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WOMEN-LED SOCIAL INNOVATION INITIATIVES CONTRIBUTE TO GENDER EQUALITY IN RURAL AREAS:

GROUNDED THEORY ON FIVE INITIATIVES FROM THREE CONTINENTS

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Abstract: Ensuring gender equality is an important development challenge, especially in rural areas, where women are often marginalized by economic, socio-cultural and policy structures. Women-Led Social Innovation Initiatives (WLSIIs) are a promising way to address this challenge, but their contributions to gender equality depend on complex interactions between marginalizing structures and agency of women. The objective of this paper is to examine how the relevant elements of agency enable WLSIIs to contribute to progress towards gender equality in rural areas. We examine five WLSIIs located in Canada, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, and Serbia. The cases focus on employment, education, identity, gender roles, and rural development, and are analyzed by grounded theory. We identified 1) gendered identity, 2) (in)dependence of women, and 3) control of women over the "rules of the game" as structural features that can enable or constrain WLSIIs. These concepts are located between grand societal structures (policy, economy, culture, and social organization) and women's concrete, everyday realities, and as such helped us to understand factors supporting or hindering women's agency and well-being. We identified women's self-confidence, women-to-women networks, and self-developed and externally supported capacity as the key elements enabling agency. All these together increased social acceptance of the examined WLSIIs, helping to overcome cultural prejudices and gendered stereotypes. For example, women-to-women networks and self-organization increased economic independence, which reduced skepticism towards "new" roles of women and even changed unequal political dynamics. We conclude that women's collective agency can be enabled by WLSIIs in diverse geographical and cultural contexts and should be recognized by policymakers as a key mechanism that has great potential for enhancing gender equality and overcoming structures marginalizing rural women.

Keywords: Gender equality, Rural development, Social Innovation, Structure-agency interplay, Women entrepreneurship, Women's collective agency

Highlights

- Grounded theory to understand how women-led social innovations create progress towards gender equality.
- Women-to-women networks as a space for empowerment and the self-confidence needed for challenging patriarchal structures.
- Women's self-organization, voluntary work, and new skills facilitate shifts from dependence to economic independence and social freedom.
- Networks between WLSIIs and other key actors can help women gain control of decisions made over their lives.
- Women`s collective agency can be a game changer, but it may require extensive voluntary (unpaid) work by women involved in WLSIIs.

1. Introduction

The United Nations´ (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims *"to leave no one behind"* from development. It also *"endeavors to reach the furthest behind first"* (UNDP 2018). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 strives to cope with this challenge, aiming to *"achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls".* However, challenges remain, even though "gender equality" and "women's empowerment" have been global policy priorities since the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., the Millennium Development Goals) (Cornwall & Rivas 2015; Nhamo et al. 2018). The challenge of gender equality is particularly pressing in rural areas (UN Women 2018a; UN Women 13 Oct 2022). Rural women

continue to face serious disadvantages (Brydon & Chant 1989; Sachs 2018) compared not only to rural men, but also to urban women, and this "asymmetry" is not properly considered in the implementation of rural development strategies, programmes, and projects (European Parliament 2019).

Cornwall & Rivas (2015) contend that underlying power relations should be recognized and addressed in order to understand what truly transformative policy agendas and practices would look like. *"We hear talks about women's economic empowerment and about 'lifting' communities by investing in women, with scant consideration of the structural barriers to women's individual self-actualization, let alone their collective mobilization"* (Cornwall & Rivas 2015, p. 400). There is thus a need to consider gender equality from a grass-roots perspective while being simultaneously mindful of the remaining structural challenges and power imbalances in the countryside.

Women-Led Social Innovation Initiatives (WLSII) addressed this challenge by emphasizing women's collective agency, often stemming from the grassroots level, to overcome marginalizing factors and biased societal structures (e.g., seen in Lindberg et al. 2015; Maguirre et al. 2016; Maestripieri 2017; Ali et al. 2018; Sarkki et al. 2021). In general, community-driven social innovation adds economic and/or social value to rural areas (Pato 2020). In the context of women and social innovations, Lindberg et al. (2016) developed four key characteristics for social innovations: 1) that they emerge as a response to marginalizing structures; 2) they include agency of disadvantaged groups; 3) they include novel solutions; and 4) they aim for societal improvements or even transformations.

To analyze linkages between women's agency and societal structures, we look at social change as being defined by structure-agency interplay (Giddens 1979; Archer 2003). A structure-agency framework is relevant for addressing social innovations, as they usually aim to achieve empowering structural changes in the societal contexts where they operate (Cajaiba-Santana 2014; Turker & Vural 2017; Sarkki et al 2019). Such a framework has been operationalized to examine social innovations by women farmers (Ravazzoli et al. 2019, Gramm et al. 2020). However, there is a need to advance conceptualizations that recognize agency deriving from WLSIIs while simultaneously recognizing existing structural issues undermining gender equality in the countryside (e.g., Lindberg et al. 2016; Lauri 2021; Dalla Torre et al. 2020).

The objective of this paper is to examine how the relevant elements of agency enable WLSIIs to contribute to progress towards gender equality in rural areas. To answer this question, we need to identify key elements of agency, and structural aspects that are marginalizing or supporting WLSIIs' work towards gender equality. We do so by examining five case studies on WLSII located in Canada, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, and Serbia. The case studies are analyzed by inductive and qualitative grounded theory focusing especially on dynamics linked to progress towards gender equality.

We analysed the five cases through the lens of our research questions. Data in our cases are collected via qualitative methods (mainly interviews) and participatory stakeholder workshops with leaders and key actors in the five examined WLSII cases. While we are not aiming for quantitative nor strictly comparative research, our results can identify key processes to be scrutinized further in subsequent research. Our inductive qualitative approach is theoretically relevant, since, to our knowledge, this is the first study seeking to identify what kinds of elements help to build the agency of WLSIIs, and how these elements of agency can help to overcome the existing structural problems for gender equality, utilizing a multi-case approach. As such, our exploratory analysis can generate important insights on what aspects make WLSIIs a promising way to enhance gender equality in rural areas, and we also present initial assumptions on how WLSIIs can challenge and even change the structures marginalizing rural women.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the conceptual background developed to provide the overall frame for the inductive analysis; Section 3 outlines empirical materials used and explains the application of grounded theory as a method of analysis; Section 4 introduces the case studies; Section 5 presents our results from the five case studies on elements of agency and structural features, and seeks to develop synthesis on relevant dynamics towards gender equality; and Section 6 discusses four processes on the linkages between elements supporting agency and structural features which explain progress towards gender equality by WLSIIs. Section 6 concludes that women's collective agency has been proven to be important in Europe and beyond, and should be recognized by policymakers as a mechanism

that has great promise for enhancing women's capacity, well-being, and opportunities, and thus for enhancing gender equality.

