



From Household to Public Sphere: Women Farmers, Gender Inequality, and Collective Mobilisation

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Abstract

The MAIs Project – Women Farmers in Inland Territories – aimed to empower and promote the civic and associative participation of women farmers in S. Pedro do Sul and Sabugal, contributing to the advancement of gender equality in these regions. Using a participatory approach grounded in the principles of community development, activities were structured along three axes of intervention: personal/social, technical, and collective. This article analyses gender inequality in civic participation and highlights popular education as a key tool for strengthening collective action. When considering community mobilisation in rural contexts, it is essential to recognise the role of trust-based networks and the coordination between public policies and local actors. Women farmers face structural barriers that limit their engagement in the public sphere, including the burden of domestic and agricultural labour and persistent patriarchal norms. Thus, the centrality of labour and the gendered division of responsibilities emerged as key factors in understanding patterns of political participation and the development of collective action.

Keywords: women farmers, gender inequality, rural development, civic participation, popular education, community development.

INTRODUCTION

Approaches to community development must be grounded in a plurality of concepts—such as local development, community building, civic participation, and popular education—and methodologies. Despite their differences, when considered together, their articulation becomes essential to sustaining community building. The term community development is typically more prevalent in cultural and social contexts where collective and community processes are more prominent (for example, more common in Southern Europe than in Northern Europe, and more in Africa and Latin America than in Western Europe and North America), whereas local development tends to appear in more academic, intellectual, and institutional settings, and conversely, in different geographical areas (Roque Amaro, 2018).

According to Costa and Silva (2018), after decades of dominance by a centralised development paradigm imposed globally, new approaches have emerged that aim to reclaim and revitalise the empowerment and participation of citizens and civil society in managing their own interests, through processes of social and political empowerment. Notable among these are the paradigms of Production-Centred Development and Economic-Centred Development (Hickey & Mohan, 2004), whose centralised nature—regulated by central authorities and a conventional economy lacking concern for sustainability—led to a significant disengagement from collective action and a loss of citizen decision-making power (Chang & Andreoni, 2021). It was in response to this deficit in engagement, and the failures of centralised development processes that caused widespread

poverty and exclusion, that the People-Centred Development paradigm emerged (Hickey & Mohan, 2004).

This people-centred development model is seen as more decentralised and locally grounded. It promotes greater citizen participation, empowerment, and community sustainability. This represents a clear shift in development policy thinking and action, replacing top-down paradigms with bottom-up approaches—particularly relevant when seeking to engage communities and foster change. From this perspective, the social capital of communities, along with direct participation and actions leading to empowerment, are considered fundamental.

Empowering a community means raising awareness that it is possible to improve its living conditions—in other words, equipping the community with the means (education, information, organisation) to understand that poverty and exclusion are not immutable destinies, but realities that can be transformed through collective, political, and economic action. Friedmann (1992) proposes expanding the domestic economy into broader spheres of social practice (at the community/regional level—for example, cooperatives, producer associations, local markets; and at the national/global level—for example, integration into value chains, inclusive public policies). Empowerment does not only involve the provision of material resources or external aid but also helping people realise that they themselves have the capacity to change their reality. It is about awakening a new mindset, based on self-confidence, collective organisation, and a forward-looking vision. In this context, community development also includes community empowerment and the recognition of the power of a community's social capital as a mediating and crucial element for facilitating and mobilising direct and active participation.

Community development can be understood as a process of change, centred on a small-scale community, aimed at responding to its unmet fundamental needs, with the goal of improving well-being by enhancing its endogenous capabilities and resources (Roque Amaro, 2018). Such a process requires a methodology rooted in a pedagogy of participation and community autonomy; the support of various types of external resources to strengthen endogenous ones, within an integrated and multidimensional perspective; and a partnership-based logic—that is, coordination between institutions and services operating in the community. This also entails a wide diversity of rhythms, logics, processes, and outcomes depending on the specific characteristics of each community.

To achieve the best outcomes from action-research processes of this nature, intervention team members must take on various roles suited to the challenges at hand—such as sowers, revealers (of skills, resources, and voices), facilitators, and mobilisers of the conditions and factors necessary for implementing community development and establishing a community group (CG).¹ In rural studies, the concept of social capital has been used as a factor that can contribute to local development. In this context, it is important to consider the potential that arises from the various interactions between different actors, both internal and external, across structural levels—micro, meso, and macro—as these interactions are key to stimulating dynamic community development. Some authors argue that building social capital largely depends on the complementarity between public policies and available services, alongside communities' ability to establish trusting relationships that enable engagement in local initiatives (Carmo, 2008).

In rural areas, where associative networks are relatively weak, public institutions should play an intermediary role between policy implementation and the need to engage local actors in decision-

making and the practical application of projects. According to Evans (1996), although the presence of dense, high-trust networks at the micro level may be important, they are often insufficient to generate new forms of cooperation capable of mobilising communities around specific local and regional development initiatives. This capacity requires alignment between public institutions' programmes and actions and the interests of voluntary organisations and private entities—what Evans terms embeddedness.

