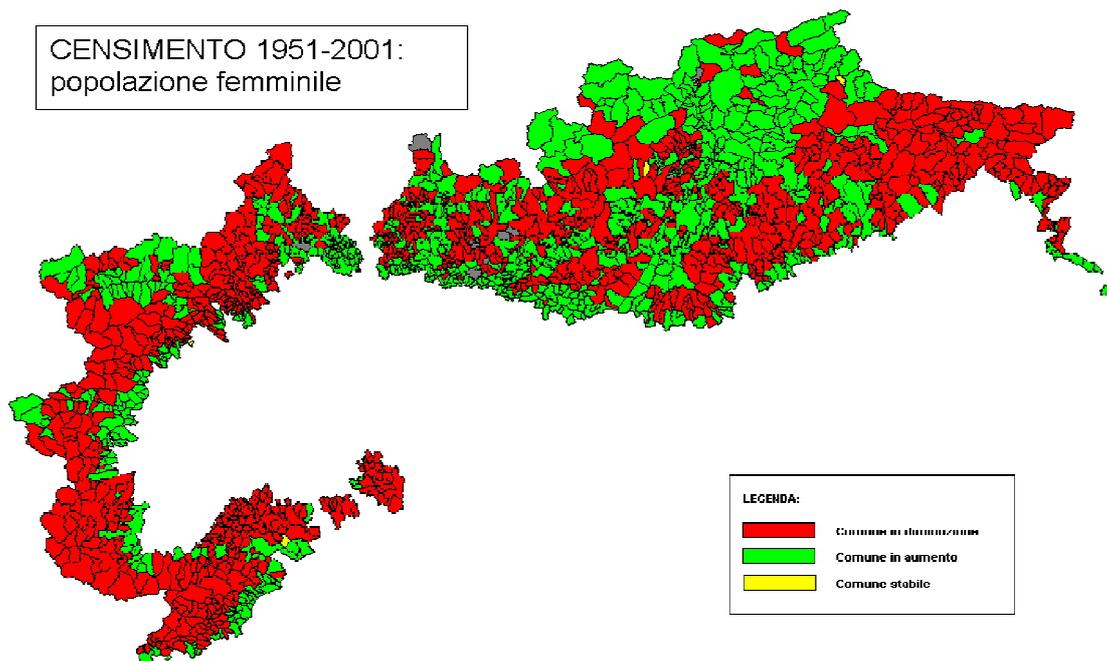
what to expect from it. When they went back to their villages they realized that they would have to relinquish the dreams they had previously cherished and the pleasures they had enjoyed. Yet these aspirations could not possibly disappear into thin air, and they were actually transmitted to their daughters. It so happened that women started to leave the mountains well ahead of their actual diaspora, which began about forty years ago.

The crisis of the extended family, that has dramatically improved the life of women living in the cities, has worsened the life of women living in the countryside and in the mountains. Now that longevity is increasing and solidarity networks are breaking down, women have to nurse elderly parents, parents-in-law, and relatives as well. Public services are often insufficient and, on top of that, women feel a sense of moral obligation to do what the others expect them to do, and sometimes they conceal their hiring of foreign carers to dodge the neighbours' judgmental attitude. Seeing all this, it is perfectly understandable that daughters will do anything they can to avoid that kind of existence. Therefore, women really had only one choice: to escape from their villages, and from the priests, their parents, brothers and husbands. They have moved out or have decided not to get married or not to have children. As a result, now valleys are far less populated than they used to and the local economy drags along, while the social and cultural life has waned.

Data about the diaspora

When we have processed the results of the inquiry and drawn the depopulation maps for the Italian Alps accordingly, we have realised that we should take a different line of argument, by analysing data in gender-based sorted lists to detect possible discrepancies in male and female depopulation patterns between 1950 and 2001, decade by decade.

