

## ***Women of the mountains: from silence to recognition***

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*Throughout the centuries, from the Middle Ages until recent years (we can easily say the Sixties at least), women all over the Alpine Arch have succeeded in surviving in environmental frontiers, maintaining a close relationship with nature, exploiting resources whilst at the same time preserving and caring for the territory. This without giving up the magic and the poetry that have transformed them into custodians of memories and writers of songs. Our mountains, which for years have been kept on the fringes of the routes of communication, social and cultural development, have borne witness to the affirmation of a feminine culture and society. Not least because very often men were away, having emigrated or working far from home.*

*Even today, in the Alps, the majority of micro-economy and identity-economy initiatives are conducted by women. When they stay, the mountain does not die, but it sets out on the path of a different type of development, in harmony with the land, exploiting the opportunities it has to offers to humans.*

*By contrast, when women leave, the mountain dies, and all the more frequently our hillsides witness the abandonment by women, who refuse to “marry a farmer”. At first the men resort to the importing of wives from South America, the Far East or Eastern Europe. Then, ever so slowly, one after another, they simply move elsewhere as little by little they grow old.*

*Meanwhile however, at the same time a counter-movement is also beginning to assert itself. Many women have decided to revive those traditional economic practices (animal breeding, handicrafts, harvesting and transforming of herbs, hospitality) making use of new methods, combining them together in a global perspective and managing them by means of the latest, state of art methods of communication. This has resulted in the rebirth of entire valleys.*

*The fact is however that increasingly women are demonstrating, at a basic level, one of the more dynamic elements that exist within the Alpine micro-economy. This is also because they have not forgotten their origins, and have succeeded in preserving the memories or traditions without forgoing innovation and the claim to their sacrosanct rights.*

*The future of the Alps is in their hands. We are confronted with a privileged interlocutor for whoever has the survival, development and life of the mountain at heart. It is necessary to give them the opportunity of expressing themselves, to satisfy certain needs that are distinctly “feminine”, and which their male counterparts neglect or fail to see and understand. It is important to make it possible for them to organise themselves so that they can succeed in bringing out the best from thousands of years of experience of being in close touch with nature.*

*These are the reasons that have resulted in the formation of a study group, at the Centro di Ecologia Alpina, (in pink of course...but without preclusion) on the status of women in the Alps. It has already staged five international conferences and has established an International Network of women from the mountains.*

*Our project is to try to stop the flight from the mountains, to help people to regain a sense of place and identity. To do this, we have to privilege the reproductive section of population: that is, women and young people /that are the most likable to fly). We must raise their quality of life, and give them power of choice in a social context that is still patriarchal.*

*Mountains have survived for centuries without men: but without women they are dying.*

### ***Women were the first to fly away...***

Women were the first to leave the mountains. They set in motion a feminist protest that, even though it did not make it into the newspapers, was no less effective. The young women refused to marry a farmer. They stopped having babies. They found a way to go down to the valley and find a job in the city. This was simply their reaction to a culture that saw in them little more than useful tools to be used for work and procreation, and right up to the end relegated them to the sidelines, repressed them sexually, and prevented them from fulfilling themselves in any way.

The exodus began in the 1950s, and became a cause for concern in the decades that followed. Today it has become a matter of fact throughout many of the valleys.

This abandonment, however, has ancient origins, firmly rooted in a culture and a consciousness that have developed throughout centuries of history. In an attempt to solve, or at least limit, the harm being done in a situation that in some cases has already resulted in extreme consequences, it is necessary to take a step back in time.

Women have developed a resignation behaviour, to survive in a patriarchal society, but they had never lost their hope in a better life. Social control of a small community did not permit them to create a movement: in the Alps, they were spread up in microscopic villages, without possibility to meet and communicate. If you were against the social system, you did not have any other choice except the flight. And they did it as soon as they could.

### ***The condition of the woman within the traditional Alpine family.***

In this ancient, atypical and what one might call, in this present day and age, incidental universe, how is a woman to be considered?

Amongst the mountain folk there is no, one single vision of the female world. This is because the daughters of the Alps are such complex, polyhedrous personalities. They change according to their social condition, the role that they are called upon to undertake, their life story, their economic function. They transform themselves into different and mysterious beings, with a profound wisdom and a great fascination, precisely like the old woman described by Praga:

*... she belonged to the mountain; she was a part of it. Seventy years of going up and coming down meant that she had become a part of its nature. In the same way as there are crags that have human appearances [...] this old woman had taken on the appearance of a crag. With enough imagination it would have been easy to discover the lichen and moss on her skin (1).*

The mountain pastures, “where the air is thin”, are a part of a physical, environmental, but also fantastic dimension, over which a woman, and the woman-witch-matriarch, still exercises undoubted power. The life of the mountain women, however, was hard, particularly because before they could achieve importance within their family and with their husbands, they first had to spend endless years in silence, waiting and in submission.