The MAIs Project identified some of these challenges and aimed to pave the way towards expanding social capital (at the micro, meso, and macro levels) among women farmers in the regions of S. Pedro do Sul and Sabugal. This was achieved through the promotion of their organisation as a community (based on the principles of Popular Education) and through the co-organisation of activities that brought new people to visit their villages and enabled them to experience other realities.

The villages portrayed here, Covelinhas and Rompecilha (both located in the municipality of S. Pedro do Sul), have undergone significant socio-demographic transformations in recent years, including population ageing. Additionally, they face difficulties in mobilising collectively around concrete initiatives, many of which have emerged through the isolated efforts of particular actors and groups. The limited involvement of political authorities and local organisations in the development of social projects that meet the needs of these populations and preserve their traditions suggests a bleak outlook. This may discourage residents from attempting to reverse the current trend of decline: "I see the future of linen here in the village as a bit bleak, even though linen is light in colour, I see a very dark future, because there is no one left to work it (...) now it's like any other tradition, like so many memories that are being lost, and this will be just one more, which is a shame." (Woman farmer from the village of Rompecilha).

Gender Inequality in Civic Participation

Over the past fifty years, women's rights have been progressively integrated into institutions and cultures. However, despite the progress made, gender inequalities persist and are reflected in citizenship, particularly in the political sphere (Nunes, 2013). This gender inequality in public participation is structural in nature and is linked to the unequal social division of labor. Numerous studies have shown that women experience a "double workday," which includes domestic and parenting tasks and leaves little time for leisure or civic engagement (Torres, 2018; Perista et al., 2016; Torres & Brites, 2007).

When these inequalities are analyzed within the context of women farmers, it becomes evident that they face a situation of double discrimination: on the one hand, they are often only seen as "helpers" to their farmer husbands, and on the other, they are expected to perform domestic roles under a patriarchal logic that prevents them from being recognized as farmers in their own right (Gomes et al., 2022). The spheres of agricultural and domestic work are closely intertwined in family farming, as in most cases the farm is located near the home. This leads women farmers to view agricultural work as an extension of household tasks and not to distinguish between the work they perform in each space (Herrera, 2016).

Furthermore, the political sphere operates according to implicit rules and norms that favor those without domestic or caregiving responsibilities. This results in a double effect of exclusion and self-exclusion for women, with powerful symbolic effects that make equal participation difficult (Nunes, 2013). Women's heavy workloads and family responsibilities also translate into lower civic

and associative participation, which undermines social justice and the quality of democracy (Torres, 2018). In this sense, it is valid to argue that the patterns of political participation and collective action of men and women must be understood through the centrality of work.

The reproduction of male domination (Bourdieu, 1999) is visible in multiple ways—from family and professional constraints, to the distribution of authority and social responsibilities between the sexes, to the internalization by women of responsibility for family-related tasks (Torres & Brites, 2007). According to Sacchet (2009), both women and men tend to have similar levels of social capital, but women's social capital is of a different type. Women are more likely to participate in smaller, more homogeneous groups related to family and community spheres (typically volunteer-based), whereas men are more present in larger, more heterogeneous groups connected to the public spheres of work, economy, and leisure—such as professional associations, labor unions, and clubs.

Data from the European Social Survey (2020) shows that men participate more than women in all forms of associativism and collective action, including volunteering, collective action practices, labor unions/professional organizations, and political parties.

Another key indicator is the level of confidence men and women feel regarding their ability to participate in political life. Once again, women report lower confidence, confirming the trend of women's self-exclusion from this sphere. This is a European-wide trend, and Portugal is no exception. In summary, there is a clear segregation in political and associative participation that disadvantages women, who tend to engage in "typically female" social networks.

Social Capital and Rural Development

The low representation of women in the public sphere (in political, associative, and collective domains) is linked to the fact that men and women possess different types of social capital.

Pierre Bourdieu (1980) and James Coleman (1990) are two sociologists who laid the foundations of the concept of social capital. For Bourdieu, social capital is something held by individuals, while for Coleman, social capital consists of social relationships that allow a group of individuals to enhance the use of their resources. However, Bourdieu also considers that social capital can be collectively possessed (for instance, by a village or an association). Both authors agree that the maintenance of social capital depends on the continuous activation of social relationships, which may weaken if not used. In this sense, "social capital is based on the temporal persistence of networks nourished through relationships of reciprocity grounded in shared norms and values. That is, individuals interact under the expectation that at some point they may benefit (personally, socially, economically, etc.) from their membership in that network." (Carmo, 2008). Thus, social capital has a material dimension through networks and a cultural one through norms.

Social capital takes three distinct forms: relations within a community (bonding); relations between communities (bridging); and external relations (linking) (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). The first type is characterised by ties between groups with shared experiences, reinforcing social identities—for example, women's groups. The other two types refer to networks built on broader relationships (more distant from everyday experiences) and relate to the concept of public-type social capital. Bridging capital involves relationships between more heterogeneous and plural groups, such as professional groups or political parties; linking capital refers to

connections with people/groups in positions of power or influence, and individuals' ties to formal institutions (Sacchet, 2009).

