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Changing Rural Masculinities: Young Qualified Male Entrepreneurs in Spain

Mireia Baylina¹  | María Josefa Mosteiro² | Ana María Porto² | Montserrat Villarino³ | Maria Dolors Garcia-Ramon¹ | Isabel Salamaña⁴

¹Department of Geography, Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, Spain | ²Area of Research Methods and Education Evaluation, Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain | ³Department of Geography, Facultad de Geografía e Historia, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain | ⁴Department of Geography, Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, Universitat de Girona, Girona, Spain

Correspondence: Mireia Baylina (Mireia.baylina@uab.es)

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ABSTRACT

Unequal gender power relations have long driven many young women to leave rural areas. Recent rururbanisation processes in Spain have intensified with the arrival of a diverse population driven by different motivations, increasing social heterogeneity. Among the newcomers are young, highly educated men involved in innovative entrepreneurial projects aimed at revitalising local economies. This study examines their identities and everyday practices in several geographically well-connected rural areas of Spain. The aim is to find out whether there are changes in their social roles that may be indicative of more egalitarian gender power relations. In-depth interviews and field notes were employed to capture the gendered nature of men's experiences. The findings reveal diverse repertoires of masculinity and evidence both progress and resistance in the construction of gender equality. While key patriarchal elements persist—such as lack of co-responsibility in social reproduction—some values underpinning men's subjectification have been delegitimised, and a process of reflexivity appears to be consolidating.

1 | Introduction

Many studies on gender and rurality in contemporary Western societies demonstrate that the forms of masculinity and femininity emerging in rural contexts differ significantly from those in urban areas (Little 2006; Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014). These studies analyse generalised ruralities not only by highlighting the differences between men and women but also by revealing how these spaces are gender-coded. Generally, male power and female subordination have constituted the dominant social relations within rural environments, expressed through ideologies and practices perceived as natural (Cloke 2005). This unequal power relationship between genders has historically contributed primarily to the exodus of many young women

from the countryside. Various studies have identified multiple causes behind this rural exodus, including the lack of educational and employment opportunities, the social pressures exerted on women and the disproportionate burden of care work they face; conditions derived from the persistence of traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Leibert 2016; D.G. Desarrollo Rural, Innovación y Formación Agroalimentaria 2022).

Among the new residents in Spain, there are young, highly educated men engaged in innovative entrepreneurial projects that extend beyond traditional agricultural and livestock activities, encompassing diverse economic sectors with significant transformative potential. This group potentially embodies a form of human capital capable of discerning and strategically mobilising

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the intrinsic productive capacities of rural areas. Consequently, they constitute an interesting case through which to explore whether new, less rigid forms of rural masculinity are emerging, or to what extent these young men, shaped by urban experience, higher education and entrepreneurial initiative, challenge the hegemonic conventions of masculinity traditionally associated with rural life. Recent research on young women engaged in innovative enterprises that revitalise and influence rural spaces has revealed notable shifts in their social roles (Baylina et al. 2019, 2023). In contrast, there is still a lack of evidence regarding whether similar changes are occurring among men with comparable profiles.

This study seeks to explore the identities and everyday practices of highly educated young men who move to the countryside to start an entrepreneurship project, in geographically well-connected rural areas of Spain. Specifically, it examines their self-perceptions in order to understand how they construct their identities in rural contexts and how their daily practices, organised around both work and care, reflect these constructions. Particular attention is paid to their discourses and everyday actions, as these reveal the traits of masculinity they enact in practice. The aim is to find out whether there are changes in their social roles that may be indicative of more egalitarian gender power relations; transformations that could, in turn, influence women's decisions to remain in rural areas and contribute to the socio-demographic and economic rebalancing within these territories.

Recent studies on the geographies of rural masculinities, conducted mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries, have examined changing forms of masculinity within family farming particularly through the notion of involved fatherhood (Cush and Macken-Walsh 2018; Molloy and Pierro 2020; Eriksson and Hajdu 2021). Other research has explored alternative masculinities within traditionally masculinised professions such as firefighting and forestry (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013; Ambjörnsson 2021), the masculine construction of rural youth (Bye 2009; Trell et al. 2014) and the experiences of economic migrants employed in primary industries (Aure and Munkejord 2015). Additional studies have addressed rural masculinities shaped by intersecting identities that challenge hegemonic rural norms, including those of men with disabilities (Pini and Conway 2017; Gahman 2017) or rural male Goths (Ragusa and Ward 2017), among others. However, there remains a significant gap in research on entrepreneurial men across diverse economic sectors, individuals who are young, educated, with urban experience, and who have the potential to revitalise and transform rural areas as productive spaces.

Our study contributes to addressing this gap by examining the forms of masculinity constructed within these emerging economic spaces and exploring how they intersect with women's lives. It also adds to the international literature on geographies of rural masculinities beyond the Anglo-American context, emphasising the significance of place in the construction of gender identities and the importance of analysing both hegemonic and alternative masculinities across different geographical scales.

The paper is structured as follows: First, a review of the literature on masculinities and rurality; second, a section on method and data, which includes the geographical context, participants and

qualitative methods employed; third, the empirical results; and finally, the discussion and conclusions.

