

LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND RURAL SPACE: A TERRITORIAL ANALYSIS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since Spain's return to democracy in the mid-1970s, women have greatly improved their economic, political and social status in the country; nevertheless, despite dramatic gains by the second decade of the 21st century, women in Spain remain disadvantaged citizens when compared to their male counterparts' political engagement. This gender difference is especially evident in rural areas. In a recent survey of 4,500 people between 20 and 65 years old living in rural Spain, 25% of villagers indicated their belief that men and women cannot perform the same functions, nor have the same responsibilities. In fact, 30% of the population considers that women should sacrifice their productive activities for reproductive ones, and preserve their traditional role (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, Rural y Marino, 2011). These data exemplify the inequality that persists in Spain. Furthermore, rural women suffer from two limitations, being women and living in rural areas where there is a more patriarchal structure and a lack of services and opportunities compared to urban areas (Binimelis et al, 2008).

This evidence indicates the need for new studies and proposals to deepen the understanding of gender dynamics in Spain's rural areas. With this objective, this study analyzes electoral data from six Catalan Pyrenees counties to determine the degree of women's political participation and determines, through qualitative methodology, the factors that facilitate or constrain women's active involvement as mayors and council members in rural municipalities.

II. WOMEN AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE AS A STUDY LINE

In recent years Spanish women have been increasingly elected to political office. In March 2007, the Organic Law 3/2007 for Equal Rights of Women and Men introduced the requirement to include at least 40% women in the electoral lists of political parties running for elections. At local scale, this requirement applied initially to towns larger than 5,000 inhabitants, and since 2011 has expanded to include all towns with 3,000 inhabitants or more.

Despite progress in legislation, the political reality of women in Spain and Catalonia (Verge, 2010), and the Pyrenees region in particular (Casellas, et al, 2009), is far from being comparable to that of men. In the Pyrenees, the double discrimination against women in terms of production and reproduction is accentuated by geographical conditions, lack of employment opportunities and the limited ability of local governments to provide services that would free women from their traditional roles (child care, elder care, etc.) and permit greater civic participation (Tulla, 1991). Rural areas are less densely populated, and therefore are less able to collect taxes to provide such services. Additionally, their historical isolation within the mountain ranges has helped preserve traditional patriarchal structures (Binimelis et al, 2008), resulting in limited job opportunities for women (Garcia-Ramon et al. 1995, Monk and Hodge, 1995; Viladomiu and Rosell, 1998).

The limited role of women in rural policy has been addressed in international studies. Massolo (2003) led a study of rural and intermediate towns of various Latin American countries that reported only 5.3% of mayors were women. A Brazilian study also demonstrates limited female participation, as women represent just 9% of the members of municipal councils in the State of Sao Paulo (Brabo, 2008). Latin American studies have identified active participation in social movements as a precondition for the women who subsequently form part of the municipal electoral lists (Silva, 2011). In Europe, research on the participation of women in local governments, such as in Hungary (Timar, 2004), has focused on urban municipalities. In Spain there have been studies on women entrepreneurs and elected politicians in large rural towns of Andalusia (Palenzuelo Chamorro, 2002). There has also been a discussion on the integration of women in formal politics as mere continuity of the work developed by men or, conversely, as an example of a break in local political culture (Otero, 2006).

Studies on political involvement distinguish between demand and supply factors (Norris, 1997). Broadly speaking, demand factors are represented by the degree of need or ability to include women in the organs of political representation. In this sense the law passed in 2007 represents a major step forward. Supply factors influence the degree of involvement of women in politics as candidates or elected officials, including the interest or bias held by women themselves as well as the attitudes of those who surround them. Both supply and demand factors are conditioned by dominant cultural values, which imply a particular view of society, in a mountain area that is bound and tied by gender stereotypes. In this sense, gender stereotypes have played a triple role in the political arena, operating in the minds of political parties, women themselves and society as a whole.

III. CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The High Pyrenees and Aran region (APIA) is located in northwest Catalonia. The six counties in this region cover 5,686 km² (17.8% of Catalonia's area). It had a population of 76,662 inhabitants in 2010, which represented only 1.02% of the total population of Catalonia.