2. Key concepts

2.1 Women-led social innovation initiatives

Social innovations may emerge in situations where policy and markets have failed to ensure well-being and opportunities for different groups of society (Aoyama & Parthasarathy 2018; Ludvig et al., 2018; Gorriz et al. 2019; Slee et al. 2022). Rural women often experience marginality around exclusion from access to resources and opportunities. Marginality has been defined as *"an involuntary position and condition of an individual or group at the margins of social, political, economic, ecological, and biophysical systems, that prevent them from access to resources, assets, services, restraining freedom of choice, preventing the development of capabilities, and eventually causing extreme poverty"* (Gatzweiler et al. 2011, p. 3; von Braun & Gatzweiler 2014). This definition is reflected in the realities of rural women, who are globally less enabled to participate in labor markets than men or urban women, are more likely to be unemployed, and are over-represented in informal and vulnerable employment. Due to gender roles in rural areas that are the consequence of customs, imaginaries and policies that determine women to be responsible for raising children and housekeeping, they bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, which takes away time and energy from other activities, and are usually paid less than men or urban women. *"Globally, women shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid work, affecting their participation in economic and social activities. In particular, doing unpaid work significantly reduces women's time to pursue education and employment, generating a vicious cycle of limited opportunities and access, with negative consequences for themselves and their households."* (Hernando 2022: 1).

The global average for the time women spend daily, on unpaid care work is 4 hours and 37 minutes (19.7 percent of a 24-hour day), whereas for men the same world average is 1 hour and 51 minutes (7.7 percent of a 24-hour day) (Charmes 2019: 17). The gender pay gap in Europe was estimated at 23 percent (European Commission, 2019), and in 2021, globally, women earned 82 cents for every dollar earned by men (https://www.statista.com/statistics/1212140/global-gender-pay-gap/). According to the FAO (2017), challenges for rural women include social norms that limit women's agency, lack of education, and lack of legal and financial entitlements. In addition, and as a consequence, women represent just 13% of agricultural land holders and are often underrepresented in political decision-making at the local level (UN Women 2018a). Such structural inequalities provide triggers and motivation for women to enhance their opportunities and express their agency through WLSIIs.

We take the structural inequalities that marginalize women to be products of institutions: "rules of the game" (North 1990), which may range from official bodies to informal social rules and norms. These institutions impose rules that pervasively influence and constrain 'political, economic and social interactions' (North, 1990), which can be overcome if opportunities arise under situations of significant change. In this view, the women taking part in WLSIIs are bound by formal and informal institutional rules around gender which contribute to their marginalization. For the women involved in the WLSIIs, obtaining control over their own lives therefore requires them to obtain some measure of control over the rules of the game by initiating significant change, an aim which aligns with the goals of WLSIIs (Gramm et al. 2020).

WLSIIs are increasingly emerging as a potential response to the disparities of social and gender inequality in rural areas (Maguirre et al. 2016; Maestripieri 2017; Ali et al. 2018; Sarkki et al. 2021; Gorriz et al. 2020). We define WLSIIs as civil society actions that are led by women and aim at reconfiguring social practices (i.e., networking, behaviors, ways to make decisions) for example in the spheres of policy, governance, economy, education and training, childcare, and family. WLSIIs usually support progress towards gender equality and seek to improve women's lives through novel initiatives addressing or challenging traditional gendered norms and expectations, biased institutions, and other marginalizing structures. Such initiatives are often at the front-line of implementing change and can play a vital role in women's empowerment,

perhaps even a bigger role than official policies and programs that often fail to get fully operationalized in practice (Cornwall 2016).

2.2 Structure and agency: How women-led social innovation initiatives contribute to gender equality?

WLSIIs have implications for gender equality resulting from the interplay between structures and agency (Ravazzoli et al. 2019, Gramm et al. 2020). There has long been discussion in social theory about how structure-agency interplay explains change or stability in society (Archer 2003). In general, structure can be defined as recurrent patterned arrangements, which influence or limit the choices and opportunities available for individuals, and agency as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices (Baker 2005). We adopt a middle ground in the structure-agency debate where structures influence human behavior and where people are also capable of changing those social structures within which they operate (Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1979; 1984; Apter & Garnsey 1994). In terms of gender equality, it has been noted that women have both been partly shaped by surrounding society, whilst simultaneously demonstrating a capacity to transform the social structures in which they live (Archer 2002; Lee & Logan 2019). Even though the structure-agency interplay has been long debated, there is the need to operationalize these concepts in empirical research to understand roles that structures and agencies have regarding gender equality, and to progress toward the goals associated with it (Ravazzoli et al. 2019; Dalla Torre et al. 2020).

To operationalize what agency consists of in practice, we employ the concept of *elements of agency*, meaning elements that enhance the potential for effective agency at the individual and group levels. This links to the notion that empowerment does not only relate to the person's freedom to act but also to the concrete material, social and institutional preconditions required to exert agency (Ibrahim & Alkire 2007). We consider that elements supporting agency are preconditions for influential WLSIIs, and their existence or purposeful creation enhances possibilities for WLSIIs to initiate progress toward gender equality.

To operationalize what structures consist of in practice, we employ the concept of *structural features* to nuance the dichotomy between the negative and positive impacts of structures for progress towards gender equality. On the one hand, women are often marginalized by existing structures (e.g., related to the economy, institutions, politics, norms, values, culturally acceptable roles, identities). Such marginalizing structures can often trigger actions by WLSIIs to enhance gender equality. On the other hand, structural features may also play supportive roles in progress towards gender equality (e.g., supportive policies, fostering heritage laws, distribution of wealth). Furthermore, the concept of structural features also recognizes uncertainty and the ambiguous roles structures play in the development of WLSIIs. To summarize, the interplay between elements supporting agency and structural features explain processes of change, or lack of it, towards gender equity.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Empirical materials

We examine five cases of WLSIIs, which aim to enhance gender equality for rural women. The cases are located in rural areas in Canada, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, and Serbia (see Annex 1 for details). The WLSIIs under investigation aim to increase opportunities for women, support their possibilities for agency, enhance their well-being, and reduce dependencies on male-dominated structures (e.g., family, business, politics, and other societal hierarchies). The cases are linked in varying ways to employment, education, identity, gender relationships and agriculture. Identity does not only link to self-identification and imagining one's own opportunities, but for women, gender identity can be both marginalizing and empowering. Gender identity may impose roles and socio-cultural stereotypes on women, and therefore may limit choices imagined for them. Our inclusion criteria for the case studies were: that the case 1) is rural, 2) is about social innovation initiatives (i.e., includes civil society actors and seeks to add social and/or economic values) (see Palo 2020), 3) is women-led (leader(s) of the initiative are women), and 4) seeks to enhance gender equality in some way.

We chose the local-level cases from diverse geographical locations, institutional settings, and cultures. While we do not aim for strict comparison or quantitative analysis on the impacts of the examined WLSIIs, the diverse contexts where the cases are located offer possibilities to identify key themes and similarities that link to and even explain the ability of the WLSIIs to advance gender equality in rural areas. Thus, the selected cases offered a sound basis for conceptualization and for analyzing the prevailing links between social innovation and gender equality. Four cases were chosen from the H2020 SIMRA project's (http://www.simra-h2020.eu) database. We screened 230 social innovation examples from the SIMRA project and based on the criteria of the major role of women in these innovations, selected the most suitable ones for our study. A case from Canada, from the self-governing northern territory of Nunavut, includes an indigenous minority group and was added to increase the cultural, institutional, and geographic diversity of the case studies analyzed. The present paper adds value to previous scientific literature analysing women's empowerment in different contexts (e.g., Mosedale 2005; Myamba 2018; Nino-Torres 2019; Ojediran, F. & Anderson 2020; Py et al 2019; Raja et al 2021; Rawat 2014; Samanta 2020; Sergaki et al 2015; Theeuwen et al 2021). It does it by elucidating the structure–agency interplay affecting and being affected by WLSIIs to explain whether and how changes towards gender equality take place.