2 | Masculinities and Rurality

The concept of masculinities enables masculinity to be understood as a process of permanent construction that unfolds within the fabric of social relations. Accordingly, masculinity is conceived as a relation of power that encompasses not only interactions between different sexes but also those among individuals of the same sex, across various spheres of everyday life (Connell 2005).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity emerged within the field of masculinity studies, which gained significant traction in the late 1990s. Connell described it as a framework that explains the ways in which men's dominant roles are rendered 'natural' and 'necessary', not only in relation to women but also in relation to other men. Consequently, the dominant position of men within gender relations is normalised, and an ideology is produced that contributes to the social reproduction of this asymmetry within the patriarchal order. Hegemonic masculinity is differentiated from other forms of masculinity, such as complicit masculinities, which contribute to legitimising and sustaining hegemonic patterns; subordinate masculinities, which contrast with hegemonic traits—such as patriarchal heterosexuality—where homosexual men are positioned as subordinate because they do not conform to the dominant model; and marginalised masculinities, which lack access to hegemonic status due to factors such as physical disability, social class or ethnic origin (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Fidolini 2019).

As a social construct, the concept of hegemonic masculinity must be continuously reformulated across time and space. Scholars argue that the plurality of masculinities should be preserved, and some contend that masculinities should be understood as both multiple and hegemonic, where the hegemonic form represents an ideal that may or may not be realised, yet one within which all men are positioned (Allan et al. 2019). Moreover, the potential for change in gender relations must be acknowledged. The concept is grounded in the structural subordination of women and functions in tandem with hegemonic femininity to highlight the asymmetrical positioning of masculinities and femininities within the patriarchal gender order. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that the notion of hegemonic masculinity should incorporate a more holistic understanding of gender hierarchies, one that recognises both the agency of subordinate groups and the power of dominant ones, as well as the mutual influence between gender dynamics and broader social processes.

People engage in gendered practices that are shaped by the places in which they live (Forsberg 2019). However, social processes operate spatially across multiple scales: the local scale, constructed through everyday interactions within families, workplaces and communities; the regional scale, shaped by cultural and national frameworks; and the global scale, formed through transnational dynamics such as international policies, global business and the media (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Therefore, any analysis of masculinities must consider these interconnected levels. Globalisation continually demonstrates

how global gender dynamics, economic restructuring and transnational migration reshape regional and local models of masculinity and femininity.

The relationship between masculinity and rurality has been extensively studied within geography since the early 2000s (Berg and Longhurst 2003; Coldwell 2010). In rural contexts, patriarchy has traditionally been understood as an extension of male dominance over the natural environment. The association of femininity with nature has reinforced a masculine perspective towards issues related to the domination and control of wild spaces and livestock. Undomesticated rural landscapes have been constructed as masculine and sites for adventure, contributing to the creation of specific geographies of marginalisation and exclusion in rural settings. Cater and Smith (2003) demonstrated that the practice of adventure tourism embodies an idealised body—male, young, able and Whit—despite being marketed as inclusive of all audiences. Currently, as Brandht (2021, 390) suggests, ‘bringing tourists into the forests and mountains, the men must be knowledgeable of the wilderness and master natural forces, but they also need to be sensitive to other people’s needs, which demands less stereotypical masculinity. Care practices must be incorporated into the rugged male body’. In this regard, several authors focus on farmers’ parenthood to explore how they include caregiving in their construction of masculinity (Brandht 2019) or which are farmers’ own expectations of fatherhood and also arising from gender equality policy and shifting societal norms (Eriksson and Hajdu 2021).

Rural masculinity refers to the ways in which certain characteristics of rurality contribute to the construction of masculine identities. Attributes such as physical strength, courage, the capacity for fieldwork and toughness in negotiating have been key aspects of male identity closely associated with rural life. These social constructions are further reinforced by symbolic dimensions of rurality and agricultural labour, such as the operation of agricultural machinery or technological proficiency (Brandht 1994, 2006), as well as by specific professions (forestry, rural agents, firefighting) that valorise strength, tenacity, heroism and decisiveness. Discourses linking men to these skills have served to legitimise unequal gender relations in agriculture and build a common sense understanding of rural practice, one that assumes women are unsuited to driving tractors, be forestry agents or owning farms. Similarly, Campbell (2006) has illustrated how the public performance of masculinity in specific rural spaces, such as pubs or workplaces, serves to legitimise a form of masculinity associated with power and the reproduction of local culture.

However, rural masculinity and femininity are not static; they are subject to ongoing social changes and transformations. Novel technologies in agriculture such as automation and genetic manipulation also co-produce agricultural lives and affect the embodiment of farm work (Brandht 2021). Robotic or automatic milking takes over many tasks usually done by a farmer and reduces the need for bodily contact between the farmer and the cow (Bear and Holloway 2015). Farmers end up checking the computer, interpreting data and responding to issues it suggests. As farm technology becomes increasingly computerised, the landscape of hegemonic agricultural masculinity is being reconstructed towards a more entrepreneurial form. Contemporary changes in European Union agricultural policy, particularly the

new governance of farming practices, affect gendered roles, especially the male conception of what it means of being a ‘good farmer’ as these changes undermine farmer’s autonomy and mastery (Hammersley et al. 2022).