To contextualize the political involvement of women in this mountain region, it is necessary to pay attention to the socioeconomic development that took place throughout the twentieth century. Historically, the physical structure has conditioned the development of productive activities, the use of natural resources and accessibility to the region. The APIA presents unique mountainous terrain characterized by an east-west asymmetry of valleys. This morphology has benefited economic opportunities for specific sectors. The primary sector has been focused on crops, cattle ranching and wood products. The secondary sector has specialized in logging and the extraction of water as a source of hydropower. Later on, the tourism sector and construction used the morphology and the landscape to develop economic activity. An additional aspect to be considered is the process of depopulation and migration that has taken place over the years. The general trend in the Pyrenees until the late twentieth century was a gradual reduction in population caused by the loss of job opportunities. The economic recovery of the early twenty-first century, and therefore the need for labour force, led to a significant repopulation trend beginning in 2000.

The present study combines qualitative and quantitative techniques. Research on electoral data identified women's political involvement at different scales (Spanish, Catalan and Local Mountain Counties). At the local level studied the features of women's political responsibilities after their party's list achieved a measure of electoral success. Furthermore, the field work involved 30 semi-structured interviews, distributed by counties, by sex and by technical and political experience. Interviews were conducted during the months of July to October 2011, the verbatim transcript system was used, and thematic analysis (Leininger, 1985, Taylor and Board, 1984; Spradley, 1979) was employed. This approach helped to identify the relevant elements of the analysis.

IV. WOMEN IN POLITICS: DEGREES AND DETERMINANTS

To contextualize the participation and political activity of women in the mountain regions of the Pyrenees and their progress, we first address the political participation of women in the Spanish context. Overall, the presence of women at the Spanish parliament has evolved positively from 6.7% in 1987 to 41.1% in 2007, linked to the implementation of the new legislative framework (Verge, 2010). At regional scale, in 1987 there were significant differences between the low levels of communities such as Murcia (0%), Galicia (1.4%) and Aragon (1.5%), compared to Madrid (16.7%) and the Basque Country (13.3%). In this regional context, Catalonia is a remarkable case. Like Madrid and the Basque Country, it is one of the most economically prosperous regions of Spain; nevertheless in 1987 Catalonia had a lower percentage of women, 8.9%. Twenty years later, in 2007, and as a result of new legislation, the average presence of women legislators in the regional governments increased by a remarkable 41%. Yet, Catalonia still had a surprisingly low percentage, 36.3%, after

losing ground to the Spanish average. If we focus on the participation of women in executive regional governments, the overall result for Spain is also an increased presence of women from 11% in 1996 to 40% of women executives for the year 2009. In this sense, Catalonia has 58% participation, significantly above the Spanish average of 40%.

At the municipal level, the number of women mayors in 1983 was 164 for all of Spain, representing just 2% of the mayors for more than 8,000 municipalities. In 2007, the number of women mayors rose to 14.6%, or a total of 1,179 across the country. As for council members, the data from 1995 to 2007 in the Spanish municipalities reveal an increase of 16.5%, to 30.5% women councillors. In Catalonia, although the number of women mayors has increased, it has been below the Spanish average throughout the period. Data on the composition of the councils also show that Catalonia has performed at levels consistently below the mean values for Spain. As a general assessment we could assert that the analysis of the institutional representation of women in Catalonia is surprisingly low, considering that the region is highly urbanized and has enjoyed a long industrial tradition and broad social movements.

With respect to our area of study, on average the six counties have a consistently low participation of women throughout the legislative sessions. APIA has evolved from a very low female presence of 3.9% in the first period, to almost 22% over eight legislatures. Overall, we could assert that the presence of women in local councils followed a general trend of improvement over political appointments, but in comparison with the whole of Catalonia, the mountain regions have shown a slower rate of adaptation to the new democratic society. In order to analyze the improvement of women's participation, we also focused on the number of members of the consistory who have been re-elected. Catalonia fluctuates between 3.5% in the first to 21.7% in the eighth legislative period. In the APIA the percentage went from 2.7% to only 14.3%. This difference shows that women have significantly more sporadic political representation than men.