### ***The single woman: freedom and sense of sin***

In the long age of the traditional Alpine society, that we can put from the Middle Age until the Sixties, the season of youth was very short, watched over by parents and priests, the guardians of the family's good reputation.

Even if, compared to their bourgeois peers, the peasant women enjoyed a certain freedom of movement, which out of necessity led them to promiscuity with men, there still nevertheless existed a double moral standard which denied them of their right to pleasure. From a very early age they were trapped by the precepts of the catechism. Sex phobic priests would instil in them the sense of sin and of duty. Everything was a sin, and even as recently as thirty or forty years ago, they would be publicly scolded for not wearing socks or for going dancing on a Sunday afternoon, when young people would gather together and someone would pull out a barrel organ. Transgression did certainly exist, but each action that went beyond what was considered the norm was lived with great feelings of guilt, and the social control exerted by the community was extremely powerful. The sense of sin was deeply rooted in the people, and sin was understood to mean, above all, sexual transgression, and the scandal itself referred to doing or saying anything that was in some way related to the sphere of sex. Even the style of women's dresses was characterised by extreme sobriety in both design and colour, which was always dark, and evolved incredibly slowly. The slightest hint of change or innovation almost constituted a provocation. The moment the girls attempted to "shorten" the skirts, even just a little, they were swamped by the disapproval of the family, the village and even the parish priest (2).

In exchange however, the choice of a spouse remained quite free from family constraints. For many observers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries financial interest was of greater importance in the peasant marriage than in an urban marriage. This is likely: if it is true that the city was the first to be touched by the transformation of the ideological and economic structures, whilst the mountains remain to this day still, a "reservoir of archaisms", how can one fail to be amazed if its inhabitants have remained faithful to the ancient laws longer than the workers and the bourgeoisie? But then is it the case, perhaps, that the 'rural ways' meant that one always married first and foremost for financial interests, whilst in the case of 'urbanity' it was first and foremost for love? By dint of wanting to separate courtly love from coarse behaviour the dominant culture succeeded in setting love against the rural way. Despite these prejudices, however, if one does not accept as the sole definition of love the one created by aristocratic and urban culture, one might realise that a marriage based on free choice has been easier and more common amongst the peasants than it is among the bourgeoisie. (3).

### ***The married woman***

Marriage often ratified an already existing state of fact: pregnancies that occurred before the canonical blessing were extremely frequent. Tragedies were rare, children were well accepted, and barring any impediment through other causes, or the stern opposition of the families, the couple married and set up a new home. From that moment onwards women's lives changes totally and from that instant their personal existence began to lose its importance until finally it disappeared altogether. Their every demand was to be devoted to the husband, the children, to work right up until

they died. So much so in fact that both the testimonies and the songs (4) reveal that the separation from their parents must have been traumatic, even more so because becoming part of the husband's family almost always meant dependence on the mother in law, and the young bride felt as though she counted for nothing.

### ***A denial of the right to pleasure***

Once married, practically all aspirations had to be suppressed, and it was even sinful just to talk about them. Women had to take care of the newborn babies, and the births followed one after another. There was little money, and anyway there was never anything left to spend on themselves. Working in the fields, taking care of the home, the husband and the old folk gave no respite. Satisfying the needs of others, of the husband, the children, the in-laws, and the animals meant that they grew old quickly. The love (if it had ever existed) soon faded, destroyed by exhaustion and hardship. The following is an astonishing testimonial:

*"... We mountain women were like goats not women. From June through to October we had to work like beasts to gather in everything we needed for the long winter. Mountain women did not have their babies in the summer, but in the autumn, and they were the fruit of the winter. During the winter the men were always there, always on top! Come the summer the men were nowhere to be seen. They would be up in the pastures or gathering in the hay. The woman was simply an animal. She had to keep the bed, run the house and the children, milk the animals in the barn and then rake in the hay. Women worked sixteen hours a day, more than the men in fact. Any intimacy was reduced to a mechanical act, without a hint of affection. The man was master, the man had the money, and the man had everything" (5).*

### ***Woman, the mother of the family***

There was no such thing as a holiday for a woman.

Whilst the man had his local tavern, the woman was never allowed to enter, unless of course she had gone to collect her drunken husband to put him to bed. During the winter at least, the men had an opportunity to rest, because there was no work to be done in the fields.