However, as we have seen, social capital can also be a resource for exclusion, as it is unequally distributed according to socioeconomic and cultural factors. Franklin (2005) argues that social capital theories have a conservative bias, as they focus on the formation of consensus rather than on the conflicts and negotiations established among people. The same author points out the importance of feminist studies in addressing social capital to uncover its biases and limitations, particularly in analysing gender relations in society and the naturalisation of women's positioning at the centre of community and family life.

Rivera (2019), Alfaro (2006), and Kliksberg (1999) are authors who have investigated the relationship between social capital and agricultural and rural development. Their studies conclude that social capital plays a crucial and decisive role in agricultural and rural development. Rivera (2019) highlights trust, the quality of relationships, shared interests, cooperation, a sense of community, culture, and tradition as key elements for the development of rural communities. The recent reorientation of European funding to support agricultural and rural development—as well as the emphasis on multi-actor projects, the creation of thematic networks and operational groups—are also clearly investments in building social capital.

Social capital and the relationships of trust and cooperation within communities are processes that take time to consolidate; however, investing in intervention projects that promote intergroup encounters and inter-regional and transnational exchanges is essential to initiate this path.

Molyneux (2002) advocates a gender-aware approach to social capital, by recognising and problematising the central role of women, since women play an important role in mobilising the types of social capital that development agencies and governments consider key to their poverty alleviation and community development programmes.

“Women frequently have the strongest local and kin ties; they network and engage in reciprocal supportive relations, and they are often among the most active supporters of neighbourhood and participants in local forms of associational life. They are to be found at the heart of voluntary self-help schemes whether in health, education or neighbourhood food and housing programmes, in cultural associations, supporting communities hit by sudden unemployment, running barter groups, childminding circles and safe houses for abused or marginalised women.” (Molyneux, 2002, p. 195).

In this context, it has become widely accepted among social and development projects that investing in women is investing in the social. This idea is based on the premise that women tend to use their resources more collectively, particularly within the family (in education, health, and the well-being of its members) and within the community (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2024; UN Women, 2024).

However, it is necessary to ensure that this perspective does not turn into a way of exploiting and legitimising the traditional discourse on women's social roles. The separation between political agents (predominantly men) and social agents (predominantly women) contributes to the consolidation of stereotypes and power inequalities. Investing in women should not be seen

merely to foster the development of other groups and social sectors, but as a legitimate goal in itself. This requires ensuring that women have a voice in the construction and decision-making processes of social and political projects and encouraging greater involvement of men in family and community responsibilities. Achieving full equality demands changes in both the composition and nature of participatory and representative spaces.

Within this context, this article seeks to reflect on and understand the perspective of representatives of local collective organisations (in the two municipalities where the project operates, S. Pedro do Sul and Sabugal) on the role of women farmers at the local level; to reveal the challenges and problems faced by these local associations and collective organisations; to listen to the perspectives of local decision-makers on gender inequality and their needs regarding this issue; and to collect experiences and recommendations on local intervention in rural contexts.

METHODOLOGY: THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOCAL ACTORS

Throughout the MAIs Project, associations and local groups — whether formal or informal — were involved, based on the understanding that they represent the community's capacities for initiative, communication, organisation and autonomy (Miguel, 2021). These groups function as platforms and strategies for defending and asserting the community's interests and rights. They also have the potential to support local (social and cultural) development and to generate opportunities and pathways for the exercise of strong and cohesive collective power.

This form of collective organisation facilitates the sharing of ideas, information and resources in support of social projects, with the main advantage and objective of valuing both individual and collective desires, needs and problems. However, these associations are also frequently “stages” for discord and rivalries among local groups and interests. It is therefore important to consider the different social, cultural and political contexts in which these groups operate, as they can shape and condition collective project actions.

The villages of Rompecilha and Covelinhas have associations of this nature, created with the aim of bringing the local population together around social, cultural and community dimensions. Today, these associations struggle to survive common challenges faced by rural areas, namely population ageing and the disappearance of traditional cultural expressions — in particular, the linen and wool production cycles.

Involving local actors, community leaders and grassroots organisations in social intervention projects is crucial, as it demonstrates respect for the knowledge and capacities of the community. This involvement helps to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the project and its future. Furthermore, it strengthens partnerships and, in this context, supports the development of context-specific solutions that consider the challenges, risks and opportunities perceived by the local stakeholders.

Over the course of the MAIs Project, five interviews and several informal conversations were held with members of local associations, namely: the Associação de Desenvolvimento Rural de Lafões (Rural Development Association of Lafões), the Associação de Criadores de Ruminantes do Concelho do Sabugal (Association of Ruminant Breeders of the Municipality of Sabugal), the Associação Cultural e Desportiva de Rompecilha (Rompecilha Cultural and Sports Association), the Associação Empresarial do Sabugal (Sabugal Business Association), and the ARCAS Association of Covelinhas. The main goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the specific needs

and challenges of the project's target territories, and more specifically, to explore issues affecting rural women at the local level, including their role in local associative structures.

