Gender relations in local politics and economic development in the Catalan Pyrenees

**Introduction**

Since Spain returned to democratic government in 1976, women’s political participation as elected officials has broadened from token representation (4.57%) as congressional delegates in 1982-86 to 36% of the 2011-2015 legislature (Instituto de la Mujer, 2011). This evolution has been unequal depending on the territorial context (municipal, autonomous regional government or central administration in Madrid) and the rurality of the area represented. This study analyses data from the municipal elections in the Catalan High Pyrenees (CHP), the mountainous periphery of Catalonia. Preliminary studies (CASELLAS et al, 2009) have shown that the percentage of women serving on municipal councils in Catalonia is lower than in other parts of Spain and is even lower in CHP local governments. In general, there is a lower percentage of women mayors than women council members and a higher percentage of women council members in the more urban municipalities, but the percentage of women mayors is actually higher in small towns.

If we look at Spain in general, we see women’s participation increase from 2% of mayors in 1983 to nearly 15% in 2007, while the percentage of women council members was 6.5% in 1995 and reached 30.5% in 2007, more than double the percentage of mayoral offices held. The overall percentage of women mayors in urban regions of the Basque Country (19.9%), Madrid (19.6%) or Valencia (17.5%) is higher than the 15% average for Spain; Catalunya is the exception (12.7%). On the other hand, in these same urban regions the percentage of women council members is slightly lower than the average for Spain while in the most rural regions it is much higher: Canary Islands (38.3%), Andalucía (37.8%), Murcia (38.9%), La Rioja (35%) o Extremadura (35%). It is important to note that 2007 legislation concerning gender equality (Ley Orgánica 3/2007 para la Igualdad Efectiva de Mujeres y Hombres) has led to an equal number of women and men on the political parties’ local electoral ballots in all towns of more than 5,000 inhabitants since 2007.

In Catalonia’s mountain areas, patriarchy continues to dominate economic and social relationships (TULLA, 1991; TULLA, 1994). Men make the decisions in the public sphere and, in this sense, women’s political participation has been only occasional until recent years. The different forms and degrees of patriarchy can vary from one country to another and in particular economic and social circumstances (DUNCAN, 1996). In the rural CHP areas the explicit and implicit dominance of the legal concept of “the heir” (*l’hereu*)[[1]](#footnote-2), which has lost importance in other more urban areas, accentuates the masculine position of power (particularly that of the eldest son). It is simply understood that economic and political decisions in the public realm are made by men, while women make the decisions in the private realm. As a result, women can be employed outside the home but in rural areas they are always expected to place greater priority on family responsibilities than on their public ones (TULLA, 1991). This has clear repercussions for women’s access to elected political office in local government. The study objective is to analyze this marginalization of women, who are judged more rigorously when they take public office than are men (BAYLINA & BOCK, 2004).

**Methodology**

The study uses three methodological approaches: the theoretical framework of women’s participation in local politics and economic development; statistical analysis of elected officials (CORCOY, 2008); and interviews with elected officials and local economic development professionals, both women and men.

**The Catalan High Pyrenees as a study area**

The most mountainous region of Catalonia is the High Pyrenees and Aran (CHP, Figure 1), a territory with 5,686 km2 and 77,189 inhabitants in the census 2011. The CHP has 1.02% of the population of Catalonia and 17.8% of the surface area. The dominant trend in the 20th century has been emigration to the urban areas of the Catalan coast; more women than men have left the CHP, due to the limited employment and personal opportunities available to women in their home region.

The politics of gender have made progress over the past 20 years, although this has been more effective in urban areas than in rural communities. Previous studies identified a dominant ideology in rural societies of the Western world that places men at the top of a “natural hierarchy” and women, in their domestic role in the reproductive sphere, as those who preserve the way of life and the social training represented by the family, community or village (Davidoff et al, 1976 in Little & Panelli, 2003). On the other hand, a study of the introduction of agrotourism activities in rural Spain identified women as the entrepreneurial agents who organize and carry out most of these activities in this new type of economy (GARCÍA-RAMÓN, 1995).

The double employment discrimination against women, in terms of production and reproduction, is accentuated in the CHP because it is a peripheral area with fewer employment options and local government has less capacity to provide public services (public transport, entertainment, care options for children, the sick, and the elderly, etc.). These circumstances channel women into the role of “care providers” along with their role as “pillar of the family” and the key element in preserving and transmitting the culture and social heritage of rural areas (PALLARÈS-BARBERÀ, 2003).

The interviews reveal a major coincidence between women’s participation in elected local government offices and the fact that their presence was required as men attempted to fill out their electoral ballot lists, either because of a lack of candidates or to meet the “gender quota” established by law. Women who agree to be placed on the ballot list are generally women without children or whose children are older, or those with young children who have child care options. In general, women serve fewer legislative terms than men do.