*"But the women had to work harder than the men, and if you happened to end up with a bad sort you even had to pay for his vices."*

In times of economic hardship, women were forced (almost obliged) to leave the village long before the men. In so doing their reproductive potential was curbed, and so restricting the number of births within the community (6). Then there were also some extreme situations. In Alto Adige and in Tirol, within the "hereditary farm" system, daughters were forbidden from inheriting if they had any brothers. Their lot was really difficult. Either they managed to get their hands on a prospective heir and therefore owner of a farm, in the form of a husband, or they would be servants in their fathers' homes, or leave, never to return, making do with the most menial of jobs far from their own village.

### ***Women's culture on the Alps***

Under these conditions, female protests were voiced through song lyrics or by the telling or rewording of stories of legends and myths. Both song and “story telling” on the Alps became probably the main form of expression and cultural creativity. Women, the custodians of memory from the most ancient of times (7), were probably the anonymous composers who passed down to us the characteristics of an ancient civilisation, and frustrated aspirations from the other half of the heavens.

Within this Alpine system, women still undertake a fundamental role, in as much as it is they who keep the family tied to the land. The women are the custodians of memories, the guardians of ancient culture and traditions. This is because they represent stability in comparison to men who, because of their hustling and bustling, come into contact with different worlds and civilisations and often leave to work in far off distant places.

### ***The woman's condition in the traditional Alpine society.***

In the peasant society the woman was “the first to get up and the last to go to bed”. Just like their male peers, girls started working from the moment they could walk. Whether inside or outside of the house, there was always something that needed doing.

However, despite this social inferiority that they were forced to put up with, the family's, the community's and the village's financial standing revolved around the female who was without a doubt the most important. The main feature of the alpine population was that of moving around with the animals. Man is his animals' parasite and it is their needs that take priority over all else. A direct bond, a reciprocal relationship of dedication and dependence binds one to the other. In a society where the man is often away, or has to do the hardest, physical agricultural work (mowing, digging), the person who tends not only to the cows, but also the sheep and goats, usually assigned to the younger women and the children, and who feeds them, takes them to the pasture and looks after them with herbs when they fall ill... is the woman of the family!

### ***Women, the custodians of memory***

It was the young girls and the mothers who had maintained the most ancient, archaic inheritance of knowledge, which allowed the exploitation of the resources of the forest that dates back to the nomadic civilisations of the hunter-gatherers. Medicinal herbs, small fruits, mushrooms were sold at market. It was they who worked the loom and knitted, provided the clothing and linen, and attempted to make their homes more welcoming. In this way the decorative motifs and symbols whose origins are lost in the mists of time, have been passed down. In areas with some sort of tourism, the housewife would rent rooms or would do “seasonal” work in hotels.

### ***Women without men***

Women have looked after the mountains for centuries and millennia, with and above all in the absence of a man. If she suffered from loneliness, amazingly she somehow managed to exorcise this pernicious feeling (8), considering man, once his reproductive role was exhausted – not just as incapable but almost a dead loss. He was just “an extra” who, even if he suddenly disappeared, would have little or no effect on anyone, and indeed would probably even result in life becoming more

pleasurable for those he left behind. The most commonly held belief about a widow was that she was a lucky woman who had succeeded in getting some time to herself, no longer having to be at her husband's beck and call. Those who were truly struck by misfortune were those who grew old childless, or worse still, without even a daughter.

For long periods of the year the men were away. They were shepherds, or had to tend to the animals in the mountain pastures, or mow the hay down in the valley, whilst the family were high up the mountainside with the animals. Small commercial activities were conducted by travelling salesmen who moved around during the summer. Each valley specialised in its own trade (peddlers, knife grinders, sellers of spices or religious images.....). On the other hand one of the major aspects of the Alpine economy has always been that of having multifaceted professions, because agriculture on its own has never been able to guarantee a living.

### ***Typical economic activities of women in the traditional Alpine economy***

Women not only busied themselves in the "ordinary" day to day running of the farm, that was based on subsistence farming which just about ensured sustenance, with the help of their husbands, but they also developed alternative forms of supplementing their income, which would bring in a little extra cash. This was often the only "cash" available for dealing with any additional expenses.

Women had developed legitimate professions that took them far from home, and that not only allowed them to support the family, but also to bring worthwhile features of renewal and quality of life to their own community. In Claut, in the Val Cellina, in Friuli, they would leave with their spoons and their wooden ladles, carved for them by the men during the winter, and stay away for months on end, only returning in the Autumn when their merchandise would have been all sold (9). They were travelling all over the north of Italy, reaching Florence and Bologna; they were moving from village to village, from farm to farm, sleeping in the hay-lofts and eating what they could.