The five interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with a focus on capturing the most relevant elements for the objectives of the methodological approach. The informal conversations complemented the interviews; however, in these cases, overlapping speech and difficulties in understanding some of the dialogue may, in some instances, have compromised the clarity of the content.

The first stage of content analysis began with the processing of the qualitative data collected (Guerra, 2008). A categorical content analysis approach was used to handle the material. Categorisation enabled the reduction of complexity and the identification of key issues addressed (Roque Dantas, 2016), resulting in essentially descriptive findings (Guerra, 2006). Categories were defined based on the topics outlined in the interview guide, as well as themes that emerged during an initial reading of the material. A second, more detailed reading allowed for the classification of statements by category, and corresponding subcategories were created according to the content of each discourse. A more qualitative analysis of the material helped to identify not only dynamics but also values, meanings and social perceptions related to specific issues.

To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, the interview statements are identified only by an alphanumeric code. Each participant was assigned a number (P1, P2, P3...) in the order the interviews were conducted. Additionally, for the purpose of gender analysis, the participant's sex was indicated in parentheses — for example, (P1, woman) or (P3, man). This coding system was adopted to protect the identity of the respondents, in line with the ethical principles of qualitative research.

LOCAL PERSPECTIVES AND PERCEPTIONS ON GENDER INEQUALITY

From the discourse of four local decision-makers interviewed in the municipalities of Sabugal and São Pedro do Sul, four key dimensions emerged regarding perspectives and perceptions of gender inequality at the local level: 'decision-making in agriculture', 'representation/participation in political and associative spaces', 'training and access to employment', and 'challenges faced by women farmers'.

Decision-making in Agriculture

Regarding the role of women in agriculture (and at home), the local decision-makers interviewed associate them with 'home-based agriculture' and with managing bureaucracy. They noted, however, that decisions are sometimes made jointly by both members of the couple or by women after consulting men (husbands or partners), with the man's opinion prevailing, or more frequently, by the man alone, without requiring joint decision-making.

"Generally, even when the farm is in the husband's name, it's the women who come to handle the paperwork." (P3, woman)

"In family farming, agricultural decisions are made jointly by the couple." (P1, woman)

"We see many more women coming in to deal with farm matters — livestock bureaucracy, subsidies. As for the work itself, perhaps the heavier tasks are done by men. But, for example, that home-based farming is essentially managed by women. They're usually not paid, it's more for home consumption or for family and friends rather

than for sale. If it's for sale, then the person usually has a business mindset and accounting in place. But typically, women farm for the home." (P1, woman)

"But then there are still those cases where they need to consult the husband, the man of the house, because he's the one who will say yes or no and make the decisions." (P3, woman)

It is also clear from the interviews that, generally, women do not receive wages for their work on the farm (nor for domestic work), even though they carry out most (or all) of the tasks related to vegetable gardens, orchards, or animal care. They have some freedom in making day-to-day decisions, though this often results from the fact that men have paid jobs outside the farm — not because women are recognised as farm managers.

"It's a matter of convenience — because he works elsewhere." (P3, woman)

Representation/participation in Political and Associative Spaces

In this context, interviewees perceive that the visibility and role of women in public spaces (political and associative) have changed, influenced by public policies and programmes at both national and local levels.

"A few years ago, all parish council presidents were men, but now we're starting to see some women." (P4, man)

Regarding participation in associations, collectives, and local groups, interviewees feel that more women are getting involved, but their involvement is still limited in impact.

"It has improved, but we can't yet say it's a regular practice — there's still a long way to go." (P3, woman)

"ADES had elections recently, and there's a significant number of women on the board. But... I find it interesting that more women than men attend general meetings." (P4, man)

When asked about women farmers' engagement in public forums like local assemblies or associative boards, the interviewees noted that their concerns are often taken seriously — out of respect and a belief that when women speak, it's because there's a real community need. However, this doesn't translate into equal opportunities to participate freely and extensively in public discussions, as is the case with men.

"For example, when 2 or 3 women attended the Parish Council meetings and spoke, all the men kept quiet. It wasn't fear — it was respect. When they put forward an idea, it's because there's a real issue. When they ask for something, it's because it's genuinely needed." (P2, man)

Despite some contradictions, interviewees acknowledged that women — despite working double shifts and bearing the burden of family care — are more involved in local activities aimed at improving collective well-being. They take part more actively in projects, training, and awareness actions. Men, on the other hand, tend to attend only mandatory activities, such as those required to obtain pesticide or tractor licences.

"I don't see much difference... not much difference between men and women. In our project for older adults, there's no major difference. We ran a digital literacy workshop

in the parishes, and 60–70% of participants were women. Men tend to keep their distance from these projects, while women are more involved. When it's planting or harvesting season, the men aren't available at all. Even in other activities, women are more willing to engage in training and projects. For example, if a training course is mandatory, everyone turns up. But women take their responsibilities more seriously than men. Men, frankly, leave everything to the last minute." (P4, man)

The interviewees noted that, due to the lack of awareness about existing inequalities — or the belief that gender inequality is no longer an issue — few (if any) initiatives are implemented locally to promote gender equality in rural areas. Even in training and development projects, gender stereotypes remain ingrained. For instance, only about 10% of women farmers have a driving licence, which is especially limiting in areas with poor public transport (figure cited by interviewees, but not supported by municipal-level statistics).