Map 1: Demographic trend over the past 50 years. Male and female depopulation



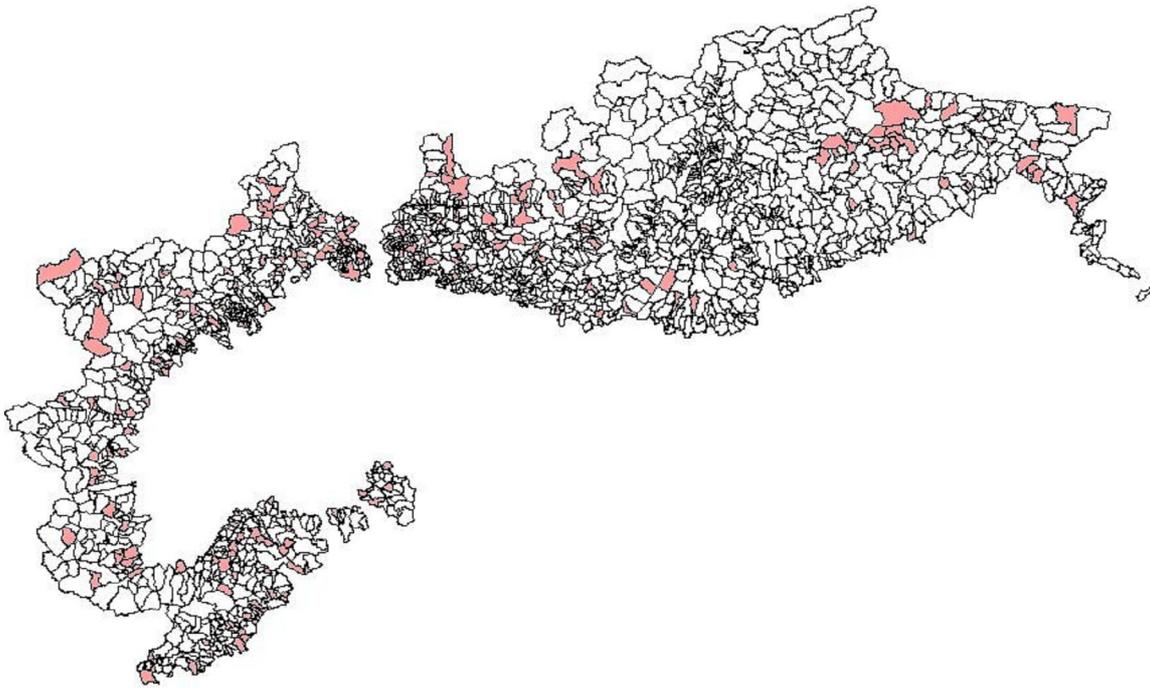
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While it is true that the two trends seem to run parallel to each other, we ought not to discount other factors:

- Women live longer than men, and therefore one would expect them to be more numerous, in the long term;
- Studies of demographic changes must take into account the 20 to 45 age-set, that is to say, the age at which women can still procreate and are more likely to, and the 20 to 49 age-set, namely the age at which women are more likely to marry in mountain communities.

When these variables are factored in together, we can fully realise the seriousness of the women's plight. Maps show that clearly. Pink-coloured areas are those where women aged between 20 and 49 are in equal number or more than men. As anyone can see, they are a tiny minority of municipalities. Across the Italian Alps, women in that age-set are almost invariably fewer than men. Some cases are more alarming than others, but the overall picture is by no means encouraging.

Map 2: Evidence of municipalities where the female population outnumber the male



Nationwide, women exceed men by 1.60%, but those between 20 and 49 years of age are about 49,9% of the age-set, 49.1% in Trentino.