### ***Rebel Women***

From medieval times onwards, right up to recent times, setting the classes against one another, even if it did not degenerate into open revolt, was obvious for all to see not just in the Alps, but throughout the Italian and European countryside. Whoever did not belong to the dominant class could withdraw legitimately, if they were able to, from the actions of the state or church justice system, particularly in the more remote areas, on the mountains and Alps. With every murder, even before the circumstances surrounding the crime were known, the sympathies of all, involuntarily favoured the guilty. The anguish, so manfully and proudly confronted, evoked such admiration that those who recounted it even forgot to hint at the cause for which it had been inflicted.

According to contemporary accounts, for all them Middle Ages until XVIII century bands of bandits infested the roads and the pathways of the entire Alpine region. Shepherds, for that matter, have forever been associated with outlaws. Women, almost always servants, who had fled from their masters, and occasionally prostituted themselves, joined these derelict bands of fugitives from justice. In groups they would drag themselves along with the traders who carried their wares from one market to another, or with armies on the march (10). Evidently, rather than

give up – free of charge – the only thing of theirs that was worth anything, they preferred to administer their own work force for themselves. There is no reason to doubt that they took part in robbery and pillaging raids in person. The mothers, sisters, wives and lovers of outlaws would then take in and support the relatives without ever once betraying them. In reality, the concept of a woman being a weak creature is very modern, and has its origins in the nobility, but above all in the middle classes. Even aristocratic women would frequently mount a horse (11) and take part in armed revolts.

The class revolt is a recurring theme in the descriptions of the sabbat and of those that were to become known as the main instigators of the rebellions, the witches. Not only would their fetes end in the narration of the crimes committed by those taking part, but women were specifically encouraged by the devil to rebel against their masters. This same pact with the devil was called *conjuratio* by the inquisitors, just like the pact that was formed between the workers in struggle. Before becoming a crime against religion, witchcraft was treated as though it were high treason. In other words it was a political act of insubordination. The demands made against owners and employers, and in particular attacks against property were often branded as witchcraft. Beelzebub represented, in the opinion of the persecutors, a promise of power, love and riches, for which one was even prepared to sell one's very soul, and to violate every moral and social law as it were. The actual rituals attributed to witchcraft, which are all centred on the theme of inversion (a mass celebrated backwards, dancing in an anticlockwise direction), are all symptomatic of an identity which establishes itself between witchcraft and revolution. The woman-witch is the symbol of the "dark side" of nature, of how much that is uncontrollable, wild, disorganised and violent it is possible to find in the world. Witch-hunts were a most powerful weapon against any form of social insubordination whatsoever (12). There exist coincidences that are no less curious, between the fresh outbreaks of the persecutions of women, the hunting down of heretics and the eruption of both urban and peasant revolts. The Alps are always at the centre of these continuous, semi-clandestine tides of men and ideas. One could almost believe that the mountain folk gave both support and succour to every type of outlaw and heretic. The shepherds, the alpine grazers and their women, constantly on the move, with no fixed abode, have often been confused with and overshadowed by those outside of the law, from medieval times right up to the Resistance against fascism and nazism. So much so that the persecution and the inquisitors – both ecclesiastical and civilian – ran rampant, particularly on the vast "cultural areas", the Alps and the Pyrenees, of the sheep farmers, who often lead and gave support to resistance to constituted power. Social reflection suggests that people brutalised by hunger and work are unable to give any thought to protest. But women appeared to be the exception to this rule, and not only in the pre-inquisition medieval era. At the end of the century it is they, and not the men, that the various writers of the inquisition on the state of the campaigns (Jacini, Meardi and so on) point to as the true enemies of the social structure that existed at that time. The frequent observations on the desire for luxury that animated the gentler sex should be considered in the light of the battles for altering production relationships, some sort of women's battles. A handkerchief, or a ribbon, could become the rallying flag. The wife was an agent of independence and of demands, especially in the mountainous Alpine regions such as Carnia, where male emigration meant that the burdens of work rested firmly on their shoulders. Meardi sees in these peasant women a push towards urbanisation; not only in the way they dressed, like city dwellers, but also in the way they assumed more genteel ways. The same

obstinacy with which women demanded wine and liquor for themselves, even at the risk of “under nourishing their man”, or force him into an insane spending spree in order to prepare the trousseau for his daughters, should be viewed not so much in an individualistic light but in a social one. It was an invitation to the husband to get on with it and earn more (13).