Empirical research was conducted between the years of 2017 and 2019 through detailed observation of the fieldwork in each of the case studies. Interviewees and workshop participants in the case studies were selected based on the extent of their engagement in WLSII (Table 1). The interview data were transcribed, and notes were taken during the workshops and fieldwork to underpin the analysis. The fieldwork and data collection methods varied across the case studies, but each case study (e.g., Chorti et al 2019) enabled us to acquire in-depth knowledge on the elements supporting agency and structural features relevant for WLSIIs and for progress towards gender equality. Primary data collection was complemented by relevant media documents and literature screening. The workshops in the cases of the Women farmers and Jana Al Ayadi initiatives were done within the context of the SIMRA project by researchers working in SIMRA, which focused on rural social innovations (see Secco et al. 2017).

The analysis of the selected case studies began with the writing of collective synthesis summaries on the case studies. These collective synthesis summaries were used as a first step in analysis to translate relevant empirical material and findings to English and to create a rich body of material from the five case studies. The quality and comparability of these case synthesis summaries were ensured by the core group of authors of the present paper, who asked clarifying questions, pointed out gaps in the synthesis summaries and ensured that the case syntheses covered all relevant questions. Thus, the case study reports were written through an iterative process involving commenting and revisioning.

All collective synthesis summaries on the cases included sections on 1) enabling and hindering factors relevant for the WLSIIs; 2) information on key actors; 3) overview of key stakeholders; 4) process of evolution of the WLSIIs with a focus on new networks, governance arrangements, and attitudes; 5) changes and impacts facilitated by WLSIIs; 6) aspects of empowerment and depth of change facilitated by the WLSIIs; 7) brief empirically relevant literature review; 8) geographical and jurisdictional facts; and 9) key novelty introduced by the WLSIIs. Once the collective synthesis summaries were completed, the core group of authors discussed further steps for analysis and agreed to focus on analyzing how are the relevant elements of agency enabling WLSIIs to contribute to progress towards gender equality in rural areas.

Tab 1. Overview of the empirical materials on the five case studies. Source: elaborated from Sarkki et al. 2021 [62]

Name of the Social Innovation	"Miqqut" Programs by the Ilitaqsiniq Nunavut Literacy Council (Ilitaqsiniq-NLC)	"Learning, Growing, Living with Women Farmers" Social Cooperative	"Jana Al Ayadi" Cooperative Aiming for Economic Empowerment of Women	"Afoulki" Cooperative of Rural Women	"Vojvođanska kuća" Social Enterprise Employing Marginalized Women
Acronym	Miqqut	Women farmers	Jana Al Ayadi	Afoulki	Vojvođanska kuća
Location	Kivalliq region of Nunavut, Canada	South Tyrol, Italy	Deir El Ahmar, Lebanon	South Morocco, Morocco	Municipality of Sombor, Serbia
Temporal scale	2011 ->	2006 ->	2005 ->	2004 ->	2015 ->
Empirical materials	Participant observation (by Fransala) in 2018–2019 (on women's everyday lives in the region, Miqqut program, etc.). In addition, semi-structured interviews on this topic with key WLSII actors plus a potential beneficiary of the initiative (n = 3), and on local women's lives from various different perspectives (n = 50). Literature review (scientific literature, policy reports, national statistics, and grey literature) on local culture, institutions, and policies.	Semi-structured interviews (n = 11) with women farmers actively involved in the initiative. Focus group (n = 1) with key actors in the initiative. Survey (n = 21) responded by beneficiaries of the WLSII (e.g., rural families benefitting of the nature pedagogy services provided on the farm by women farmers). Field observations. Literature review on local language. Workshop for discussing and internally validating results from fieldwork with the key actors of the initiative.	Field observations in 2017–2019. Semi-structured interviews (n=3) with the president and owner of the cooperative and a member of the board of the cooperative Participatory video on the initiative and the region. Workshop with members of the cooperative, local authorities, and other stakeholders.	Structured Interviews (n = 5) with potential beneficiaries of the initiative; semi-structured interviews (n = 5), with the key actors linked to the Afoulki cooperative including the president and board member of the cooperative.	Semi-structured interviews (n = 4) with key actors linked to the initiative (leader of the initiative, funding agency representative, consultant involved in establishment, one more representative of the association). Document analysis focusing on grey literature in local language, on this initiative and related activities. Media screening on the topic.

3.2 Grounded theory as analysis method

Given the rich but not harmonized empirical material, we chose an analysis method that can capitalize the benefits of such materials. Grounded theory allows the categorization of diverse empirical materials under emerging themes, and is an alternative for deductive hypothesis testing. Grounded theory is an inductive approach to theory building, which can be used to code empirical material and develop categories to make theoretically relevant conceptualizations, and which is especially well-suited to analyzing qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss 1999). A book by Glaser & Strauss (1967) legitimized qualitative approaches and made coding, categorizations and memo-writing major strategies in qualitative inquiry. Some key principles of grounded theory are that categories to classify empirical data must not be theoretically forced upon it, but equally, theoretical sensitivity needs to be practiced when coding the data. Such analytical strategy can be assisted by the use of broad enough theoretical concepts

as heuristic devices (Kelle 2007). Thus, theory must not dictate the results of inductive analysis by deduction.

Theoretical sensitivity in grounded theory consists of conceptually relevant categorization of the data (see Glaser 1978). We used concepts of 1) elements of agency and 2) structural features as broad theoretical categories, and then filled these categories with empirical insights to explain the progress, or lack of it, initiated by WLSIIs towards gender equality. Based on coding the collective case study synthesis reports, we identified excerpts describing different aspects related to elements supporting agency and structural features. Excerpts were one-sentence descriptions of case study details and were given different codes. Table 2 outlines the steps we used in our application of grounded theory.

Tab 2. Steps in grounded theory (developed by Glaser 1978; Holton 2007; O'Hagan & O'Connor 2015), and its application to examine WLSII case studies.

General steps in grounded theory	Our application
Step 1: Define research questions	We wanted to understand the potential of WLSIIs to contribute to gender equality in rural areas. Our previous work identified cyclical progress towards gender equality while simultaneously leaving some problems not addressed and even creating new problems (Sarkki et al. 2021). In the present paper, we wanted to understand better the positive dynamics that WLSIIs can create. To explore this issue, we aim to examine how the relevant elements of agency enable WLSIIs to contribute to progress towards gender equality?
Step 2: Collect data	Choosing five case studies with already existing and available primary empirical data. The major inclusion criterion for cases was that they were rural, women-led, included aspects of social innovation, and sought to improve the lives and situations of rural women.
Step 3: Standardize case-specific data to enhance comparability	Writing collective synthesis case study reports on the five case studies, each structured in the same way in an iterative process between the core author group and case study responsible authors.
Step 4: Code data	Open coding of data in collective synthesis reports inductively by identifying excerpts related to the research question.
Step 5: Organize data around concepts	Systematic analysis between cases in a theoretically sensitive way by clustering the excerpts under similar groups dividing the clusters of excerpts under general categories of structural features and elements supporting agency.
Step 6: Form categories of related concepts	Forming sub-categories under general concepts of structural features and elements of agency by giving labels for similarly coded data. This analysis was stopped at a point of saturation when new codes relevant to the research question could no longer be identified from the collective synthesis reports.
Step 7: Elaborate patterns and linkages between categories	Searching patterns across cases on how identified elements supporting agency and structural features were interlinked explaining potential progress towards gender equality. Identified patterns are summarized in cognitive maps (see Eden 1992) consisting of relevant elements of agency and structural features.
Step 8: New categories and theory	Building key assumptions based on analysis of the case studies on linkages between WLSIIs and progress towards gender equality.