**Women’s participation in local government**

The strong emigration trend has led the best-educated women to establish themselves in major cities, a “brain drain” that makes innovation in production and organizational, administrative or economic development approaches more difficult for the rural regions (PALLARÈS-BLANCH, 2009).

Lower participation rates by rural women in public politics might be due to (i) the prevalence of the *hereu* concept, which means that the structures of social and political organization function under a set of values that are more patriarchal than in urban areas (BINIMELIS, 2008); (ii) the double invisibility that women experience because of the lack of explicit recognition of the work they do, both at home and outside the home, and the functions they fulfill in the community; and (iii) the position they occupy in a traditionally agrarian society in which men were the only visible actors (BAYLINA & GARCIA-RAMON, 2004).

In rural areas, women entered the labour market later than in urban areas, primarily due to the limited job opportunities for them and because of greater difficulties in balancing work, family and personal life. We must highlight that the men interviewed for this study expressed high appreciation for the efficacy of women in managing many services, such as the production and distribution of potable water, which they felt that women addressed in a more rational and hygienic way. It is also important to add that women are increasingly holding positions of technical responsibility (architects, physicians, veterinarians, archivists, etc.) or management (administrative secretary for local government, management of local institutions, etc.). Some of the women who have opted for elected office in local government have also been entrepreneurs in value-added economic activities in the CHP. During the interviews, men acknowledged that women have been more sensitive to promotion and marketing of new artesanal activities related to tourism. They have combined family-based production with commercialization through markets, fairs and special events that have helped to create a distinctive brand for some products (TULLA, 2003).

**Women’s responsibility for municipal management**

Women in local government have fewer specific responsibilities than men do. Women council members tend to focus on social services, both in Catalonia as a whole and in the CHP, and to a lesser degree are involved in administration, territorial management and the environment. Nonetheless, our interviews revealed two facts: 1) except for a few cities among the CHP municipalities, there is only limited specialization by members of local government, and 2) assigned responsibilities change continually and are often shared, with the name of the male councillor appearing first on the assignment roster.

**Are women less engaged** i**in local government in rural areas?**

We have reached several conclusions: (a) increasing women’s participation in elected office at the local government level is a slow process; (b) it is even slower in CHP rural areas because of the persistent patriarchal culture; (c) the recent socioeconomic transformations have encouraged women to enter the labour market and to participate in local politics; (d) nonetheless, women mayors are still a token number in CHP local governments; and (e) active participation by women in various local economic development efforts has demonstrated their capacity and effectiveness in leadership and economic innovation, which strengthens their potential opportunities to take on governance roles in rural communities.

Women’s participation in politics is conditioned by various supply and demand factors. The supply is affected by the number of women candidates interested in a party affiliation, a low perception of the efficacy of political involvement, less available political capital (occupational training and background), as well as the difficulties of reconciling private (family and personal) life with work responsibilities and participation in public life and various associations. With respect to demand factors, a woman must confront a series of barriers related to access to public office: the dominant political culture in the centres of power, with its more or less explicitly sexist mentality, is subject to the clearly patriarchal interests of party leaders and within political parties the definition the merits and qualities required to hold office are oriented toward more masculine characteristics; women are subject to continuous assessment of their competence (NORRIS, 1997).

The organizational culture, with its patriarchal roots, in mountain areas translates into the creation of informal networks of trust and power that are strictly masculine, an “old boys’ club” that has been solidified over the years in the position of the local party bosses or by participation in leisure activities such as hunting. Our study verifies the existence of the “glass ceiling” that keeps women from reaching the highest positions in their field (VALCARCEL, 1997).

The current crisis in rural areas has led to consideration of ways to improve agricultural production through competitive specialization or the development of high-quality artisan products (TULLA, 1994; 2009). Our interviews demonstrate that women participate in a substantial portion of the new activities in rural areas, with more or less responsibility. In various cases, women with public responsibilities in local government have encouraged local development activities, since they are often entrepreneurs themselves in the realm of rural tourism and artisan products. This fact does not appear in any clear fashion among the responsibilities of local government, which reveals this “invisible activity” of the woman politician. Revaluating natural spaces in the CHP has contributed to the added value of family tourism (PRADOS, 2009), in which women have a fundamental role in its success. The industrial crisis in rural areas has necessitated new activities to compensate for the resulting unemployment, especially of women who worked in the textile and home appliance industries. Some of the women council members we interviewed have been actively involved in the search for economic alternatives, not only the various types of tourism but also the incorporation of new technologies in other types of industries and services (PALLARES-BARBERA, 2003; VERA, 2003).

Indeed, although women remain somewhat invisible in public life because their contributions don’t fit with the sociocultural traditions in rural CHP communities, we can conclude that both the legislative initiative requiring gender equity in public life and the entrepreneurial, innovative spirit women bring to the current socioeconomic crisis in the CHP are slowly raising the profile of women in local government.

1. In rural areas of Catalonia, the traditional heir is the firstborn (eldest) son. If there are no sons, then the eldest daughter, the *pubilla*, is the legal heir. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)