Likewise, as rural areas are no longer dominated by agricultural activities and have become sites of social recomposition due to the arrival of immigrants, new social relationships are emerging that may represent alternative masculinities. Aure and Munkejord (2015) explore how masculinities are constructed in the Arctic region of Finnmark (Norway), following an intense immigration process driven by a strong industrial and service-oriented labour market linked to mineral resource extraction. The authors identify shifts in men’s values concerning work and family. Engagement in intensive parenting, participation in domestic activities and support for partners are emerging characteristics of dominant yet non-hegemonic rural masculinities, like those identified in other regions of Norway. Similarly, Tyler and Fairbrother (2013) analyse forest fire prevention and response in Australia from a gender perspective, addressing hegemonic masculinity and the emergence of alternative masculinities. Ambjörnsson (2021) investigates how women claim their space in the forest sector by building alternative femininities and embodying female masculinities that are sustained through other forms of privilege, such as class and heterosexuality.

Although rural sexual identity is underpinned by a strong assumption of traditional, family-based heterosexuality (Little 2006, 2007; Bryant and Pini 2011), alternative masculinity desires and embodiments can also serve to naturalise homosexual masculinity (Bell 2006). Similarly, *queer* families in rural contexts destabilise the heteronormative structures of the countryside, while simultaneously exposing practices of oppression and discrimination (Leslie 2017). This underscores the ways in which masculinity and rurality intersect with other identities, such as sexuality, class, age, ethnicity and health and even religion, faith and spirituality, as explored compellingly by Hopkins and Gorman-Murray (2019).

Recent literature highlights the ongoing transformations and tensions surrounding rural masculinities. Interaction with alternative forms of life and work has generated new masculine references; debates on gender equality and sexual diversity have also reached rural contexts; and the increasing participation of women in productive and community spheres is redefining gender relations. These social transformations bring about changes in how masculinity is perceived and experienced in rural settings. Given that rural masculinity is not a homogeneous construct, men’s experiences and challenges may vary according to their intersecting identities—in this case, higher educational attainment, young adulthood, entrepreneurial status and previous urban life experience. The literature provides a framework for identifying the traits of masculinity and the household roles enacted by highly educated young men within the context of Spanish rurality.

3 | Method and Data

We employed a qualitative methodology based on a case study approach, which examines phenomena from the standpoint of

those who experience them, focusing on how individuals perceive, feel and make sense of their situations (Taylor and Bogdan 1986; Monk and Casey 2021). In-depth interviews and field notes were used as research techniques. Through semi-structured interviews, information was gathered on the participants' professional trajectories following an interview guide composed of open-ended questions that allow us to obtain information that is richer in nuances and to interweave themes. The interview guide included questions related to participants' educational background, family structure, personal and professional trajectories, the characteristics and motivations of their entrepreneurial initiatives in specific rural contexts, work-life balance and more personal aspects concerning their future life expectations. There were no explicit questions on gender issues as gender was implicit throughout the entire research process, from the choice of the topic and research design to the theoretical framework, methodological decisions, analysis and the presentation of results, all articulated through a non-sexist use of language. The study reflects a commitment to a research practice consistent with feminist principles, rethought and adapted to the specific needs of the research, its context and its purpose, as well as to the feminist stand adopted by the researchers (Biglia and Vergés 2016). The field notes compiled the interviewers' perceptions and interpretations of the participants, their contexts and the overall development of the in-depth interview process.

The geographical context of this study is rural Spain, a region characterised by low birth rates, a masculinised working-age population and an ageing society. More than half of the rural population (52%) has a medium level of education, 26.9% a basic level and 20.8% a higher education.¹ Women predominate in both the basic and higher education categories. The total employment rate in rural areas stands at 56.8% (65.7% in Spain) and the unemployment rate is 22.2% (15.5% in Spain). Employment is concentrated in the service sector (47.3%), followed by agriculture (23.6%), industry (17.9%) and construction (7.7%). Most of the rural workforce is employed by others (58.2%), while 29.5% are self-employed. Men are overrepresented among the latter, although the gender gap has narrowed, compared to 2011 (D.G. Desarrollo Rural, Innovación y Formación Agroalimentaria 2022).

Beyond these general indicators, Spain encompasses a wide diversity of ruralities: areas where only a small proportion of the population is engaged in agriculture, areas dominated by large-scale agricultural and livestock enterprises owned by major investors and characterised by high specialisation; territories focused on leisure and tourism services; and regions that seek to develop new activities and ways of living that challenge global models and the consumerist use of space, among others. Beneath an apparent stability, many rural areas are undergoing significant change (Cerarols and Nogué 2022). It is within these dynamic contexts that some of the most innovative and creative initiatives have emerged across multiple sectors, such as renewable energy production, agroecology, alternative production and consumption networks, the social economy and cultural creativity. These initiatives share a commitment to the territorialisation and sustainable use of ecosystems, and they are driven by entrepreneurs who have consciously chosen rural settings as the location for their ventures. This is the rural context in which our study is situated. We selected Catalonia and Galicia, located in the

northeast and northwest of Spain, respectively, as the areas of analysis, with the aim of identifying distinct ruralities that illustrate how processes of return to the countryside occur in diverse, albeit geographically well-connected, territories.

Participants were selected intentionally according to the following criteria: men aged between 25 and 45 years, with higher education, who had chosen to pursue an entrepreneurial venture in a geographically well-connected rural environment. The sampling procedure combined snowball sampling with purposive selection based on the researchers' prior knowledge of the participants or their entrepreneurial initiatives. In total, we collected the testimonies of 22 informants; however, this article focuses on six of them. A limited number of cases was deemed necessary to adequately contextualise the participants' everyday lives and surroundings, thereby enabling a nuanced interpretation of their experiences and perspectives within their specific social and geographical contexts. These six selected cases align with the research aim and represent distinct profiles of masculinities identified within the broader sample of interviewees.