With regards to elements of agency, we identified 35 excepts from the collective synthesis summaries of the cases that were clustered under three general categories and seven sub-categories. Regarding structural features, we identified 29 excerpts that described structural features marginalizing women, divided across nine sub-categories, and 18 excerpts enabling gender equality and agency by WLSIIs, divided across seven sub-categories. Both marginalizing and enabling structural features were clustered under the same three general categories. The initial analysis by the first author was commented on, elaborated, and verified by other authors in several iterative rounds of analysis.

4. Introduction to the examined women-led social innovation initiatives

While the women are clearly diverse between and within the cases, with their individual concerns, they share concerns linked to lack of employment and education opportunities in rural areas. The core networks in the initiatives include females and males, Miqqut core network includes predominately women. The women innovators are motivated slightly differently across the cases. An introduction to the case studies regarding underlying key challenges for rural women and outlining the social innovation activities is provided in Table 3 (see Annex 1).

Tab 3. Key challenges and social innovation activities in case studies. Source: elaborated from Sarkki et al. 2021 [62]

Case studies	Miqqut	Women farmers	Jana Al Ayadi	Afoulki	Vojvođanska kuća
Location	Nunavut, Canada	South Tyrol, Italy	Deir El Ahmar, Lebanon	South Morocco, Morocco	Municipality of Sombor, Serbia
Key challenges for rural women	Intergenerational trauma from colonial developments, domestic and other types of violence, addictions, breaking down of families. Lack of support with education and childcare, self-confidence issues, lack of housing, geographical isolation.	Economic dependency of women on male members in farm families, gendered roles on farms, unpaid work, and lack of professionalizatio n. Lack of decision-making power relating to family businesses, and patriarchal value structures.	Low levels of literacy, unemployment, male-dominated businesses, patriarchal value structures and gender roles.	High unemployment and out-migration rates, poverty, low levels of literacy, subsistence family farming.	Strong patriarchal gender roles, unemployment (especially of women), limited opportunities to earn income and lack of services, outmigration from rural areas.
Social innovation activities	Not-for-profit organization providing culturally relevant non-formal learning programs (e.g., sewing and design) with embedded literacy and essential skills training.	Social cooperative providing training program and organization of childcare service provision by women farmers on their farms according to natural pedagogy principles.	Women-led cooperative specialized in the production and marketing of local authentic products, employing local women.	Rural women's cooperative created to improve the livelihoods of rural women through the valorization and commercialization of Argan oil.	Social enterprise producing traditional agricultural products, employing and training marginalized women.

The Miqqut program developer-innovator (female, University degree, age 31–40 years) explains her motivations: *"The Inuktitut language and Inuit cultural practices… are eroding at such an alarming rate that non-formal [education] programs, such as the Miqqut Project, are necessary to help revitalize and rejuvenate Inuktitut and Inuit culture".* Thus, the program aims *"to give participants the confidence and skills to move forward in the new world that we are involved in today, where it's not just all traditional and not all modern but a mixture of the two and finding a delicate way to braid them together to become successful".* While it is not easy for a small, not-for-profit organization to directly influence larger structural inequalities in Nunavut, the Miqqut program coordinator (female, college certificate, age 31– 40 years) points out that what they can do is to bring local women together and spur their confidence and strive for agency; "*This program… is such a great stepping stone for ladies who just need that little bit of encouragement in their lives…The whole program is to just push ladies to a new level of wellbeing*."

In the Miqqut case the targeted beneficiaries are Inuit: Youth (15–30 years), Adults (31–49 years), Older workers (50+ years), and persons with disabilities. In practice, program participants in the longer Miqqut programs have been women of different ages, with emphasis on those who are out of school and out of work. The core network of the Miqqut WLSII includes predominantly women.

In the Women Farmers case, the president of the social cooperative (female, education: lower than high school diploma, age 51–60) acted as the spokesperson of women farmers, and initiated the process with the aim to improve the living conditions of women farmers by providing an enabling environment to give them the opportunity to gain a personal income and training opportunities, autonomy, independence. The core network of the WLSII includes mostly women actors. The direct target of the WLSII are women farmers, employed by the social cooperative to deliver childcare services. Other more indirectly targeted beneficiaries are working parents of children 0–3 years old, who live in rural areas, and who benefit from these childcare services. In particular, mothers of children in rural areas wishing to re-enter the labour market, who, due to gender roles which place expectations on mothers to raise their children at home, require the extra support provided by these childcare services so that they can go back to work.

The President and owner of Jana Al Ayadi cooperative (Female, Education: Middle school diploma, age 61–70) wanted to develop an independent and sustainable business for women in Deir el Ahmar by creating new marketing channels to increase product sales, leading to increased profits and enhancing women's positive and independent image in the rural community. As a result of the work by the cooperative, women are now perceived as key actors and local leaders in social development, and women's ideas, plans and opinions are now treated with respect. Targeted beneficiaries of the Jana Al Ayadi are female members of the cooperative (N = 50–70) who can improve the economic situations of their families by being engaged in the work of the cooperative. The network includes both females and males.

The President of Afoulki Cooperative (Female, Education: illiterate, Age 51–60) stated in her interview that *"by the cooperative, I wanted to solve two major problems in our territory: women's poor socio-economic situation and the undervaluation of argan products"*. The President wanted to improve the living conditions of women by providing an enabling environment to give them the opportunity to gain a personal income and training opportunities, autonomy and independence. Targeted beneficiaries in the Afoulki case are any women from the territory who want to work in the cooperative. The core network includes both females and males.

The leader of the Vojvođanska kuća (Female, Education: computer scientist, Age 40–55) initiated and motivated the establishment of a women's association and later a social enterprise aimed at empowering and assisting women from the village of Stanišić. She stated, 'Everything is inaccessible to women in the countryside, from information to doctors. To improve our situation, we had to make an effort ourselves, turning our disadvantages into advantages and economic profit. That's how we became recognizable.' The beneficiaries include women of various ages, social backgrounds, and nationalities living in the northern part of Serbia."

The cases of Jana AL Ayadi, Afoulki and Vojvodanska kuća share the aim of improving rural women's situations by developing livelihoods linked to rural agricultural products, while Miqqut focuses on non-formal learning programmes for women, and the Women Farmers case, on childcare services. The challenges in all cases link in general to lack of gender equality through patriarchal socio-cultural and political-economic structures. Also lack of opportunities for education and employment are common problems across the five case studies.