"As an association, we haven't implemented any initiatives targeting only women. We offer professional training... Machine-related activities are still more linked to men. I started a tractor licence course yesterday — there were 20 or 30 male applicants and only 2 or 3 women. It's rare to run a course with no women at all, though. Now we're organising a course on aromatic plants, and that one will likely be entirely female. The stereotype is deeply ingrained." (P3, woman)

Training and Access to Employment

Interviewees acknowledged the increasing educational attainment of women and recognised their importance to the territory — particularly when women farmers have higher education levels than previous generations. They emphasised that men, even with lower education levels, tend to have an easier time finding work outside the farm, while for women, this is more challenging. As a result, higher education becomes even more important for women to expand their limited opportunities.

"I think when a woman gains qualifications, she has more advantages — a man can usually get by more easily, with or without education." (P4, man)

"Women without qualifications have a harder life than those who studied. I'm speaking generally — I think women are increasingly holding leadership positions in big companies. In the top four companies here in Sabugal, I only see women at the top." (P4, man)

The importance of women to the region is acknowledged and reinforced in the interviews, but it is clear there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality in rural areas — particularly when it comes to recognising their true value and the place they deserve in the community, free from limiting stereotypes.

"Even when women are cited as leaders, their success is often attributed to family businesses — in other words, their success is linked to inheritance." (P4, man)

"[Women], because of their experiences and what they've inherited from the past, are often afraid to start a project or speak out, fearing others will say 'she just wants to stand out.'" (P2, man)

Challenges Faced by Women Farmers

When identifying the challenges faced by women farmers in each municipality, interviewees tended to focus more on general agricultural issues rather than those specific to women.

The main challenges highlighted include the lack of attractiveness of agricultural careers (especially for younger generations), ageing populations, territorial abandonment, dependence on public aid, and the stigma/stereotypes associated with farming.

"The risk involved in farming — there are no holidays. Most farms around Sabugal are livestock-based. Animals eat every day. And then there are the young people who get into farming because the land is inherited from family (parents, grandparents...), and they're always watching for subsidies to create working capital. But there's a constant shortage of agricultural labour. That's a big problem." (P3, woman)

"I think most young people are losing interest in farming. Though some young farmers are taking advantage of RDP projects to develop agricultural activities." (P4, man)

"Young farmers, women farmers and farmers in general are struggling with inflation, especially since the war in Ukraine. I can give the example of women artisans and producers — in cheese-making, sausage-making, baking, etc. They need to be registered businesses and buy their own supplies, which are increasingly expensive. These are all challenges that escalate with each new crisis — pandemic, war... it's a snowball effect." (P4, man)

Regarding the conditions to maintain or start a farming business, interviewees said that although some policies exist to support agriculture, they don't serve those without land or capital — conditions that affect women and young people in particular, who are increasingly looking to start anew in rural inland areas.

"There's no support for people who want to start farming from scratch. No specific support for someone who wants to begin small — like one hectare of olive trees. Some people want that, but have nothing. They need help to start from zero! And they (the women) often complain about this — because more and more women are coming to us." (P1, woman)

Regardless of age, in inland territories many families have direct contact with agriculture and access to food for their households — especially women, who manage vegetable gardens and animals. Nonetheless, gender stereotypes still divide the roles and types of tasks men and women are 'supposed' to perform.

"There's the issue of physical strength — some jobs require more of it, and maybe women are at a slight disadvantage... apart from that, I think women today are just as capable as men when it comes to farming." (P1, woman)

LOCAL NEEDS AND COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Regarding intervention projects such as MAIs – Women Farmers in Inland Territories, the interviewed decision-makers expressed the view that community projects are almost non-existent, particularly those dedicated to promoting gender equality and the visibility and recognition of women farmers. However, they presented a range of projects and suggestions that could contribute to local development, such as:

A. Development of Local Collective Initiatives

"The association (from Rompecilha) was created about 20 years ago. A handful of us decided to start it in order to bring people together, to do something, to offer a small gesture that could unite us now and then. Back then, there was still a lot of farming, mostly maize, and people used oxen to plough the pastures, we had livestock. But wild boars ended up destroying agriculture, at least in our village. The association opened up the village a bit, with members joining from outside who started visiting our community." (P2, man)

"I think what's missing in the region is a cooperative. That's what people complain about most – there's no place to deliver their products and have them distributed." (P1, woman)

B. Promotion of Village Identity, Traditions and Local Products

"We want to create a flax museum, but there's no point in threshing flax if we don't have the space to process it. What we want is to build a space where we can gather, come rain or shine. So, in the evening, we can come together and socialise a bit. The women who still know how to use the loom could give a few lessons, and maybe we'll learn – there are only two or three ladies who know how to work the loom. The problem with weaving isn't the clack-clack-clack, it's setting up the warping machine. That's not for everyone, threading all those yarns. So, the goal would be to organise these flax workshops – and not only that." (P2, man)