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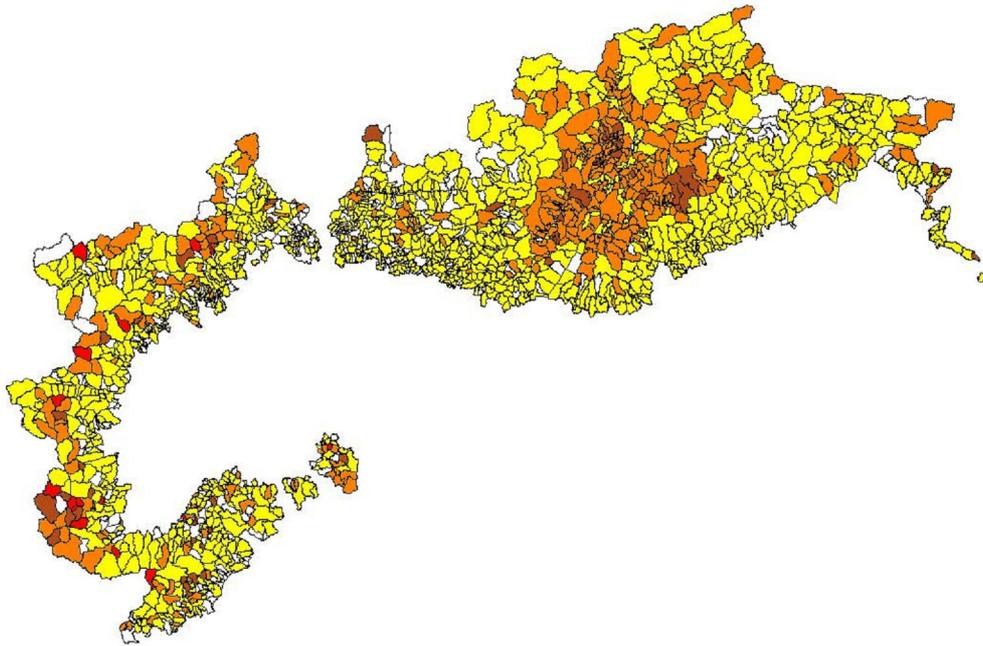
Tab 1: Number of municipalities divided by percentage of female population and by province

	> 50%	< 50%	
Alessandria	6	42	48
Aosta	13	61	74
Asti	1	11	12
Bergamo	18	121	139
Biella	14	46	60
Belluno	14	55	69
Brescia	11	92	103
Bolzano	16	100	116
Cuneo	25	126	151
Como	20	71	91
Gorizia	1	12	13
Imperia	6	42	48
Lecco	12	40	52
Novare	0	3	3
Pordenone	2	24	26
Sondrio	19	59	78
Savona	23	43	66
Trento	45	178	223
Torino	27	119	146
Triesta	0	4	4
Treviso	1	23	24
Udine	8	53	61
Varese	20	38	58
Verbania C.O.	15	60	75
Vercelli	5	25	30
Vicenza	3	48	51
Veronza	3	24	27
	328	1520	1848
%	17,75	82,25	

Source: Elaboration from Italian Census 2001

In more than 80% of alpine municipalities, for every hundred residents there are between 51 and 55 men and, in Trentino, there are various districts in which the ratio drops to 60 to 40, or even to 65 to 35.

Map 3: Evidence of municipalities where the female population are lower the threshold of 50%



Paradoxically, Trentino, which is one of the most virtuous alpine regions with respect to depopulation, is the one where the ratio is most lop-sided. Indeed, the part of the map occupied by Trentino is almost uniformly dark. In nearly 80 percent of municipalities women in this age-set are less than 45 percent. Only in larger towns like Trento, Rovereto, Arco, and Borgo Valsugana is the ratio more favourable to women.

Tab 2: Evidence of gender percentage in the “largest” municipalities of Trentino (> 5000 inhabitants):

Trento	50,33
Rovereto	50,00
Pergine Valsugana	49,86
Riva del Garda	49,92
Arco	50,97
Mori	48,23
Lavis	49,74
Ala	48,45
Cles	49,82
Levico Terme	48,52
Borgo Valsugana	50,61
Mezzolombardo	48,16

Source: Statistical Service of Autonomous Province of Trento

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In 10 municipalities, for a total of 4,772 residents, the mean ratio is 0.72 women – 41.9 percent altogether – for every man included in the 20-49 set.