To complete our knowledge of the political presence of women in local government in the APIA, we analyzed the different responsibilities assigned to women, grouped into nine areas for the eighth legislative period (2007-2011). In the category of «no responsibility» women constitute 71.4% of politicians in that group. In Catalonia overall, just over half (51.4%) of the elected women are in this condition (n=4,605). Men control the group of portfolios that are considered politically important, such as economic development (20.0% of these councillors are women in Catalonia, and 17.6% in APIA), administration and taxation (15.0% and 13.3% are women, respectively), infrastructure and municipal services (11.9% and 12.5% are women, respectively) and land development and environment (11.3% and 4.9% are women, respectively). Women are disproportionately concentrated in social services, which include education, culture and health (43.0% in Catalonia and 29.1% in APIA).

V. RURAL POLITICS FROM AN AGENCY PERSPECTIVE

The analysis of the interviews allows us to identify which factors hinder and which facilitate women's political involvement in rural areas. As identified by the literature, our research reveals first that women in this region feel that family obligations (a spouse,

children, parents or other dependents) are a priority, and therefore women who are active in politics are those with fewer family responsibilities. Women with older children or parents in good health, as well as those with a more independent personal life, such as single women, are more inclined to political involvement. There is still a clear distinction between women's roles in the public sphere and private sphere, which promotes the invisibility of their actions in the economic as well as political sphere. The figure of the (male) heir remains a determining factor in some small towns in the Pyrenees. Local politics in the mountains are still linked to patriarchal attitudes closely related to the defence of despotic economic interests. Furthermore, rural women show little interest in joining political parties and/or a career in politics. On average, they do not perceive their involvement as a personal or professional tool; on the contrary, they understand their political activism as an act of personal sacrifice for the wellbeing of the community. Unlike men in politics, women often have no previous family or professional political connections. Often they refuse to be included in a party ballot, and their limited presence is interpreted as a lack of skills. Once engaged in politics, there is a lack of understanding and appreciation by men regarding the contributions that are made from a gender perspective. Politically active men typically fall into gender stereotyping. The problem of gender role expectations serves to minimize the activities of women as entrepreneurs and politicians. Finally, social control makes women's participation in public life difficult, as they report more social pressures than men do.

Several factors facilitate the participation of women. The explicit support from a spouse or partner and the family is important. The availability of time linked to part-time employment, or a job in public administration, helps reconcile political engagement with family duties, although often with intense schedules. Previous academic or job experiences outside the mountain regions are also positive factors to encourage the participation of women in local politics, as well as entrepreneurial leadership in the region. Often women get involved in politics thanks to the request of political groups or specific individuals who recognize their value and potential contribution for their party. These women typically have visibility within the community and often have been involved in social organizations. They accept involvement in political activism as an extension of their sense of commitment and civic duty towards their community. In a difference from politically active men, some of these women come from a disadvantaged family context and have developed a combative and resilient personality. In the exercise of political activity women may show more conciliatory and less confrontational personalities than males. Nevertheless, they are more resolute than men to take unpopular decisions they consider essential to the wellbeing of the community and are less hesitant than their male counterparts to confront entrenched interests.

VI. FINAL REMARKS

This research examines the political participation of women in high mountain areas. The results show that there has been an improvement in the incorporation of women into the representative political bodies since the end of the dictatorship, i.e., from the first local elections of 1979 to date. However, after more than four decades, women's involvement is still significantly lower, and in the Pyrenean regions is remarkably below the rest of Catalonia and Spain. The analysis of political data and the responsibilities assigned to women who are

elected further identifies a bias against women, as they are not only a smaller number but also disproportionately placed in political posts that are considered less powerful. The analysis of interviews with local officials has helped to highlight constraints and facilitators and provide visibility to key contributions of women that help to renew rural political culture. Further research should foster additional insights in this topic.