The participants from Catalonia reside in coastal regions. One of them, Pere,² lives in the northeast,³ where he produces cider from modern apple plantations. Two others live in the southeast and manage small farms whose agriculture practices are adapted to the specific characteristics of their immediate surroundings. Gabriel produces high-quality organic olive oil in a dryland area primarily dedicated to the cultivation of olive groves, almond trees and vineyards, while Jordi grows organic fruits and vegetables for direct sale. In Galicia, Xulio runs a hen farm in a depopulated rural area on the northern coast, where land use is predominantly forestry. Lois is a wine producer in a central Galician area recognised under the Ribeira Sacra Designation of Origin and promoted for its oenology and natural and cultural heritage tourism. Raúl, a freelance consultant in gender equality, lives in the Atlantic Galicia, one of the most dynamic areas of the region, with an economy based on industry and services. It also forms part of one of the main routes of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. It is noteworthy that most of these entrepreneurial projects are ecologically or environmentally sustainable, a feature that, according to several authors, reflects a shift in dominant forms of masculinity towards broader masculinities that display less interest in controlling nature and greater openness to expressing emotions (Peter et al. 2000; Little 2006). The final case, the freelance consultancy in gender equality, also embodies this sensitivity.

Four of the six men have rural origins (Figure 1). Three of them have continued a family business, while the remaining three have established new ventures. Five participants hold university degrees in fields such as political science, economics, psychopedagogy, agricultural engineering, aeronautical engineering and business administration and management (BA). In addition, they have master's degrees in management and international cooperation, in commercial management and wine marketing and gender equality. Five participants have heterosexual partners and four live with them. One lives with his parents, and the other lives alone. Three of them have school-aged children. The initial circumstances of their businesses vary considerably, ranging from those who inherited family assets or land to those who began their enterprises entirely from scratch.

NAME	RURAL ORIGIN	PROFESSIONAL PROJECT	FAMILY BUSINESS CONTINUATION	PLACE (Region)	STUDIES	PERSONAL SITUATION
Xulio	No	Hens farm and organic eggs producer	No	Galicia	Political Sciences Ms in Management and International Cooperation	Heterosexual partner 1 daughter
Lois	Yes	Wine Producer	Yes	Galicia	Economics Ms in Business Management and Winery Marketing.	No partner, no kids. Lives alone.
Raúl	Yes	Equal Opportunities Consultant	No	Galicia	Psychopedagogy Ms in Equal Opportunities Agent	Heterosexual partner 2 children (boy, girl)
Gabriel	No	Olive grower and producer of high-end organic olive oil	No	Catalonia	Agricultural Engineer	Heterosexual partner 1 son
Pere	Yes	Producer of cider and apple by-products	Yes	Catalonia	Aeronautic Engineer Business Management	Heterosexual partner. Lives with his parents and on weekends with his girlfriend. No kids
Jordi	Yes	Organic vegetable farmer	Yes	Catalonia	Business Management (not finished)	Heterosexual partner No kids

FIGURE 1 | Participants. *Source:* Authors.

The interviewees were initially contacted by telephone, during which the purpose of the study was explained and their collaboration requested. Once they consented to participate, the date and time of the interview were arranged, with all interviews conducted at the participants' workplaces. Each participant provided informed consent prior to participation, ensuring anonymity and the confidentiality of the information collected, as no personal names or identifiable locations were disclosed.

Each interview lasted approximately 2 h, was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were then organised and interpreted through an inductive analytical procedure (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). A hierarchical system of categories was developed based on the main themes addressed during the interviews, including education, family structure, professional and personal background, entrepreneurship, motivation for entrepreneurship, work–life balance and life expectations. Within each category, subcategories were defined according to the information provided by the participants and linked to the relevant interview topics, such as self-perception. The qualitative data analysis software *Atlas.ti* was used to facilitate data organisation and interpretation.

4 | Results

4.1 | Self-Perception in the Construction of Identity

The family, as the primary agent of socialisation, plays a crucial role in the construction of masculinity. Through everyday practices, families transmit culturally embedded notions of what it means to be a 'man' or a 'woman' in society. Moreover, models of fatherhood significantly shape the development of skills, attributes and perceptions related to men's roles in society,

as well as the nature of their relationships with women and with other men (Guevara 2006).

Among the families of the men interviewed, hegemonic family models predominantly prevail, characterised by clearly defined gender roles: The father occupies the position of authority and financial provider, while the mother assumes responsibility for domestic work and childcare. As Lois notes, 'my mother is a housewife; it's not a fantastic job, but she is the pillar of the family...'. Similarly, Jordi reflects:

My father is the patriarch, the boss. When he entered the farm, even though it belonged to both my father and mother, when there were problems, he was the one in charge. If she complained, he would yell at my mother. I experienced this, but over the years and in different places you see that there is other... [models]. My father left school at the age of 12 and went to work on the farm. He is very much a man of the land and has lived in a small village his whole life. My parents went through the Civil War and the dictatorship... They haven't seen anything else! Over the years my father has changed for the better, thanks to his children and perhaps because the world itself is also changing.