5. Results

5.1 Elements of agency

Based on indicative qualitative analysis of the case studies, we identified three general categories for elements of agency: self-confidence of women, women-to-women networks, and self-generated and externally supported capacity. One of the main findings on elements supporting agency is that WLSIIs can

enhance women's self-confidence, catalyzing further action. The second relevant category focuses on women-to-women networks, and linkages between women-led social innovations and external and esteemed actors, while the third category deals with capacity, encompassing issues like skills and expertise within WLSIIs, motivations for self-organizing and voluntary work, and recognizing that WLSIIs can benefit from support from external actors. Thus, capacity refers to both self-developed capacity (e.g., based on dedication, motivation, voluntary work, sharing knowledge within the network), and capacity developed with the support of external actors (Table 4).

Tab 4. Clustered excerpts from collective case study synthesis reports describing the elements of agency relevant for the case studies. Source: authors own elaboration

Elements supporting agency	General categories
Self-confidence catalyzing future action **- The initiative led to enhanced self-confidence of marginalized women to apply for employment and further education and helped to connect past and present cultural identities by developing both traditional and modern skills ("Miqqut").** **- Increased self-confidence of women farmers helped them to become politically active to improve their situation and convince the farmers' association of the importance of their initiative and concerns ("Women Farmers").** **- Social innovation required and increased the self-confidence of women and led to social recognition and respect towards them alongside enhanced possibilities for expanding the initiative to include more women ("Jana Al Ayadi").** **- Resulting increased self-confidence and economic activities helped in establishing more equal relationship with men ("Afoulki").**	**Self-confidence of women**
Women-to-women networks **- Social innovation reduced loneliness, providing women with opportunities to meet and create new contacts with other women across different generations ("Miqqut").** **- A high level of trust in the network among women enhanced the development of the initiative ("Women Farmers").** **- Organization of opportunities for childminders to meet each other ("Women Farmers").** **- The initiative started partly from the already existing network of the women farmers organization, and then involved other actors, from the farmers' union, and the education institution Fachschule Salern ("Women Farmers").** **- Women-women networks within a locality enhanced future possibilities for action ("Jana Al Ayadi").** **- A high level of trust in women-to-women networks was important ("Vojvođanska kuća").** **- Visits abroad to other female-run associations helped them learn from best practices ("Vojvođanska kuća").** **- The land and house where the cooperative is located was obtained from the females who left the village and saw the potential in supporting the initiative ("Vojvođanska kuća").** Networks between women-led social innovations and external esteemed actors **- Hiring and gaining support from eight Elders as instructors in the pilot programs was important for success, bringing in strong traditional skills and Inuktitut language and contributing to cultural continuity ("Miqqut").** **- Networking between women cooperatives and agricultural producers enhanced further possibilities for continuity and growth of the initiative ("Jana Al Ayadi").** **- Women – village leader relationships enhanced acceptance of initiative in the community ("Jana Al Ayadi").**	**Networks**

- The women-led business attracted international agencies to the village and as a result became an essential partner of social or cultural activities/ events in the municipality ("Jana Al Ayadi"). **- Linking diverse actors (members, employees, funders, government representatives, banks, insurance companies, inter-professional federations, national agencies, public and private companies) who were not used to working together was important for the development of the initiative ("Afoulki").** **- The importance of networks with external actors (e.g., consultants, academics) and females who had left the village enhanced the development of the initiative ("Vojvođanska kuća").**	
Building skills and expertise within WLSIIs **- Cultural revitalization and indigenous language revitalization: better capacity to navigate within and combine traditional and modern dimensions of the given society. Improved communication skills. Some economic benefits via selling self-made parkas and other items of clothing ("Miqqut").** **- Traditional knowledge and expertise outside of the Euro-Canadian idea of literacy broadened the target of education activities to include themes and skills that are relevant for local women's everyday lives ("Miqqut").** **- Skills in Administration activities, and coordination of the childcare services by women farmers were important for the initiative ("Women Farmers").** **- Development of training programs for childminders based on nature pedagogy ("Women Farmers").** **- New roles for women as the owners, decision-makers, managers, and leaders of their own businesses ("Jana Al Ayadi").** **- Increased skills through training to improve know-how in food preservation was important ("Jana Al Ayadi").** **The importance of respected and motivated women able to act as leaders was recognized ("Afoulki").** **- Professionalization of women to run a business, use machines, keep accounts and books was important for the evolution of the initiative ("Afoulki").** **- The importance of training (e.g., business management and administration, marketing, communication, organic production principles) enabled the growth of the initiative ("Vojvođanska kuća").** **- Increased awareness of the economy (e.g., market demand for organic products) helped in running the initiative ("Vojvođanska kuća").** Self-organization and voluntary work to develop capacity in WLSIIs **- The board of directors of the organization running the programs consists of women volunteers. New initiatives are in the making to find and support youth initiatives and youth volunteers in their home communities ("Miqqut").** **- Creation of the social cooperative as an organizational frame for service provision ("Women Farmers").** **- Voluntary engagement of the main actors of the social cooperative in its starting phase was crucial ("Women Farmers").** **- Voluntary work created new opportunities but may consume a lot of time ("Vojvođanska kuća").** **- High levels of voluntary work are important ("Vojvođanska kuća").** **- The creation of a social enterprise (formed as an association) as an organizational frame was important for the provision of agricultural products and for making the process functional ("Vojvođanska kuća").**	**Capacity (self-generated and externally supported)**

Capacity development via support from external actors **- Received the Arctic Inspiration Prize in 2012, providing external validation for the programs and helping to attract support from new partners and funders. Local businesses and even local private individuals as supporters and donors, in addition to funding from different governmental sources ("Miqqut").** **- An action plan by a marketing expert to explore new market and entrepreneurship opportunities (e.g., new visual look for products, E-marketing) helped the initiative to grow ("Jana Al Ayadi").** **- External support from policymakers increased capacity for action ("Afoulki").**	

5.2 Structural features marginalizing rural women or supporting women-led innovations

Regarding structural features, we identified three general categories: gender identity, (in)dependence of women, and control of women over the "rules of the game" allied with their lives. These features can either support or hinder positive developments. Identity is about self-identification and distinctions, but also about structural issues linked to cultural gendered roles, suspicions and prejudices that may create gender-based marginalisation of women. Women's dependence on men appeared to be a major structural feature connected to marginalization, while WLSIIs enhanced independence of women. Control of women over their own lives links here to policy, economy, and wider institutions. Therefore, structural features can have negative or positive effects on gender equality. In Table 5, the left column presents general categories, the middle column presents structural features marginalizing women, and the right column presents structural features supporting gender equality. The excerpts in the middle and right columns both belong under the same three general categories, but the right column is not meant to represent specific solutions to the specific marginalizing issues in the middle column (Table 5).