Tab 3: The less 10 municipalities of Trentino for Percentage of female presence (2001)

<i>Name and percentage</i>		<i>Total population</i>
Vignola-Falesina	38,30	128
Massimeno	39,13	106
Amblar	41,25	215
Brione	41,38	148
Cavizzana	42,16	239
Fierozzo	42,60	456
Preore	43,10	395
Smarano	43,46	450
Pieve Tesino	43,60	743
Peio	44,21	1892
MEDIA	41,91 %	4772

Source: Statistical Service of Autonomous Province of Trento

Our analysis proves that, in the 1990-2004 period, many of the “missing” women have remained in the same valleys: 52.6% of them have simply moved to larger settlements. With changes of lifestyle in the settlements of origin, it is possible that these women would not have left. However, it is undoubtedly difficult to promote changes that are, first of all, of a cultural nature.



Tab 4: Demographic trends between 1990-2004

	Emigrates			Location of the new residence						
	Total	n. of women	%	Abroad	Outside Trentino	Within the valley rural settlement	Within the valley urban settlement	Within the valley (TOTAL)	Other Urban settlement in Trentino	Other Rural settlement in Trentino
Amblar	57	33	57,9	12,1	27,3	48,5	3,0	51,5	9,1	0,0
Brione	44	26	59,1	7,7	15,4	42,3	0,0	42,3	19,2	15,4
Cavizzana	30	16	53,3	0,0	25,0	50,0	0,0	50,0	6,3	18,8
Fierozzo	66	33	50,0	3,0	6,1	18,2	42,4	60,6	21,2	9,1
Massimeno	39	22	56,4	0,0	40,9	31,8	18,2	50,0	0,0	9,1
Pejo	341	198	58,1	1,5	13,6	48,0	0,0	48,0	26,3	10,6
Pieve Tesino	276	140	50,7	0,7	22,9	30,0	13,6	43,6	25,0	7,9
Preore	82	46	56,1	6,5	15,2	23,9	37,0	60,9	4,3	13,0
Smarano	168	89	53,0	15,7	16,9	52,8	7,9	60,7	4,5	2,2
Vignola Falesina	54	32	59,3	0,0	0,0	6,3	84,4	90,7	9,4	0,0
TOTALE	1.157	635	54,9	4,4	17,2	38,6	14,0	52,6	17,6	8,2

Source: Elaboration from Statistical Service of Autonomous Province of Trento

It is undeniable that there is a social and cultural problem affecting women living in mountain communities that we have detected throughout the fieldwork and that cannot be by-passed.

It looks like, especially in Trentino, changes in customs, morals, lifestyles, and in the women's status have not been completely digested by the male population. The weakening of the mechanisms of social and family control on women and a different conception of marriage and love-life are culturally and socially ostracised and those women who stubbornly resist this opposition are usually forced to leave.

Hidden discomfort: the right to a denied pleasure, traditional expectations and current needs

We have detected an obvious dichotomy between social expectations and women's claims and demands. Married or aged women are still required to be the primary caregivers, even though they may have their own job, and an exacting one at that. People believe that their incomes should be devoted to family and home-care, their patience should be drained by sometimes abusive if not violent relatives. In a word: they should constantly sacrifice themselves for the others.

Here is an example of what could happen anywhere in the Alps. In a German speaking alpine area, a 40-year-old single woman, the director of an institute employing 70 researchers, decides to move back to the village where she grew up, where her brother still lives, alone. Because she retains her job as head of the

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research centre, she of course hires a maid to help her with the domestic chores while she is at work. Unfortunately, the traditional view of things goes like this: a middle-aged woman with an unmarried brother should behave like someone who is half a wife and half a mother, that is, like some sort of a servant. She should stay at home and basically pamper him. Because she is not like that, gossiping becomes unbearable: why does she pay a housemaid, can't she do those things by herself? Why does she spend so much time away? What does she do while she is not here? Does not she feel guilty and embarrassed when she leaves her brother alone? Eventually, the brother could not withstand such an enormous pressure: every time he walked into the pub, he felt like everyone was gossiping about them. She eventually had to leave and go back to the city.

Rumours sometimes turn into outright harassment. In one of the villages where we did fieldwork, one of the few young mothers with a university degree turned down an offer to work as a high-rank civil servant, which would have allowed her to combine a professional career with motherhood, because of her fear of what her neighbours would have thought if she had made “mistake” at work.