### ***The emigration of women in the Alps***

Traditionally across the whole Alpine region, before marrying, women would go into service, and this would bring them into contact with the city, with civilisation and with different needs. They would then return home with a different outlook on the world. Often however, when they returned they were forced to give up their freedom and the hard earned privileges (for instance, the right to eat meat and drink wine, that only men could have) they had acquired whilst working as domestic servants. Often these aspirations remained and were “passed down” to their daughters.

When the separation became too lengthy, it was no longer possible to re-bridge the gap. Wet nurses stayed away for many years, only returning to the village for the time it took to produce the children that allowed them to go on working. Communication with those who stayed behind became impossible. When they were no longer capable of reproducing, they would remain with their adopted family as child minders or housekeepers. This, even when there was no real financial need for them to do so, but just as long as they were allowed to retain their autonomy and respect they had so sorely earned and paid for, and so that they could avoid having to return to a destiny of subordination and isolation already marked by use and by the unwritten laws of habit (14). Women from the mountains began leaving, either physically or in their thoughts, in their desires, or in their dreams, a long time before the exodus of thirty years ago, documented by sociologists and confirmed by demographic reports alarmed by the drop in population.

When viewed in this light, it could be said that in the Alps, possibly a great deal more than on the plains or in the cities, two distinct societies and cultures that communicated so little with one another, lived side by side.

### ***The change in the traditional Alpine society: the abandonment of the mountain***

Mainly because, particularly from the last century onwards, men started to emigrate en masse for long periods of time, women found themselves totally alone, with no one to lend a hand, having to run a complex economic system, forever sufficiently inadequate to satisfy both their material as well as spiritual needs.

And so they decided to leave.

When one decides to leave, the decision is not sparked off merely because of economic reasons. Living conditions being equal meant that some people chose to emigrate, whilst others opted to stay. If we take a look for example at the quality of life of the urban populations at the end of last century, it cannot be said that it was any better than those in the mountain villages. In fact, it is often possible to ascertain that the city dwellers were actually worse off. But for them there was always the hope in some form or another of a better life, of climbing the social ladder, for themselves or for their children (at the cost of difficult sacrifices, and imagining rather than truly achieving it). So much so that emigration for urban centres was limited in consistency and time. The mountain from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, when



the big out migrations began, on the other hand could in no way allow anyone to ever think of a better future. And if this was true for men, what must it have been like for the women, incapable, amongst other things, of openly rebelling against a civilisation by which they were repressed through insurmountable cultural and religious conditioning, unless they were prepared to make the painful break from their families and their communities.

### ***When the women leave, the mountain dies***

Women's response to centuries of repression was to flee from the priests, the villagers, the fathers, the brothers and the husbands.

And so it is that the valleys became depopulated. Women were a pivotal part, not just of the economy, but also of what lies behind an economic system, i.e. its civil and moral values. Mountains have survived for centuries without men: but without women they are dying.

They left their men behind and went to work in the cities. Either that or they remained single. As married women they did not want to have babies. What other type of refusal could have been more radical.

### ***The offers available on the employment market, the opportunities, the desires of men and of women***

However, in the last few years the situation in at least some places has begun to change. Partly because many of the dreams induced by urbanisation have been shattered. The decay of the environment and the separation from nature is more sharply perceived. The designs, the pretexts and the social requirements are showing their limitations.

The present society, both in the Alps and in the flatlands, is still a male chauvinist society, created for the benefit of men and their aspirations. In general these could be interpreted as: permanent employment; a monthly salary with job security; well defined roles and duties that match the qualifications and the level of training achieved, thought out and pursued in order to obtain a particular job; no need for training or additional study after work; as near as regular working hours as is possible; separate holiday and work periods so as to ensure a good margin of "free" time in order to take up a "hobby", to go on "holiday" or to dedicate time simply to "relaxing".

These are all things that are increasingly becoming a privilege, for men that is. Not to mention the women!

All of this combined with a resistance to weariness, self discipline, the ability to communicate one's own thoughts both well and quickly, the patience to never take anything for granted, to be able to start afresh, if necessary. All of these are qualities that women have had to develop in order to survive and to assert themselves, especially in environmental frontiers such as those of the Alps.

This is precisely why some of the Alpine region's more interesting economic initiatives are being run by women.