Tab 5. Clustered excerpts describing structural features discovered based on inductive qualitative analysis of the collective case study synthesis reports. Source: authors own elaboration

Structural features	Aspects marginalizing women in rural areas	Aspects supporting gender equality
Gendered identity	**Patriarchal values and roles** - Traditional gender roles, manifested, for example, in the dominance of males in farmers union ("Women Farmers"). - Men's influence over women and control of their decisions (many women were not allowed to work outside the home) ("Afoulki"). - Strong traditional patriarchal values and gender roles ("Vojvođanska kuća"). **Cultural prejudices** - A colonial legacy marginalizing indigenous people and cultures has led to suspicions among local people against schools and education as promoters of a Euro-Canadian culture ("Miqqut"). - In the starting phase, people, especially male members of the farmers union, were skeptical about social services offered by women farmers ("Women Farmers"). - Social and cultural boundaries regarding women in business ("Jana Al Ayadi").	**Social acceptance** - High social acceptance for traditional skills (parka-making etc.) lowers the barrier for women to participate in the courses where they can then also learn other types of skills. This has also paved the way for wider community support for the programs ("Miqqut"). - Increasing societal acceptance of working mothers who make use of childcare services ("Women Farmers"). - Community support for women working in businesses ("Jana Al Ayadi"). **Trending positive identities** - Societal trend towards natural, rural lifestyles and nature pedagogy in childcare services helped the initiative to achieve wider acceptance ("Women Farmers").

	- Difficulties around engaging females to work in the initiative due to persisting neglect of women's potential roles in rural development ("Vojvođanska kuća"). - Perceptions that women's place is at home, not in the business or public spheres ("Vojvođanska kuća").	
(In)dependence (economic, social)	**Dependence due to lack of education** - Low literacy skills among indigenous women in rural Nunavut is quite a common barrier to education enrolment ("Miqqut"). - Women's illiteracy (Literacy rate in rural areas of Morocco: girls of more than 10 years old: 42.5%, boys over 10 years old: 70.3%) ("Afoulki"). - Lack of expertise (e.g., machines, economic skills) hindered the development of the initiative ("Afoulki"). **Periodic funding compromises independence** - Dependence on project-based funding is a challenge for the continuity of the initiative ("Miqqut"). - Demand for childcare services on the farm depends on politics and financial support from the public sector ("Women Farmers"). - Intensive voluntary work – after some time people lose interest ("Vojvođanska kuća"). - Absence of long-term support and stability of funding (dissatisfying, if you cannot provide finances to people working in the initiative) ("Vojvođanska kuća"). **Geographical hardships** - Smaller, more isolated Nunavut communities are left without many courses (high cost of transportation and accommodation, difficult to recruit teachers) ("Miqqut"). - Lack of jobs for rural women ("Jana Al Ayadi"). - Lack of opportunities for young people in the rural setting ("Vojvođanska kuća"). **Lack of time due to other responsibilities** - Lack of adequate and secure childcare providers (birth rate is relatively high in Nunavut) ("Miqqut"). - Limited time of women farmers for providing childcare services, as they have to fulfil multiple tasks on the farms ("Women Farmers").	**Women – family relations** - Improving the financial status of women's families by establishing a viable business ("Jana Al Ayadi"). - Motivation of women to actively participate in family responsibilities while at the same time supporting their families through income related to work from the initiative ("Afoulki"). **Income from social innovation initiatives** - To gain a personal income and be autonomous, women decided to start an on-farm diversification activity and succeeded in convincing their families to support the activity ("Women Farmers"). - The ability to develop women-based cooperatives shows prospects for enhanced independence of women ("Jana Al Ayadi").

Control (institutions, policy, economy)	**Skepticism toward women-led social innovations** - Low initial support by the Farmers´ Union because of a lack of trust in the initiative ("Women Farmers"). - Initially, people were skeptical about the idea of creating a women-led cooperative ("Afoulki"). - Lack of trust in the quality of products made by women ("Vojvođanska kuća"). **Competition in the economy and funding** - Competition for funding ("Women Farmers"). - Exploitation of argan fruit by non-local enterprises at a lower value ("Afoulki"). - High economic competition ("Jana Al Ayadi"). - Lack of incentives for marketing and export ("Jana Al Ayadi"). - Lack of access to credits and resources ("Jana Al Ayadi"). **Unfavorable political dynamics** - Due to formal status as an association, the initiatives are not eligible to apply for national subsidies (designed for individual property holders) ("Vojvođanska kuća"). - If the initiative does not support the ruling party, it may compromise possibilities to obtain public funds ("Vojvođanska kuća").	**Policy support** - Need for non-formal learning/ training initiatives widely recognized by policy makers ("Miqqut"). - Political support from the social sector: users of childcare services on farms pay the same price as for public offers ("Women Farmers"). - Institutional support from the Ministry of Agriculture ("Afoulki"). - During the time of launching the initiative there was support for establishing associations of females on the local level ("Vojvođanska kuća"). **Profitable business sustaining women** - High demand for products (parkas) ("Miqqut"). - Ability for cost-efficient production ("Jana Al Ayadi"). **Available funding** - Supporting funding from various sources; Federal gov. of Canada, different departments of the Gov. of Nunavut, local businesses, etc. ("Miqqut"). - EU's European Social Fund financing for delivering training courses to women farmers and childcare services ("Women Farmers"). - Ability to attract funds for establishing small facilities ("Jana Al Ayadi"). - Availability of international funds/grants that support the work of the association ("Vojvođanska kuća").

While the findings on elements of agency and structural features are important, they do not yet capture dynamics on how WLSIIs can initiate progress towards gender equality. We illustrate some of the dynamics linked to cases with two cognitive maps in the next sections including two figures (Figure 1 and Figure 2) that were drawn based on the linkages between elements of agency and structural features in the cases. We narrow the examination around two findings: that women-to-women networks and the self-confidence of women are crucial elements for contributing to gender equality.

5.3 Dynamics around women-to-women networks and women's self-organization

All the WLSII cases were based on women-to-women networks and women's self-organization, and (partly) voluntary work. These had varying impacts on different structural features and links to different elements supporting agency. The "Jana Al Ayadi" and "Afoulki" cases illustrate that the WLSIIs were able to evolve from initiatives that initially utilized extensive voluntary work to self-sustaining and profitable businesses. In the "Afoulki" case, the cooperative improved the living conditions of women by providing an enabling environment for obtaining personal income, by offering training opportunities, autonomy, and independence, by easing women's poor socio-economic situation, and placing women in a better position to have more equal roles in customary structures. In the "Jana Al Ayadi" case, the women

networked with each other and with agricultural producers and village leaders. As a result, women eventually became the owners, decision-makers, managers, and leaders of their own businesses, and are perceived as primary actors in local development whose opinions, ideas and plans are accounted for with respect. The "Vojvođanska kuća" case illustrated increasing economic autonomy for the women engaged in the WLSII.

In the "Women Farmers" case, the networking amongst women to provide paid childcare services was crucial for enhancing women's independence. According to the interviewed president of the social cooperative, *"That is, it has made the woman more independent, because she can shape her life by herself and through collaboration with other women."* Changes took place not only at the level of everyday practices but also in policy. The initiative created changes in the provisional law on social agriculture through a long process of interactions within the context of male-dominated farming and with the Farmers Union, overcoming unfavorable political dynamics linked to agriculture in South Tyrol. Likewise, another wider level change was achieved by the "Afoulki" initiative when it expanded to become an umbrella cooperative acting in many localities in the region. Thereafter, it provided new opportunities for women in marginal rural areas, instead of just operating one small cooperative in one location.