In both cases, the interviewees demonstrate an awareness of the unequal dynamics within their parents' relationships. Jordi recounts his father's exercise of hegemonic power, attributing it to the traditional and backward rural context in which he lived. He also acknowledges the role of children in transmitting alternative values, as well as the broader global and regional social processes that have contributed to societal transformation. In

Galicia, Xulio highlights another structural inequality affecting farming families, one that persists in Spain despite the enactment of Law 35/2011 on the shared ownership of agricultural holdings. As he explains, 'a lot of the work on the farm was traditionally a woman's job, but there isn't enough money to pay everyone's social security, so generally the children and the woman work, but the owner is the man'. This statement encapsulates the continuing inequality and invisibility of women's labour in the agricultural sector, as well as the negative social and economic consequences that stem from it.⁴

Other interviewees describe less traditional family models in which both parents were employed outside the home, although the mothers temporarily left the labour market to care for their children. As Gabriel explains:

My parents both worked until my sister and I were born. Then my mother stopped working [...]. I don't remember how old I was, but my mother went back to work after many years.

In some cases, the distribution of household responsibilities is more balanced, with fathers participating actively in domestic work. Xulio explains that 'although my mother stopped working to look after us and my father had a permanent job, whenever he came home, he would start working on things around the house'. Similarly, another interviewee emphasised that co-responsibility within the household has been a generational learning process:

My father is a man who also collaborates at home, who does things, who cooks, cleans... It doesn't mean anything to him because he also saw his father do it. So, let's say that over three generations, it was the parents who were gradually setting the example. (Raúl)

Father-son relationships play a crucial role in the construction of masculinity, as fathers serve both as models of masculine identity and as potential agents of change towards more egalitarian attitudes. Xulio recounts that his relationship with his father was characterised by shared male activities but also by emerging patterns of domestic responsibility that enabled him to question traditional models of masculinity and to position himself in a more equal relationship with women:

My sister and I were always made to clean and dust, run errands or do things around the house, both of us, not just her because she was a girl, I had to do it too, and I wasn't allowed to lie on the sofa all day. (Xulio)

The men's self-perceptions reveal varying degrees of movement towards the deconstruction of traditional masculinity, a process that is more evident in some cases than in others. The most paradigmatic example is that of Raúl, an educator in gender equality, who is convinced that 'gender is something that transforms society, but you also transform yourself every day'. He describes himself as 'an independent professional, multifaceted, liberal, creative and reserved'. In his professional practice, he notes that clients are often surprised: 'They always expect a woman to arrive; when a man appears, they are shocked. They

don't become as defensive as they would with a woman. They don't believe that a man will talk about feminist theory, it confuses them' (Raúl). Similarly, Xulio considers that he is 'in a process of detaching myself from gender stereotypes'. Gabriel, who defines himself as a highly consistent and perfectionist worker, also acknowledges that he has 'a rather introverted personality' and finds it 'difficult to express deeper emotional issues'. These self-perceptions illustrate a gradual shift towards more fluid and plural forms of masculinity.

However, we also find expressions of hegemonic masculinity in the traits that some of the interviewees attribute to women. Lois states that 'my mother and my grandmother are the women I admire most in the world because they knew how to patiently put up with men and they raised their children with values'. The fact that these women had to 'put up with' men shows a clear dynamic of imposition and domination, in which men took advantage of the unequal structure of the couple relationship. In turn, the winemaker reproduces these traits in the products he markets: 'we created a gin with women in mind: we made a gin in Galicia with an Albariño base, it's very feminine, very soft, aromatic, not bitter...'. Sometimes professional and/or entrepreneurial skills are prominent in how interviewees perceive themselves. These competencies are also associated with masculinity. Pere describes himself using traits typically linked to entrepreneurship, including 'perseverance, self-confidence, and the ability to face challenges', and clearly expresses that 'he prefers being the boss than the employee'. These are elements that are part of the current identity of the rural owner that are moving away from the traditional masculine values, such as the capacity to control nature, though they continue to form part of the hegemonic masculine imaginary.

Interviewees also show attitudes of perceiving women 'from above' (Bourdieu 1998) thereby reinforcing the masculine model of their position within the gender hierarchy. Jordi, who is married to a Muslim woman, explains that his wife 'is a Moroccan woman who is different from other Muslim women in this area: she doesn't wear a headscarf and she's a teacher...'. He claims to have contributed to this change. When asked about his model of masculinity within their relationship, he says that 'for now, it is to be respectful of her and let her live her life'. These expressions reveal a dominant perspective that continues to be highly naturalised, although there are also traits that point towards more egalitarian behaviours. Jordi converted to Islam to marry his wife, as marrying a Christian would have required her to break with her family.

4.2 | Daily Practices: Work-Life Balance

The socialisation of men as breadwinners is still at the basis of their life project despite the potential decline of hegemonic masculinity in a context marked by recurrent employment crises. McDowell (2003) identified this pattern among young White working-class men in the United Kingdom, and Borrás et al. (2012) observed a similar dynamic among young working- and middle-class men in Spain. These authors argue that, in a context of precarious and unstable employment, young working-class men accept poor working conditions to obtain resources and fulfil

their breadwinner role, whereas for young middle-class men, job instability affects their life project (Borràs et al. 2012, 10).