"As for the certification of bracejo [traditional woven grass], it's really important, and there should be a policy to support the continuation of bracejo work. It's a beautiful craft and could supplement income alongside agricultural activity." (P3, woman)

Regarding the MAIs project, participants considered it relevant to local realities and needs, and said it contributed to the recognition and appreciation of women farmers:

"It's about valuing these people – sometimes they don't feel appreciated, and that's fundamental... Once they see their products being sold, they begin to understand the purpose, and they commit more and more." (P1, woman)

"It's important to assess needs on the ground in order to provide proper support. This doesn't mean training-action alone will solve everything, but it's more tailored – it's something else entirely. And then there's the digital economy aspect, which can solve a lot, because nowadays, if you're not online, you don't exist." (P4, man)

Several constraints were identified, such as difficulties in project implementation, resistance to change, challenges in (re)organisation, depopulation, isolation, and an ageing population.

"(...) the cultural factor and resistance to change often mean people remain stuck. (...) Around here, I think it's mainly a cultural issue – fear of change and stereotypes." (P3, woman)

"There are so few of us that, just to avoid doing something unconstitutional, we rotate positions [in the various association boards]." (P2, man)

"If we organise an activity here, we can bring people together. People from Covelinhas don't really have a space for such events either. And beyond the social aspect – which is the most important, people gathering and talking – because, as we say, talking cures

many ailments... it's about enriching our experiences and making the most of opportunities." (P2, man)

"I'd really like to bring in some basic first aid training – knowing how to care for someone who's bedridden... or someone who chokes. And as soon as there's a space available, we could offer 'ageless sports', because we're missing physical activity. In the old days, we'd walk kilometres to work the land – go in the morning, come home for lunch, go back in the afternoon, and again in the evening. That kept us physically fit. Now, we're all at home." (P2, man)

The need for greater support and adaptation to processes, communities, and individuals was also highlighted, to ensure that initiatives and projects are successful, not forgotten, and don't contribute to growing feelings of disbelief or mistrust:

"We need consistent and ongoing support. Sometimes they think, 'oh, it's just another project' – it'll end without any real outcome. But if there's persistence, they'll realise that it can work. There needs to be more permanent follow-up." (P1, woman)

"[Regarding a previous online marketing project] – it was a pilot... we ran several sessions, provided training, things were progressing, but suddenly it seemed like the [promoting entity] lost interest in the project... and now people are sceptical! First it was Vodafone's internet, which didn't support the website and getting everything working. Then there was always some excuse, and it just dragged on – same old story – and not much came of it." (P4, man)

As for the replicability of projects like MAIs, the decision-makers interviewed noted the increasingly proactive role of women who are working or wish to work in agriculture:

"More and more women are actively looking – they want to get involved, they want to move forward with their own projects and work in agriculture, to have their own jobs and not depend on others." (P1, woman)

However, the essential contribution that local public entities should provide is often cited as lacking – sometimes even indicating a lack of knowledge about the needs of communities and farmers in their own territories:

"The Council helps, but not much. (...) Before I took on the leadership role, I went to the [São Pedro do Sul] Council and asked, 'If I take this on, will the Council support it?' (...) And they said yes. But when I asked for help in drafting the project proposal to apply for funding, from the RRP, they told us, 'You're the ones who have to submit the project – we won't do it for you.'" (P2, man)

"Honestly, it feels like I'm asking for something for myself – and I'm not! For example, Covelinhas is working on wool processing, and now's the time to help, because there are still people who know how to do it. But once that group from Covelinhas is gone, the wool tradition will die out." (P2, man)

POPULAR EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING COLLECTIVE ACTION

Social capital cannot be built unless opportunities exist or are created for it to flourish. To this end, it is essential to pay attention to collective and community processes, as these have the potential to address the challenges faced by rural areas, such as population decline (particularly among

younger groups), the reduction in the number of community organisations, and the lack of infrastructure and services.

Learning is a mechanism for building social capital and has the potential to foster development and change among individuals, work, and organisations in response to the need to interact with economic policies within their social and political context (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

As Paulo Freire noted in the context of reflecting on alternative research methods, both educators and social scientists encounter political and ideological challenges in their practice. When engaging with a given reality, whether rural or urban, it is crucial to understand what constitutes that concrete reality:

"For me, concrete reality is more than facts or data taken more or less on their own. It is all these facts and all these data, plus the perception that the population involved has of them" (Freire, 1981 [own translation]).

This lens of "concrete reality" was adopted throughout the MAIs project. Merely identifying issues such as the low level of social participation among women farmers and the unequal division of agricultural and domestic tasks was not enough to deeply understand these problems. It was necessary to uncover how the affected women perceived and understood these issues. In this sense, a liberating perspective was adopted—one based on mutual understanding and respect between community members and the research team (Freire, 1981).

The development and implementation of the participatory methodologies used in the project were grounded in Paulo Freire's Popular Education (1975), one of the most widely accepted approaches for sustainable social transformation. It is based on critically addressing the reality experienced by the population, collective knowledge construction, valuing local knowledge, and fostering reflection-action processes.