### ***When the women remain, the mountain finds the way to new development***

Let's be quite clear about this: The "main economy of the Alps", that of the luxury hotels and of the mountain lift systems, of industry and of the tendering for public works are all still firmly and securely in the hands of men, as for that matter is political power. But the economy of the valley, the family concern, that which allows one to remain attached to the territory, to continue to live high up the mountain, is once more in the hands of women.

### ***Identity economies***

In recent years however, a new economic concept has begun to take shape, the identity-economy. These are businesses which, even though their origins date back to a past which is sometimes extremely remote, are developing in a modern way, with the help of modern technology, or by setting themselves goals and objectives that differ from those of times gone by. In addition to producing an income, these initiatives preserve but above all assist and "launch" the traditional cultures, allowing them to become the base for self sustaining economic activities. Through the rediscovery, re appropriation and improvement of one's own cultural heritage, it is possible to draw from an almost endless source of energy that will lead to the knowledge of how to plan one's own future differently, creatively, joyously. Women, the custodians of memory, have understood this from the very start and they have succeeded in putting everything at stake and discovering the unexpected resources within and around them: in "their" territory.

### ***"Parallel economies"***

The women of the Alps have never resigned themselves to taking on the subservient role of the housewife. Ever since the moment when traditional Alpine cultivation collapsed, they have managed to reorganise family businesses in order to adapt them to their own needs. Whilst men benefit greatly from the "privilege" of being employed, setting off in the morning for their place of work, wives and mothers remain in the valley. It is they who manage to keep that little piece of agriculture that remains, alive. It is they who provide for the family consumption and also the "wholesome foods, because if we were to look at the cost, we wouldn't save that much of the husband wage". The vegetable garden, the cornmeal for the 'polenta', the poultry pen, the goats, the sheep, the pig for making the salami, a cow or maybe two, is the job of the Alpine housewife. Where the social fabric of the village has not been upset, mountain pastures and May hays are still used. Middle aged women still go up the mountain with all the animals, children and school aged grand children, to find the cool of the "*al fresco*" (Val Chiavenna), firstly in the mid mountain side settlements, and then in the Alps. Youngsters and children look upon this as a holiday. The roads and the houses have all been renovated and restored, and in the majority of cases without any public funding. The husbands join the wives during the holiday periods.

These are types of parallel economies that have never been valued for what they are truly worth, but they allow family cash expenses to be cut to the bone and a decent living to be had from a single income, even to the point perhaps of allowing the children to attend university. At the same time, however, due to the fact that the land is still cultivated and looked after, walked, seen in any condition of time and period of the year, they allow the condition of the alpine territory to be constantly tended to and monitored, actions which otherwise would place an extremely high financial

burden on the tax payer who would have to fund it through taxation, or worse still, as is increasingly the case, through “natural” disasters.

### ***Women and tourism: new opportunities?***

Even tourism, which has for a long time now overtaken agriculture and animal breeding and rearing as the main income earner in the Alps, is practically run by women. The majority of tourism businesses are in fact family run concerns. Even where the proprietor’s name appears as that of a man, it is in fact a woman who is managing the business.

They are the masters of the house who welcome the guests, prepare the rooms, take care of the furnishing and of the kitchen, organise the outings and the tourists’ stay, making them feel totally at ease. All of this requires noticeable physical and cultural resources, and puts the women under great emotional stress. As in every type of economic development, there is a “price” to be paid for tourism. It is not just the environment that becomes eroded, but also private life, the quiet way of life, the habits of a lifetime, the ideas and the well-entrenched prejudices. In many of the villages in the Alto Adige region, where until recently the guests were welcomed in the same apartment used by the host family, it became necessary during the Christmas season to sacrifice family intimacy in order to entertain the tourists. (15). At the end of the Summer season, the owners of rented rooms, of bed and breakfasts and of the small hotels in the Val Gardena (Bz), that has undergone enormous transformation in tourism, have to undergo therapy for their exclusively culturally provoked mental problems:

*“They are incapable of constantly coming into contact with people who are so different from themselves“*(16).

### ***Women and education and training***

Women are much more inclined than men to attend education and training courses. After having been isolated from the world of culture and communication for centuries, they are more curious than their male counterparts, more generous and more open to new ideas. They are not ashamed to admit that they do not know something, and so are capable, even at “a certain age”, of learning and getting themselves trained. When basic cultural initiatives are organised, they are ready to take part, to lend a hand, to show what they are capable of doing, to open up the family trunks, to cook for the guests. Sadly, in the majority of cases, the men, once home from work, simply sit down in front of the television set or are totally incapable of taking on a task in which they are unable to see some sort of gratification or immediate gain. The women, the custodians of memory, and therefore of the past, are capable of mapping out a vision of life that from the immediate future opens out onto what is to come. This is why they, more than men, are able to see clearly the benefits of a long-term action or project. Being used to waiting, day after day, to being patient, to gritting their teeth, to raising the children, to setting up a new home “outside the house of their parents”, to ensuring that the bank account is not allowed to go into the red, means that they do not live with the expectation of quick and easy solutions. In the meantime they invest in the future.