In our research, there is also evidence of this role, although less explicitly. This may be because some entrepreneurs have already consolidated projects, and others express confidence in their eventual success ('this will go forward', Gabriel), showing a trait of male overconfidence. Some of them have partners, and in these cases, their partners are employed. The economic need and labour emancipation of women have naturalised the dual-income household; and although this fact is not enough to undermine men's identification as breadwinners, it does decrease the pressure placed upon them. Moreover, the 2008–2015 economic crisis consolidated a situation of job insecurity, prompting some men to seek survival strategies outside the formal labour market. Xulio highlights the need for resources to launch his project: 'to design the project, adapt to ecological regulations, expand the area, develop a strong marketing plan... The money from savings, family support or whatever, allows you to start and survive until you have an income'. For this reason, he says that 'we are not a traditional rural family, rather we are undergoing a process of ruralisation. My wife still has a paid job in the urban sphere'. In expressing this, Xulio reveals how he reconstructs his male identity within a social context that shapes processes of subjectivation (Ranea 2021). Added to this, research on women entrepreneurs in the rural area shows that their professional project is also at the centre of their life project, something new, compared to previous decades, particularly in the rural environment (Baylina et al. 2017; Porto et al. 2022). This indicates the emergence of new forms of femininity that relate differently to both hegemonic masculinity and emerging masculinities.

The entrepreneurs' working day reflects the centrality of their professional project in their daily lives. Lois described a typical day as follows:

I get up around 7:00 AM; have a good breakfast, answer the first emails, read the news and leave around 9:00 AM for one of the two offices we have. I have various meetings, and then I go to the other office to review the company's financial matters and the technical aspects of the wine. Around 2:00 PM, I almost always go to the bank because it usually takes nearly three quarters of an hour... I have lunch with my parents except when I have visitors or a work lunch with someone from the team, and I return to work from 4:00 to 8:00–9:00 PM. I go home, have dinner and try to go to bed around 11:00 PM.

The interviewees rarely include the sphere of social reproduction into their accounts of daily life. When asked who does the domestic work, Lois answers:

I tidy up the house...; that is, I have someone who comes on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. A lovely woman and, really, she is the one who keeps me presentable. I like coming home and finding the house the way I like it to be, it's fantastic.

Although the person who tidies the house is not his wife and the entrepreneur pays for the service, he nonetheless benefits from traditionally assigned roles (the provider, the caregiver) and adds that women are experts in these tasks due to their gender socialisation. Such behaviours reinforce and sustain some women's self-conviction that they 'naturally' carry out these roles and service professions. This narrative is an excellent example of the existence of the privileged subject who can be self-sufficient at the expense of others (Pérez Orozco 2015). This is mostly exemplified in the hegemonic male, although not exclusively.

Jordi, married with no children, also described his daily routine:

I get up late, around 9:00 AM. Since I don't have an office on the farm, I do paperwork at home. At 1:00 or 2:00 PM, I go up to the farm to prepare the baskets and help the boy who delivers them. I'm there for about 2 h, and around 5:00 PM, I come home to do more paperwork. At 9:00 PM, the boy finishes the deliveries, and I go back to the farm and help him unload, then I go to check the wells and turn the water off...some days I stay until 11:00 or 12:00 PM.

When asked who prepares the food, Jordi answered: 'When my wife [teacher] is not there, I do it. My wife does a lot of the housework, the cooking and cleaning... I admit I could do much more'. This reflects the same pattern observed in the previous case, but in a more problematic form, as the man delegates a job of shared responsibility to his wife, who does it for free at the expense of her own time. Another interviewee, Pere, also expresses this utilitarian view of women:

My mother does all the household chores here, and my girlfriend does them in the apartment in Barcelona.

However, not all cases are the same. Some men display more egalitarian behaviours. Gabriel explains that the domestic work is divided 'as we can; when I leave for the farm, Anna and my son are still asleep; she prepares lunch and whoever is at home prepares dinner. I'm out for much of the day, but when she has meetings, I stay with the children from 3:00 PM until she returns'. Similarly, Xulio notes that 'when I work from home, I take care of the household tasks: the shopping, the laundry...; so, I've taken on a lot. I've almost always done the housework, except when my wife was unemployed'. In this sense, the entrepreneurs reconfigure the traditional gender order (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014).

The men in the study have very few children (five in total), consistent with regressive birth dynamics in Spain, more pronounced in rural areas, and with the average household size in this context.⁵ In a society characterised by precarious wages that make individual subsistence difficult, where the difficulty of accessing housing prevents independence or expanding the family and where a culture of individualism prevails, a form of pragmatic utilitarianism has emerged. Many people question the purpose of having children, viewing them as a costly investment that complicates professional careers, limits economic development and reduces personal freedom. Based on our interviews, children are perceived as complicating everyday life. Xulio comments that

'my daughter has to go to school or have some activity and... there are tensions and frustrations'. Jordi, fully aware of the workload involved, states: 'I would have already had children years ago, but the problem is that until the project is on track... because having a family and making a project work are not compatible'.

Paternity may confer a socially dominant male position; however, its enactment through nurturing and caregiving is closely associated with femininity. Lois summarises this tension clearly:

I think that having children means that the woman, at some point, must step back a little from the daily work in the company. I am fully dedicated to my projects, and I believe that a woman, even when making this decision, cannot devote herself 100% to a project. So, for me it's easier.

None of the interviewees expressed that they were responsible for caring for dependents. In fact, caregiving appears only marginally in their narratives and, when it does emerge, it is typically in response to direct questioning. Gabriel, however, demonstrates a sense of responsibility as a father and care for his wife, expressed through the creation of roots and social connections in the place where they live: 'the year my son was born there were 30 pregnant women in the village, and we all attended the birth preparation sessions together, which created a bond between us; later at the nursery... his birth led to an entire network of friendships'. These cases illustrate forms of 'gendering' that challenge conventional understandings of hegemonic masculinity and gender relations in rural contexts. They show how the practice of fatherhood creates the potential for developing alternative rural masculinities in other spaces (England and Dyck 2014; Brandth 2016).