Paulo Freire devoted his work to combating poverty, oppression, and social inequalities by promoting individual awareness and literacy through a pedagogy grounded in dialogue with reality. His influence extends beyond the field of education and is now regarded as a foundational approach for addressing social inequalities, particularly those related to gender. Freire argued that only in a humanised and egalitarian society can democracy be fully realised—his work thus combined theory and practice, political struggle, education, and academia. Freire's Popular Education inspired critical mobilisation and the creation of social movements based on collective action and traditional knowledge. Today, the term "popular" no longer refers solely to the poor and disadvantaged but to "that which connects us to an overwhelming mass culture, or makes us part of a global culture that, at the same time, includes and excludes, equalises and discriminates, recognises and overwhelms" (Costa & Fleuri, 2005, p. 51, [own translation]).

Popular Education is a powerful tool in social intervention projects aimed at promoting gender equality in rural and agricultural contexts. This approach enables individuals to critically understand their reality, reflect on power structures, and act consciously to bring about social transformation. From this perspective, gender inequality can be tackled by making women's experiences and oppressions visible through their own voices—whether urban, rural, teachers, Black women, or others—through a transversal, egalitarian, and intersectional lens (de Souza et al., 2021). In Paulo Freire's words, this dialogue is:

"A horizontal relationship between A and B. It arises from a critical matrix and generates critical thinking (...) It is nourished by love, humility, hope, faith, and trust (...) Dialogue is what we opposed to the antidiologue, so deeply rooted in our historical-cultural formation, so present yet so antagonistic to a transitional climate. Antidiologue implies a vertical relationship of A over B, the very opposite of all that. It is unloving. It is uncritical and does not generate critical thinking precisely because it is unloving. It is not humble. It is hopeless. Arrogant. Self-sufficient." (Freire, 1967, p.107, [own translation]).

Culture and Tradition as a Driving Force for Cooperation and Rural Development

Culture and traditions cut across all dimensions of social capital within a society. Fukuyama (2003) defines social capital as shared norms or values that foster social cooperation – from this perspective, the author views social capital as a utilitarian way of interpreting culture. Culture is often regarded as an end in itself or as a form of creative expression; however, it also plays a crucial functional role in society by generating cooperation and communication among groups of individuals through its activities. In this sense, culture can also be a key factor in social cohesion and the promotion of a sense of community, as it enables people to recognise one another's qualities, grow together, and develop collective self-esteem. International organisations, such as UNESCO, argue that the preservation of cultural values is essential for development, as the strengthening and reaffirmation of culture and traditions can unleash the energy required in challenging situations and during times of change (Rivera, 2019).

Rivera (2019) conducted a case study on the importance of social capital for agricultural and rural development, concluding that the sense of community plays a vital role in rural areas. The farmers in this case study viewed the sense of community not merely as something intangible, but as a *modus operandi*: the regional actors involved were characterised by a "practical" and action-oriented mindset, mobilising the capacities required to bring ideas to fruition, as well as by a "culture of cooperation." This mindset was evident in the implementation of co-creation projects, where farmers were acknowledged and acted as active partners. Elements such as trust, culture, and tradition also emerged as essential to the development of these rural communities, as they foster a shared identity critical for effective cooperation. These findings confirm the value of investing in the construction of social capital, particularly through multi-actor projects based on the principles of popular and community education.

Community Building through the Mais Project

In this context, the MAIs project aimed to initiate a process of mobilisation, creation, and consolidation of the fundamental foundations and pillars required to constitute and sustain a collective/community group. To this end, an action roadmap was developed to empower the women beneficiaries, guiding the intervention in terms of: technical content, personal development, collective building, training for local technicians and other stakeholders, pedagogical approach and intervention methodology, and the planning (logistics and scheduling) of activities. This intervention plan was based on an analysis of the results of focus groups, interviews, and participant observation. Later, the need arose to gather input from local decision-makers through a series of interviews conducted in each intervention territory.

The intervention was then initiated based on the framework developed by TdM, aiming to support the empowerment and visibility of the women beneficiaries. It addressed needs identified with

the women farmers and structured by TdM on three levels: (1) technical, (2) personal, and (3) collective. The activities included both theoretical and practical (informal) training aligned with local realities in areas such as agroecological production, fair trade, collective organisation, and the valorisation/preservation of local traditions.

Technical training in agroecological production was delivered through an Autumn School, following the methodology of farmer field schools. In this approach, the women farmers took on the dual role of trainers and learners during various working sessions held on their farms, including a reflection session on how to promote the collective exchange of experiences based on agroecological practices and participatory strategies. Additionally, a traditional seed collection process was conducted, involving seeds used in the women's gardens. This effort aimed to gather, preserve, and celebrate valuable agricultural and food heritage and included the Hands in the Soil activity. This work led to the co-creation of the "Manual of Agroecological Practices: Crop Protection and Fertilisation," followed by the manual "Between Beans and Other Species from the Gardens of S. Pedro do Sul."

Alongside these activities, a sewing course was organised in S. Pedro do Sul to promote new ways of making traditional garments using linen and wool, encourage financial independence among the beneficiaries, and equip the participating collectives with modern sewing machines. These machines are shared and have become focal points for sociability and community building.