These case studies highlight that increased independence and positive examples of women-led profitable businesses in rural contexts helped to reduce skepticism towards women entrepreneurs and increased social acceptance towards new roles for women escaping patriarchal and stereotypical roles. Training provided by the WLSIIs and the new skills women gained were important in terms of making the businesses profitable (in "Jana Al Ayadi", "Afoulki" and "Vojvođanska kuća"), moving towards independence ("Women Farmers"), and coping with geographical hardships (e.g., lack of employment and education opportunities in "Miqqut"). In many cases, a lack of opportunities in the rural context was also overcome through additional networking with external actors. Figure 1 summarizes the linkages, especially related to women-to-women networks and women's self-organization.

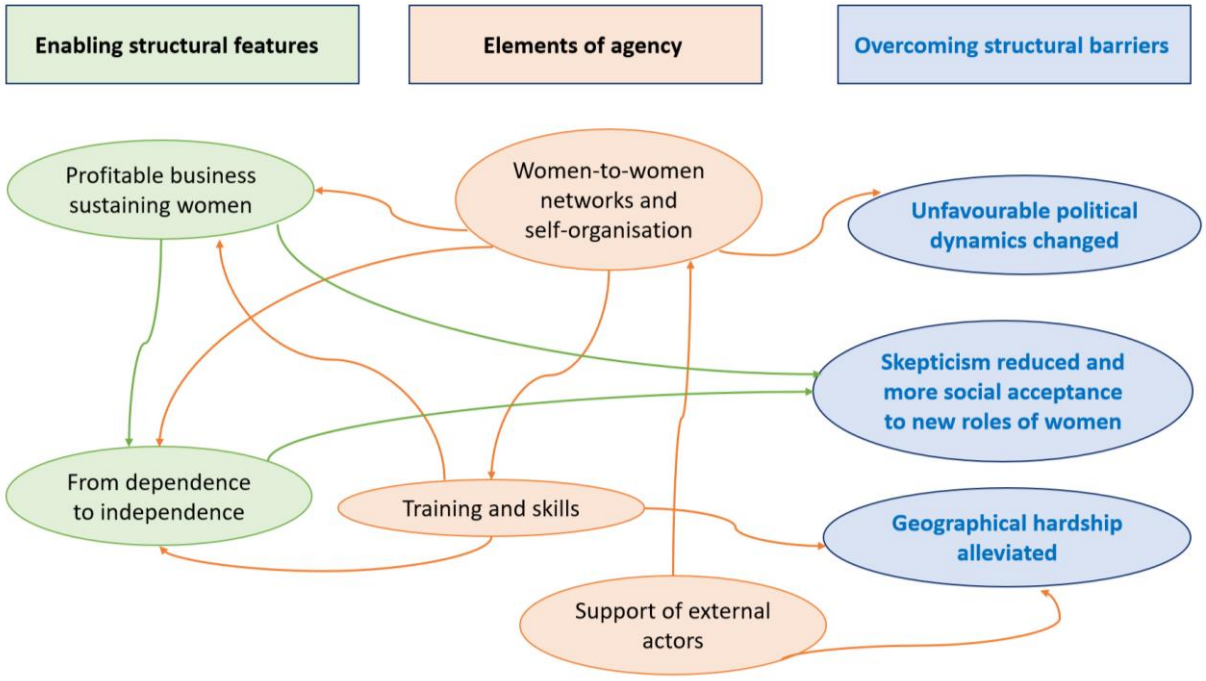

Fig 1. Cognitive map of elements supporting agency and structural features around women to women networks and women's self-organization. Source: authors own elaboration

5.4 Dynamics around self-confidence of women

Increased self-confidence was an important outcome for women engaging with the WLSIIs, but it also catalyzed further action for wider-level changes. Women's self-confidence was enhanced by the change from voluntary work to profitable businesses in the cases of "Jana Al Ayadi", "Afoulki", and "Vojvođanska kuća". In all cases, the WLSIIs increased overall social acceptance towards women-led initiatives, and training provided by WLSIIs and resulting new skills also fed into the self-confidence of women who were involved in the initiatives. For example, in the "Miqqut" case, course instructors, in sharing important cultural knowledge and skills with participants, built the women's capacity and self-confidence to better navigate, and eventually start to change, the existing cultural and structural landscape. A woman innovator of the initiative noted that *"If we have one person who can build their confidence, feel good about themselves and their skillset, they're going to make a difference in their community"*. The cases of "Jana Al Ayadi" and "Afoulki" showed that thriving businesses run by self-confident women can contribute to overcoming gendered suspicions in the local culture towards women in business. Stereotypes were challenged, also, in the "Women Farmer" case where women's roles at farm and community levels changed with active political engagement in regional politics at the male-dominated agricultural union. Interactions with external and esteemed actors helped build the cultural capital of the women, strengthening their self-confidence, initiating changes in gendered roles and stereotypes, while contributing to overcoming cultural prejudices and to the cultural legitimization of the WLSIIs.

This provided a base from which changes in gendered roles and stereotypes could start to be enacted in wider structures. For example, in the case of "Miqqut", hiring eight female Elders as instructors in the pilot programs was important for success, as the Elders brought in strong traditional skills and Inuktitut language and helped to transmit these skills to younger program participants. The program, then, offered cultural continuity through intergenerational cultural transmission, and while doing so, provided an alternative to the formal, official education system, which had been impacted by colonization and had failed to meet local needs. In the case of "Afoulki", thanks to the trust and respect shown by the local actors (ranging from the local authorities to the female president of the cooperative) towards the WLSII, family dynamics have changed, as men have gradually accepted their wives being part of the cooperative and having well-defined work schedules outside of the home.

In the "Vojvođanska kuća" case, local educated women returned to the village, bringing with them added cultural capital that they had accumulated, and providing significant help in initiating and developing the WLSII. Their increased self-confidence and experience influenced and amplified the confidence and knowledge of the women and other actors they interacted with, increasing the overall cultural capital within the network. Relations with external actors (e.g., consultants, academics, foundations) were also important. In the case of "Afoulki", bringing together and inter-linking diverse actors (e.g., members of the cooperative, employees, funders, government representatives, banks, insurance companies, inter-professional federations, national agencies, and public and private companies), who were not used to working together, was crucial for the success of the initiative. In the "Jana Al Ayadi" case, networks were formed between women cooperatives and agricultural producers, and links between the women and village leaders were also important.

The capacities to act and feel self-confident often have mutually reinforcing dynamics, as shown, for example, in the "Jana Al Ayadi" case, where help with marketing strategies and capacity building around the running of businesses led to enthusiasm among women and increased their self-confidence (Figure 2).