The entrepreneurs' leisure and free time provide insight into the amount of personal time available in their daily lives, the characteristics of the activities they engage in and the spaces in which these activities occur, all of which offer useful elements for contrasting contemporary forms of masculinity. Research on leisure and rural masculinity has focused on bodily expression and highlights the strong, athletic and capable body associated with adventure, as well as the activities traditionally coded as masculine (such as drinking, hunting and fishing). These practices and places function as spaces for the affirmation and reaffirmation of masculinity (Cloe 2005).

The entrepreneurs interviewed report having limited time for leisure. Their narratives show some differences between men who do not have a partner and/or children and those who do. Although some follow a more hegemonic model, most describe leisure practices more characteristic of emerging forms of masculinity. Pere, who has a partner but no children, explains that he has always been passionate about car races and rallies: 'I guess I started studying aeronautics because of the whole engine thing. I liked Formula 1 and things like that' (Pere). Fidolini (2019) identifies the influence of global neoliberalism on such male hobbies, that is, on models of masculinity connected to elite sports such as football, tennis and Formula 1 racing, and examines how these models are renegotiated at the local level. Raúl, meanwhile, actively seeks to ensure that his everyday leisure activities depart from patriarchal hegemonic masculinity:

If I want to embody a new masculinity, I cannot continue doing the same things associated with older masculinities rooted in patriarchy because it is very easy to fall back into all of that. Leaving work to have a beer, going out for lunch, meeting for coffee and drinks, taking the children to watch football... In this way, boys and girls are socialised into a *macho* environment. That is how it works. Someone has to break, at least partially, with that pattern. (Raúl)

Being reluctant to engage in activities associated with hegemonic masculinity is not exclusive to the equality educator. Gabriel notes that he is very aware of his need for leisure time, 'but not only mine, family leisure'. Indeed, he frames his reflections within a discourse that points to a traditional, reactionary backdrop:

I think there's a pretty *macho* vibe here. For example, hunting; everyone here hunts... it's strange. And what happens is that hunting involves other things, like having lunch with the other hunters, meetings during the week to get things ready... (Gabriel)

Similarly, Jordi, who does not have children, describes leisure time shared with his wife, 'Every fortnight we go away for a weekend; we go to a concert and then we walk around the area'. Official data show that the amount of time rural men and women spend on leisure activities per week is now practically the same (1 h). This contrasts with 2011, when men spent, on average, four more hours per week on leisure than women (D.G. Desarrollo Rural, Innovación y Formación Agroalimentaria 2022).

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the self-perceptions and daily practices of highly qualified young men who have decided to develop their entrepreneurial projects in rural areas, we observe a shift from hegemonic masculinity towards more egalitarian and sustainable models in which men explore their emotional side. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out, without denying the privileges, hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily translate into a fulfilling life experience, and the interviewees reflect on their identities and behaviours. Global political processes promoting gender equality transform hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and have permeated a new generation of men as well as women's assumption of their own professional projects. This broader discourse makes these men very aware of the gendered roles in which they were socialised and the educational models transmitted by their families, thereby preparing them for a process of deconstructing hegemonic masculinity.

This process is not linear, and its intensity varies among the men interviewed. We identified diverse profiles, ranging from those who clearly align with hegemonic masculinity and strongly uphold traditional male and female models, emphasising business-related traits such as leadership, assertiveness, competence, pride and confidence, while avoiding emotional expression; to those who clearly embody a different model, one that is more empathetic and collaborative, and who readily define

themselves through both emotional strengths and vulnerabilities. Between these extremes, there are profiles that combine features of both models, showing that the codes of domination over women transmitted across generations have not yet been fully abandoned, nor has the 'naturalised' tendency to perceive women 'from above' been completely discarded.

The idea of masculinity associated with controlling nature and, by extension, exercising agrarian control, which has been a powerful marker of rural masculinity, has shifted towards a relationship grounded in respect and connection. It is an example of the multiple caregiving practices in rural settings, involving both human and non-human actors, which constitute life and livelihoods in this environment (Stenbacka 2025). In line with global discourses on environmental protection, the ecological practices adopted by the interviewees reveal a movement towards other masculinities that are clearly more sensitive and even countercultural within their local contexts. This activist orientation extends not only to the rural environment more broadly but also to family heritage.

The primary family plays a significant role in identity formation, while the professional project occupies a central place for these entrepreneurs. They identify with an entrepreneurial profile capable of managing a business, negotiating effectively and maintaining a forward-looking vision. Despite this profile, which aligns with hegemonic masculinity through its emphasis on work time, we did not observe a strong self-perception of the man as provider, a culturally decaying figure that is less valued at the social level (Abril 2013). The entrepreneurial projects are highly personal, affective relationships tend to be contingent, and it is assumed that partners, when they have them, possess their own employment and sources of income.

Social reproduction remains an unresolved issue; a crucial sphere that indicates that social change for more egalitarian power relations is still in process. Participants do not refer to this work spontaneously in their accounts, despite the central role of care in both people's lives and the wider economy (McDowell 2004). None of the men interviewed demonstrate clear co-responsibility with their partners regarding domestic and care work. Some display a habit or conscious attitude of delegating domestic tasks to women (mother, partner), thereby reinforcing inequality. Others adopt a more negotiating profile; their values are more egalitarian, but their practices are not yet fully aligned with those values.