As a consequence, girls are most eager to look for friendly relationships outside of their close circles, which can be used as a pretext for spending as much time as possible away from their constraining daily routine. Problems worsen when girls get married, that is to say, marry into the husband's family and move in with her parents-in-law, that she is expected to care for, especially when they are no longer self-sufficient, given that paying a professional carer is regarded as socially and morally unjustifiable. While money spent on luxurious cars is an investment, money spent for carers, nursing homes, and baby-sitters is wasted. Women will have to see about that.

Men are usually free to pursue their passions and hobbies (playing cards, fishing, hunting, going to pubs, etc.), do sport and volunteering activities, see their buddies (but not at home, which is not suitable for this kind of get-together). When a young mother died in a car accident she was blamed for taking a day off to go skiing. Married women who dared to go to the local tavern would be labelled as irresponsible, if not sluts. Worse still, the kind of behaviour that must be tolerated with men (e.g. coming home drunk at night) is not forgiven when it comes to women. Even today, women cannot dawdle: they are not supposed to have any spare time and when they meet, they must account for the time they spend away from housework.

When pressure reaches the point of no return

A suffocating social climate, if unacknowledged, may provoke major distress and critical confrontations: over the past years there have been several cases of “murderous mothers”, motivated by seemingly unexplainable depression syndromes.

I analysed the socio-economic and cultural context of these tragic events, in connection with the Centre for Mental Health in Cavalese (Province of Trento), an institution specialised in treating and researching this kind of pathologies, especially when they affect women. The results are bewildering. I have examined infanticides perpetrated by young mothers with no economic or family problems in Cogne and Montjovet, both in Aosta Valley, Santa Caterina Valfurva and Casatenovo, in Lombardy, and Meran, in South Tyrol. By and large, their husbands are described as “nice blokes, working hard, family men”.



These women did pursue higher education degrees. All but one were housewives, and even this one exception worked part-time, while another, a would-be TV starlet, did not regard what she did as a job but rather as a past-time. According to a widely held belief, they have the time and opportunity to devote themselves completely to their children, with the only help of their mothers, if they are still alive; if they are not or live too far, these young mothers are left to their own devices, no matter the number of children.

The common denominator of these dramas is the loneliness of women and the inability of men to detect the signs of the impending tragedy. In one case, the mother was left alone even though she had not been able to sleep for months. Half of them were under psychiatric treatment but their husbands did not think they needed help at home, even though they did not lack the money to hire a helper. These women lived secluded and felt terribly lonely. One, who used to spend her holidays in the valley where her husband was born, remained a virtual stranger to the inhabitants of the village where she stayed.

The high consumption of psychotropic drugs among women in the rural Alps is most significant, being a clear indication that there is a large problem that people have hitherto chosen to ignore.

Matrilocal self-sufficiency

In alpine villages, women are agents of change, also because they have managed to use clans' traditional mutual assistance rules to their advantage, during early motherhood. In Switzerland, a survey has been conducted to assess differences in behaviour among Swiss nationals and second generation Italian women living in Switzerland with respect to the problem of managing career and motherhood. Surveyors expected that Italian women, coming from a culture in which they are supposed to stay at home after marriage and therefore to quit their job would be comparatively worse off. Instead, the opposite is true. The ostensibly "backward" Italian customs actually allow young mothers to retain their jobs because their mothers are

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prepared to take care of their grandchildren, to the point that some even move to live near them. Conversely, Swiss mothers could not expect that kind of help from their mothers and were more likely to quit their job. This type of clan-networking is exceedingly effective in rural communities in the Alps and more than compensate for the lack of public services for children. While on the one hand living close to one's parents also means being controlled, on the other hand, if family members are on good terms, this also implies that much of the burden of having children to look after for most of the day fall upon the grandparents. This is probably the main reason why matrilocality – i.e. the young couple settles near the house of the young wife's mother – is so widespread, and should be seen as an important development priority. In this sense, it is even more imperative that basic facilities like gyms or libraries, as well as cultural opportunities be provided to those municipalities in which this sort of mutual help networking comes almost natural. There are highly promising instances where self-management of public facilities has been successfully experimented, such as in Terragnolo, where the kindergarten is run by young mothers.