On a personal level (2), various activities were carried out related to the interests of the women and the social valorisation of their work, both agricultural and non-agricultural. One of the most significant was the use of Sociodiversity Maps as a methodological tool to deconstruct and raise awareness about gender inequalities. This allowed the beneficiaries to understand the importance of asserting their value and claiming space in decision-making processes. A basic computer course was also organised, in response to their request, with the goal of empowering participants to use social media as a tool for networked communication and promotion of their products and activities. Two additional sessions addressed digital literacy and combating disinformation (disinfodemia) in community settings, with the support of the Iberifier.eu project (Association for Media Literacy and Journalism and Cenjor).

To encourage critical dialogue and the recognition of each community's strengths and weaknesses through everyday actions, a photovoice activity was conducted. This enabled women farmers to articulate desired measures for their territories and use the resulting material to raise awareness among policymakers and key local stakeholders about the challenges they face and the changes they seek.

In the collective dimension (3), a community dialogue was held between project beneficiaries and local political representatives – responding to the diagnostic finding that there was a need to foster dialogue between women and local authorities. Two sessions of "Community Building and Sense-Making" (based on Popular Education) were conducted to revive a sense of community and collectivity among these groups of women.

Several field visits were carried out in the villages of S. Pedro do Sul – Rompecilha (linen cycle), Covelinhas (wool cycle) – and in the Sabugal area (Sortelha and Malcata, focusing on the traditional bracejo weaving technique). These visits included interviews and the gathering of women's perspectives as bearers of traditional knowledge and practices. This process culminated

in a physical exhibition entitled "From the Hands to the Voices of Women Farmers" and in the certification of the bracejo technique.

The beneficiaries also participated in an exchange visit to the exhibition "The Women of Maria Lamas" at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and joined the 25 April celebrations and march in Lisbon, supported by UMAR. This event offered an educational and inspiring experience, connecting the beneficiaries with the history and activism of Portuguese women. By learning about Maria Lamas, the initiative sought to encourage the women to recognise their own potential and the importance of active civic engagement. Their participation in the 50th anniversary of the 25 April Revolution reinforced their sense of identity and collective spirit, affirming their roles as agents of change in their communities.

These activities culminated in various public events where the beneficiaries played central roles as facilitators, speakers, and trainers. These included: visits from the Castelões and Geradora Associations for peer exchange; the event "A Tribute to Wool", which brought together groups from across Portugal interested in revitalising wool-based practices; participation in the "Broca Viva" meeting in the village of Trancoso, where they exhibited and sold their products and held a conversation on gender inequality in rural areas; activities for International Women's Day; and the Summer School on Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems: "Tribute to Linen and Wool." The summer school explored the role of agroecology in connecting production systems with the arts, using products such as wool and linen and their transformation. In this context, the women farmers took on the role of trainers, recreating the cycles of wool and linen and hosting visits to wool-producing farms.

In summary, these activities aimed to empower women farmers through a mixed-capacity approach that combined support from technical teams, the promotion of women's groups and collectives, and the enhancement of the beneficiaries' socioeconomic sustainability. As a result, they contributed to greater gender equality. The planning and implementation of all these activities were carried out in collaboration with local technicians, including municipal staff, public institutions, and civil society organisations.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

"Associativism" and the existence of "networks", both within rural communities and at the national level, are central elements in this context, highlighting the concept of social capital as an analytical category that synthesises and connects these two aspects. This concept emerges as a crucial component for enhancing the impact and sustainability of policies and programmes. To this end, the establishment of relationships based on trust and reciprocity is essential in a rural world where power structures often hinder the implementation of social policies—whose ultimate goal is the transformation of social structures.

Associativism among individuals, families, communities, and institutions is increasingly emerging as a fundamental necessity in this competitive and globalised world, accompanied by a broader process of decentralisation and democratisation of society. It is often in the absence of alliances and cooperation that many of the challenges faced by projects arise.

In rural areas, the social capital required for development manifests at the level of family alliances, for example, through the informal labour of family farmers, as well as through their cooperation in shared land use and the development of productive activities. At the meso and macro levels, it

is expressed through social movements, cooperative movements, and trade unions. The existence of social capital in rural areas is, therefore, undeniable. In this sense, social capital should be built upon or adapted from what already exists, in line with new challenges, by minimising potential conflicts of interest and aiming towards an "instrumental alliance" between different power groups—namely, the State, the private sector, farmers, and local organisations and associations.

Finally, it is clear that social capital is not an end in itself, but rather a necessary condition for the effective implementation of certain activities and for the sustainability of associations and efforts to combat gender inequalities. In this context, social capital can be understood as the lubricant that facilitates the mechanisms and relationships required to achieve these objectives. Given that social capital is never entirely absent and, moreover, has no fixed limits, programmes and projects should activate the existing social capital wherever possible and shape it to function as effectively as possible in responding to local needs. In summary, social capital represents both a foundational contribution ("point of departure") and an outcome of programmes and projects ("point of arrival").

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