These masculinities in reconstitution do not prioritise work–life balance, as occurs in other contexts (Cush and Macken-Walsh 2018). This pattern is consistent with statistical data on time use in rural areas, which show that, on a daily basis, women continue to assume responsibility for domestic and care tasks (D.G. Desarrollo Rural, Innovación y Formación Agroalimentaria 2022). Acceptance of co-responsibility remains a key challenge for advancing equality in rural areas and for retaining women in these spaces, especially considering that inequality in domestic and care work negatively affects women's perceptions of relationship satisfaction (Almirall et al. 2025). Some initiatives aimed at raising awareness of co-responsibility include courses and workshops targeted at men, an area in which one of our informants has built his professional career. This paradox

illustrates the transitional stage and ongoing transformation of masculinities and rural societies in which we find ourselves today.

Some interviewees do not prioritise having children, evidencing that reproduction is becoming increasingly less relevant from both biological and social perspectives. Among those who do have offspring, progress is evident in the practice of active parenthood. As Brandth (2021) remarks, fathers frame childcare in broader sociocultural accounts of gender equality rather than in terms of patriarchal family. Prenatal sessions in the village, for instance, constitute spaces where alternative masculinities can be explored and constructed. As Gorman-Murray (2008) points out, home and care-related spaces enable the negotiation of alternative masculinities precisely because they allow men to be more expressive, emotive and involved in reproduction. Although these spaces are often labelled as feminised, they nevertheless reveal opportunities for the development of alternative identities. Furthermore, they allow us to examine the role of men in caregiving, and by focusing on men, we avoid reinforcing the notion that care is exclusively a women's responsibility. Additional progress is visible in leisure activities, which are no longer confined to those traditionally coded as masculine within rural environments nor restricted to spaces historically associated with the confirmation of masculinity.

Although cultural constructions of rurality circulate widely through global media, social constructions of rural masculinity are sensitive to more localised cultural dynamics. New activities and new rural actors endowed with social and cultural capital are introducing traits of emerging masculinities in geographically well-connected rural areas of Spain. The profile of the men selected for this analysis, figures with public visibility, plays a significant role because they influence the direction of change in the construction of rural masculinities and in emerging gender power relations. The mere fact that they no longer identify with the breadwinner archetype, nor prioritise parenthood, is highly indicative of the rise of a new model of masculinity—one that departs from the traditional male entrepreneur, conventionally defined by an almost exclusive dedication to business and responsibility for a heteronormative family structure. Their identities and everyday practices generate a demonstration effect on other men, particularly on the youngest. The construction of more egalitarian relations and, consequently, the capacity to retain women in rural areas depends largely on these emerging masculinities.

The findings indicate heterogeneous repertoires of masculinity, reflecting both gradual progress and persistent resistance in the pursuit of gender equality. While key patriarchal structures continue to exert influence, certain values historically underpinning men's subjectification appear increasingly delegitimised, alongside the progressive consolidation of reflexive orientations.

Here, we have reflected a model of heteronormative masculinity aligned with the construction and expression of heterosexuality in rural society (Little 2007). In today's rural contexts, however, other entrepreneurs are actively subverting gender and sexuality roles through sustainable entrepreneurship projects (Leslie 2017). Future research could therefore focus on *queer* masculinities among young rural entrepreneurs, with the aim of better understanding the experiences associated with alternative

masculinities, their modes of functioning within non-normative family structures and their potential contributions to the social transformation of rural spaces. Similarly, future studies could explore the changing social roles of other categories of new male rural residents, including rural wage labourers, teleworkers, retirees and others.

Author Contributions

Mireia Baylina: conceptualisation of the article, fieldwork design and execution, results analysis and writing of all sections, final compilation and revision. **Maria Josefa Mosteiro:** fieldwork design and execution, results analysis and writing the theory and method and data sections, format requirements. **Ana Maria Porto:** fieldwork design and execution, results analysis and writing the theory and method and data sections. **Montserrat Villarino:** fieldwork design and execution, results analysis and writing the method and data and results sections. **Maria Dolors Garcia Ramon:** fieldwork design and execution, results analysis and writing the results section. **Isabel Salamaña:** fieldwork design and execution, results analysis and writing the results section.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹ Basic education corresponds to compulsory education (primary and compulsory secondary education, ages 6–16); medium education refers to non-compulsory education that prepares students for employment or further studies (upper secondary school, intermediate vocational education and training, intermediate artistic or sports education, ages 16–18/20); and higher education concerns advanced vocational education and training, higher artistic education and university studies (from age 18).

² All names have been anonymised.

³ The analysis reports only the entrepreneurs' region and geographical direction, omitting the provinces, counties and municipalities where they live and work.

⁴ Only 0.2% of farms have a co-ownership regime (Source: RETICOM 3/11/2025. MAPA 2025).

⁵ The proportion of children aged between 0 and 4 years of age in rural areas in 2020 was 1.7% of the population, compared with 2.1% in 2009. The replacement rate in Spain is 1.24 children/woman, much lower than the figure that ensures population replacement (2.05). The average

size of households in rural areas is 2.9 people (D.G. Desarrollo Rural, Innovación y Formación Agroalimentaria 2022).

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