In order to keep the population on the mountain, it is necessary to give the people the same possibilities that are available to the city dwellers. Removing essential services

(post offices, schools, shops, cafés) would be a very grave error. In addition to which these few “public locations” that act as meeting points offer a reason for going out, for exchanging a few words. It is also worth thinking about the fact that in addition to the services required by men, women also need to be able to have access to specific types of “sexed” assistance, the sort of help related to children, the family and the care of the elderly. These are the types of assistance that still to this day they have to almost completely discharge for themselves.

But perhaps women, more than men are in need of “immaterial” things that have always been neglected or viewed merely as luxuries. Social relationships, the possibility of being creative and of expressing oneself, to see and be seen. Beauty and poetry. In short - culture. In the evenings, and particularly in winter, our villages are becoming ghost towns, a desertification caused by television.

There is a need for professional organisers and motivators who, starting with the local cultural heritage, help the mountain people to feel part of the world that surrounds them, to break free from the chains of isolation and to give them a sense of importance. The development of tourism in the evolution of these small complex systems is essential, because it shows how the people “from outside” like to visit places that on the surface “have nothing to offer”. This is most certainly not an easy task. It will be necessary to invest in quality training, which in itself implies time, resources, willingness and the readiness to attempt to change a mentality well and truly engrained in the sands of time.

These are the reasons for which, if any “social policy for the mountain” hopes to succeed, today more than ever before it must be able to cope with the needs and desires of women, which can no longer be ignored or underestimated. Furthermore, to give up on these women would result in the mountain, with all its problems, tumbling down hill.

### ***The Women of the Alps, today...***

Women are increasingly proving themselves to be the emerging and innovative factor, even in professional agriculture or in those new and hybrid forms that link agriculture to tourism. Once again, the Alps and Sardinia, both regions with great pastoral traditions, are leading the way. In Sardinia in fact, women have founded a farm-tourism association.

Now here are a few statistical facts and figures. In Italy, whilst in 1931 women made up 19% of agricultural labour, they exceeded 24% in 1951 and 29% in 1971, reaching 36% in 1981, and just a little above this figure in 1991. Men manage to find it a lot easier to get a job in a factory, and therefore earn an income. This gives rise to the spreading phenomena known as the so-called worker-farmer family that revives the traditional multi-disciplinary activities on the Alps, planned through the strategy of couples.

The percentages game must not deceive however. In real value terms, even the exodus of women from the mountains has been enormous. In fact, in many valleys, the women were the first to leave. The total of 2,033,000 farming women of 1951 fell to 589,000 forty years later. The drop in the female agricultural workforce however has been accompanied by ever increasing taking on of business ownership. Many of the smaller businesses confirm the substitutive character of many of the “in pink” entrepreneurial initiatives as well as some of the larger concerns. It is here that

the bugbear of many generations of males tends to accentuate itself, i.e. the competitive function undertaken by women.

Here are some more statistical facts and figures. In 1970, at the end of an “exodus of biblical proportions” that resulted in the almost depopulation of many of the Alpine valleys, the agricultural census apportioned 18.9% of businesses to women. But starting at the broad end of the spectrum with 26.9% of smallholdings with less than one hectare, it narrows down at the opposite end to 7.2% of medium sized concerns of ten or twenty hectares, the dream of the medium sized farmer. Only from this minimum figure can a tendency be seen towards a slight improvement, settling at around the 8% mark with those bigger firms.

When compared to data from 1970, those figures from the 20-year period that followed show noticeable progresses. In fact, despite the overall drop in the number of businesses from 3,607,000 to 3,023,000, those run by women rose from 680,000 to 782,000, an increase from 18.9% to 25.9%. What’s more, the increase is not centred on those small holdings of less than two hectares, but on those with ten to twenty hectares, that in 1970 appeared the target of professionalism, but which in the meantime have been lapped by the waves of part-time working.