What people say: social control

A retarding factor in the social and economic development of alpine communities is social control, comprising all the measures necessary to keep the social order intact. If so many communities crumble down, that's because they have not been able to respond and adjust to changed circumstances and are still dominated by a mechanism of mutual surveillance monitoring and evaluating the actions of every member. This mechanism originally derived from the need to maintain internal cohesion and neutralize most sources of conflict, but it gradually crystallised codes of conduct and the underlying system of values, which are now hardly consistent with modern expectations about freedom and self-determination, the result of the emancipation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.

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Even today the set of rules that parents and acquaintances instil in children is meant to provide a safe pathway, from schooling to work, to marriage, and to parenthood. The infringement of rules is punished by merciless gossip but is almost inevitable, insofar as the mass media convey an idea of how life should look like, a portrayal that, especially for women, is completely at variance with traditional values and habits of the mind. Those who are not ready to bow must leave, for young women are not presumed to live by themselves in an alpine village; the others will have to reside in their parents' home and conceal their true feelings and frustration as much as they can.

Fear of judgment has another terrible consequence: it stifles frank interaction between individuals and clans. Behind the façade of a dense social life, one can discern the unpleasant reality of people who keep other people at a distance, for those who are not clan-members are apt to misjudge or misrepresent a family's lifestyle, and thus destroy their respectability: "the less we see each other, the less we have something to say about one another", as one informant remarked.

Inevitably, then, children do not really know each other, because their parents are not accustomed to hang out together and because, when they go to school, they are assigned to different classes, in the expectation that, in this way, they will be able to familiarize with other peers. However, when they go back home from school, they spend the rest of the time with their family, not with their new acquaintances. These relationships are shallow, with little emotional engagement, and go on like this, on and off, for years, seriously restricted by the need not to arise suspicion, not to look too different from the others, not to express too straightforwardly one's own views, for fear of being cut off as too extroverted, and therefore unreliable.

Lest festivities should lead to feuds between clans and families, people meet and celebrate on neutral grounds: the garden, the log-house on the mountain, or the tavern. The household is forbidden territory for outsiders, even for the children's and husband's friends. They have to make do with the "stube", that is, a separate room, often behind, underneath or adjoining the kitchen fireplace.

Not surprisingly, most informants revealed that nearly all of their friends do not live in the village and tend to be co-workers, with whom you don't have to share your private sphere. But still, relationships outside the family circle are thin and a generalized distrust has the upper hand. Disclosure of intimate, personal information is carefully avoided and this may cause people to feel lonely, alienated and depressed.

As a matter of fact, social control has been blamed for the high rates of depopulation in smaller villages by the C.I.P.R.A, namely the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps. Hence, we must counter this phenomenon if we want to achieve a reasonably sustainable development. As long as this vicious circle of harsh criticisms will last, change and the emergence of an entrepreneurial mentality will not be possible. This is all the more intolerable, given that large amounts of money are left in banking accounts or spent somewhere else, where nobody knows who the investor is and no one can complain. Therefore, ironically, one can see in the villages houses in need of renovation that are left untouched, because the owners prefer to buy properties in the city, or abroad, in order to prevent invidious comparisons with other villagers.

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Social control is more oppressive when it comes to more vulnerable citizens, such as the younger generations and women, because older people hold the reins of power and establish what is culturally and socially viable and acceptable, and what is not. Those who do not abide by the rules are progressively excluded from participation in the social life of the community.



Women and the identity economy

As of late, a counter-movement striving for change and for the institution of economic measures that could prevent emigration has taken shape. This is what is conventionally called “identity economy”.⁴ It is not a matter of “total innovation”: some of the proposed practices are age-old, but are reshaped in a more modern cast, using advanced technologies. Besides creating new income sources, these initiatives preserve and regenerate traditional cultures. The local cultural heritage is re-appropriated and improved, also through insights and contributions from the outside, and conservative traditionalism is cast aside in favour of a more diverse and creative future. This is the task that women, the traditional custodians of the memory of a culture, have made their own, on behalf of their communities and land.⁵ This dynamism certainly accounts for the fact that some of the most promising entrepreneurial undertakings in the Alps have been started by women.

Let’s make no mistake: the most lucrative business – i.e. hotels, ski-lifts and chair-lifts, factories, public procurements, etc. – is still in the hands of men, as it is political power. But family-scale economy is controlled by women. Most of the micro-economy and identity economy is run by women, who generally manage to combine environmental and business concerns, tradition, innovation and rights claims. This specific sensibility is the asset on which a new, more socially and culturally concerned entrepreneurial style can be built.

⁴ Zucca, Michela, *Antropologia pratica e applicata*, Esselibri, Napoli, 2001, p.256.

⁵ Zucca, Michela, *Donne delinquenti*, Esselibri, Napoli, 2004, p. 336.

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Tourism, for instance, an activity that has almost replaced agriculture and zootechnics in the Alps, is mostly managed by women, especially insofar as medium and small size enterprises in the private sector are concerned. Women are in charge of virtually everything, from internal design to reception and tourist information.

Family habits inevitably change in response to tourism. For instance, before, households were relatively small, and families were forced to share almost the same premises with their guests, so that even the intimacy of Christmas celebrations was lost⁶.

Today, women seem to be more open-minded than men, more willing to experiment, to learn new things and new practices, even at an older age. They enthusiastically participate in cultural initiatives where they help, cook, entertain, etc., grit their teeth, and invest on the future, while men appear more content with immediate gratifications.

The authorities should finally realize that, besides basic services like a post office, an elementary school, and a grocery store, women need gender-friendly services that could help them to take care of their children and older relatives. Women also need spiritual contentment, which should not be underestimated and neglected. This can be provided by a focus on culture as a remedy against the desertification of alpine villages produced by TV-sets.

A growing number of peasant women.

Increasingly, women are proving their worth and resolve in professional agriculture and in agro-tourism. In Italy, women comprised 19 percent of agricultural labour in 1931, 24 percent in 1951, 29 percent in 1971, and approximately 36 percent in 1981 and 1991. Couples formed an economic unit: men were more likely to find employment in a factory, while women continued to work in the farm.

However, statistic estimates are deceptive: the women's diaspora was massive and in some valleys they were the first to leave.



⁶ South Tyrolean informant from Valle Lunga (Bz).

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Whereas in 1951 there were 2,033,000 peasant women, in 1991 only 589,000 worked in the agricultural sector. That said, a remarkable change was the rising importance of women in farm management, and with very encouraging results.

In 1970, 18.9% of rural businesses were controlled by women distributed as follows: 26.9% of the small ones, 7.2% of the medium-sized, and 8% of the large ones. If we contrast these data with those of two decades later, we can appreciate the considerable progress. While the total number of agro-businesses decreased from 3,607,000 to 3,023,000, those run by women increased from 680,000 to 780,000, that is, from 18.9% to 25.9%. This expansion mostly consisted of medium- and large-sized farms, unlike in the past, when the involvement of women in the management of the farm was inversely related to its economic importance.

Prior to this crucial shift, in rural areas, allowing one's wife to be a housewife, instead of working the field or milking cows, was the privilege of relatively wealthy land-owners, and a status-symbol. In the Alps, this occurred very rarely. Nowadays, things are slowly changing, and women are attempting to reverse this trend. This is the real challenge of the "new rurality".

The 2000 national Agricultural Census described a changed scenario, where the presence of women in leadership positions was becoming more salient. While the number of mountain farms had decreased by 23%, and there were about two and a half million farms nationwide, nearly 800,000 of these were managed by women, that is, almost one third of the total. However, while there has been a sharp increase with respect to farms located in the hills and in the plains, mountain farms run by women have actually declined by 14%. Still, statistical evidence shows that when women control an agro-business, this is less likely to fail. Women managing farms in the mountains thus appear to be better organized and more determined than men, and this is especially true in the case of medium-sized (10 hectares) and large-sized farms (over 100 hectares).

The Census report tellingly points out that women promote a "new concept of rurality", by valorising the land and protecting the environment.