In the ancient models of family structures the wife would have been exempted from working in the fields either in consideration of her advancing years or because of the economic importance of the business. The presence of the working wife was inversely proportional to the importance of the firm. Taking care of domestic matters was a sign of middle class privilege. All farming women worked, and the children were either looked after by the grand mothers, or dragged along to the place of work. Only the wife of a well off farmer was able to dedicate her time to the kitchen, to cleaning or the preparation of jams, without ever laying a finger on billhooks, scythes, farm wagons, tractors, milk vats or cows to milk. On the Alps cases such as these are exceptional and in recent years a situation has begun to develop that appears to be heading in the direction of a counter evolution. It is the challenge of a new rurality (17).

## Notes

1. E. Praga, *Memorie del presbiterio e scene di provincia* [trans. Memories of the presbytery, and provincial scenes], Milan, Rizzoli, 1963, pg. 98, quote from Corrado Barberis, *Le campagne italiane dall'Ottocento ad oggi* [trans. The Italian countryside from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the present day], Bari, Laterza, 1999, pg. 94
2. In Val Tartano (So), in the small hamlet of Campo, as recently as 1948, the parish priest refused to give holy communion to a girl wearing a black veil, normally worn by the women from the villages in the valley bottom, instead of the local headscarf. Donata Bellotti, *Religiosità popolare in Val Tartano* [trans. Folk Religion in Val Tartano], Quaderni valtellinesi n° 7 [trans. Notebooks of Valtellina no.7], Sondrio, pg. 45 and 46.
3. Jean Luis Flandrin, *Amori contadini* [trans. Peasant Loves], Milan, Mondadori, 1980, pg. 75 foll.
4. Many songs warn the girls, and advise them not to get married!
5. Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti* [trans. The World of the Defeated], Einaudi, Turin, 1977, vol. I, Introduzione [trans. Introduction], XCIV.
6. John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf, *La Frontiera nascosta - Ecologia ed etnicità fra Trentino e Sudtirolo* [trans. The Hidden Frontier - Ecology and Ethnicity between

- Trentino and South Tirol], Museum of the traditions and customs of the people of the Trento region, San Michele all'Adice (Tn), 1993, pg. 261.
7. Various Authors, *Matriarcato e montagna* [trans. Matriarchy and the Mountains], edited by Michela Zucca, report no. 5 of the Centro di ecologia alpina, Trento 1995.
  8. Raul Merzario, **Donne sole nelle valli e nelle montagne** [trans. Women alone in the valleys and on the mountains] in Various Authors., edited by Angela Groppi, *Il lavoro delle donne* [trans. Women's work ], Bari, Laterza, 1996, pgs. 229-246.
  9. Various Authors *Valcellina: percorsi di memoria* [trans. Valcellina: Paths of Memory], edited by Teresa Borsatti and Tullio Trevisan, Geap, Museo della casa clautana [trans. Museum of a Claut's home], Fiume Veneto (Pd), 1994.
  10. Andrew McCall, *I reietti del Medio Evo* [trans. Medieval Outcasts], Milan, Mursia, 1988, pg. 140.
  11. For a more complete treatment of the history of female revolts in the areas of Celtic-Rhaetian cultural influence, see Michela Zucca, **Streghe, eretiche, delinquenti: montagne e femmine ribelli** [trans. Witches, Heretics, Delinquents: Mountains and Rebel Women] in Various Authors, edited by Michela Zucca, *Matriarcato e montagna II* [trans. Matriarchy and the Mountains II], Trento, Centro di ecologia alpina, 1998, pgs. 13-25.
  12. Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunato, *Il grande Calibano* [trans. The Great Caliban], Milan, Angeli, 1984, pgs 70-73.
  13. Corrado Barberis, *Le campagne italiane dall'Ottocento ad oggi* [trans. The Italian countryside from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the present day], Bari, Laterza, 1999, pgs. 228-229.
  14. Daniela Perco, *“Dare il proprio sangue...”: l'emigrazione delle balie da latte dalle Prealpi venete* [trans. “Giving one's own blood”: the emigration of wet nurses from the Venetian Pre-Alps ], Annali di San Michele n° 6 [trans. Annals of S. Michele no. 6], Museo degli usi e costumi della gente trentina [trans. Museum of habits and customs of the people of the Trentino region], San Michele all'Adige (Tn), pgs. 209- 224.
  15. Racconto di Richard Fliri [trans. Story by Richard Fliri], tourism operator, Valle Lunga (Bz).
  16. This situation was discussed in the Autumn of 1995 at an international conference on tourism and permanent education held in Castel Coldrano (Bz). This conference attempted to find new solutions to the problem of “cultural expropriation” caused by intense tourist development. The papers are in the process of being prepared.
  17. Corrado Barberis, *Le campagne italiane ...* [trans. The Italian countryside ...], cited word, pgs. 503-506