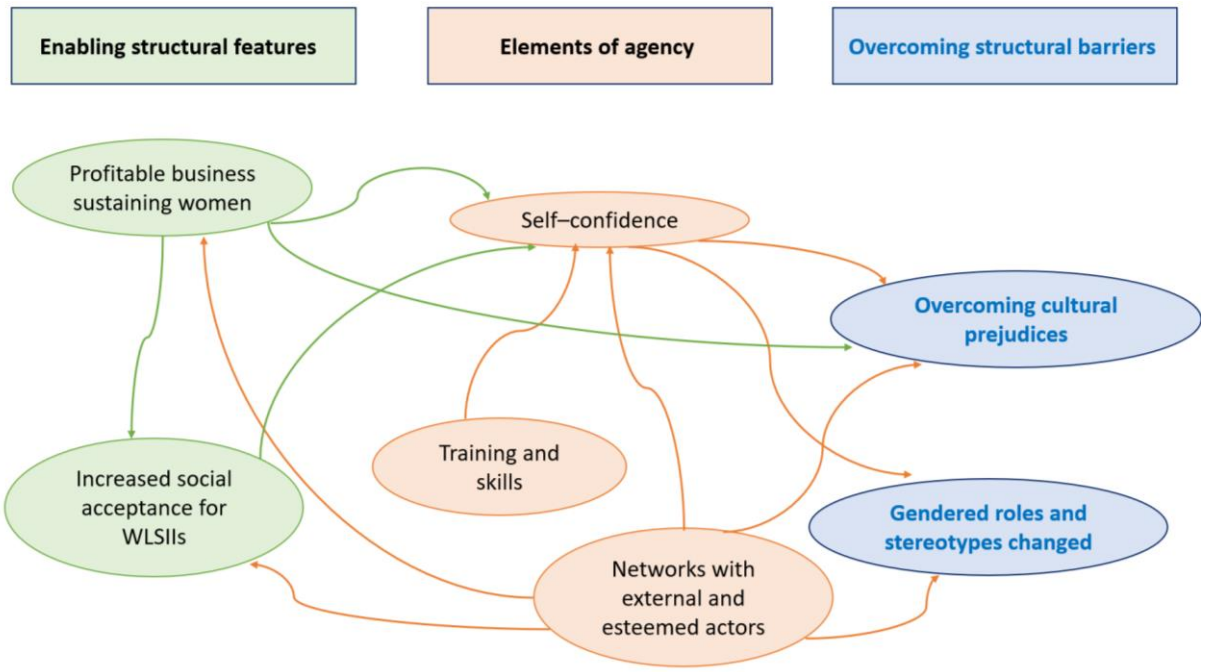

Fig 2. Cognitive map of elements supporting agency and structural features around self-confidence. Source: authors own elaboration

5.5 Limitations of women-led social innovation initiatives

Despite the high promise of WLSIIs to enhance gender equality, they may be compromised by a complex set of underlying structural features that are problematic for gender equality. In the examples from the examined five cases, some developments for gender equality took place, however, simultaneously, some other problems remained hidden or were emerging.

In the "Miqqut" case, the training courses provided possibilities to learn traditional skills (e.g., sewing parkas, mitts and kamiks) from elders and other esteemed actors, with embedded learning of literacy skills that were less "hands-on" (e.g., Inuktitut language and project management skills). This supported positive (indigenous) identity development and led to increased self-confidence for participating women. However, the culturally relevant content and good results from the courses may even have increased their popularity too greatly – there are not enough resources to admit everyone wishing to participate. This has created pressure to scale up the initiative by offering "diluted" versions of the courses to a broader range of participants. In the newer, shorter versions of the "Miqqut" programs (one week, as opposed to four months), there is less time for intergenerational interactions or versatile skills development (project planning, language skills, etc.), which may decrease the anti-marginalization effects of the programs.

Another example of being 'blinded' by looming empowerment was found in the "Vojvođanska kuća" case where the women started to work together to innovate socially. The increased self-confidence experienced led to a huge amount of voluntary work, which, however, did not result in the expected benefits. According to an interviewee from "Vojvođanska kuća": *"They do a lot in their community, but it is all their personal enthusiasm, and the expenses are high, with personal exhaustion of resources, free labour... They will do all alone, they can do all… and then, at some point, they can do no longer."* Therefore, self-organization may be seen as an empowering aspect, but it simultaneously increases the workload of women so much that it can threaten the continuity of the WLSII.

In the Italian "Women Farmers" case, according to Gramm et al. (2020), the empowerment of women is contingent on the continuity of the gendered division of labor on family farms, as in addition to their entrepreneurial activity of offering paid childcare services to other rural families and farming tasks, women farmers are responsible for housekeeping and caring for their own family and children. This results in high workload and little free time for them. Therefore, women farmers "experience autonomy, within dependence" (Annes & Wright 2015).

6. Discussion

The basic premise of WLSIIs is that they can enhance gender equality. We assume that WLSIIs can do this by enhancing elements supporting women's agency. By capitalizing on elements of agency (self-confidence, networks, capacity), WLSIIs may be able to turn the key structural features (gender identities, (in)dependence, and control) from drivers of marginality towards drivers of gender equality.

6.1 Gender identity

Assumption 1: Women-to-women networks provide safe spaces for positive women's roles and identities that build the self-confidence needed for challenging and breaking stereotypical and patriarchal roles and cultural prejudices.

Identity does not only link to self-identification and imagining one's own opportunities, but gender identity can be both marginalizing and empowering. Gender identity may impose roles and socio-cultural stereotypes on women, and therefore may limit choices imagined for them. In our case studies, prevailing patriarchal roles and cultural prejudices in the case study settings were identified as marginalizing women. Our findings on marginalizing issues are supported by literature recognizing that cultural assumptions, and roles tied to women's identities and perceptions of femininity and masculinity, may undermine their agency, while women's activities, where they sit outside of the stereotypes, may be dismissed as unimportant or even odd, thus hindering women's empowerment (Hearn 2004; Bock & Shortall 2006; Khoury & Prasad 2016; Zivojinovic et al. 2019; Gramm et al. 2020).

There is a connection between induced and reproduced lack of self-confidence and marginalization of women through power relations and oppressive structures in place. Already, at a young age, unsupportive education systems, objectifying and belittling societal attitudes and self-limiting views may begin to prevent women from reaching their full potential (Thompson 2011:137–141). *"Prior research…suggests girls tend to attribute success to external factors (e.g., luck) and failure to internal factors (e.g., lack of ability)"* (ibid.). Inversely, as our case studies have indicated, increased self-confidence can help women to reduce marginalization by, for example, taking upon new roles in their communities and connecting and collaborating with like-minded people to create changes. Our cases showed that engagement in WLSIIs can lead to increasing recognition of women as leaders and entrepreneurs in their communities, enhancing their self-confidence, broadening perceptions of gender identity, and nurturing further action.

Women's identity is often connected to children, and pregnancy is considered a biological fact that also affects female identity and the ability to self-position or self-realization. Typically, responsibilities related to child-rearing bind women to the private realm and hinder their opportunities to take an active part in the public realm, thus lowering women's status, even marginalizing them (Thompson 2011). However, the Italian Women Farmers WLSII uses the very same activity (childcare responsibilities) as something that empowers women and connects them more with the public realm. This example – as well as the Miqqut case, which elevates traditional sewing skills – indicates that WLSIIs do not need to radically overturn structural features to enact positive change. Sometimes great impacts can be achieved by looking at what activities women are already doing. In such cases, being innovative can mean that one does not treat mundane activities (e.g., childcare or sewing) as something to be eliminated through e.g., delegation or technological innovation. Instead, WLSIIs have indicated that there is innovative potential in using such mundane activities as the very cornerstones for empowerment, onto which something new can be built.

6.2 (In)dependence of women

Assumption 2: WLSIIs can help women move from social and economic *dependence* to economically *independent* business and *social freedom* via self-organization, voluntary work, and acquiring new skills.

Economic and social dependence means gender equality may be hindered by a lack of autonomy for women and by their economic and social dependence on men. In our case studies, lack of education, periodic funding of the WLSIIs, geographical hardships in rural regions, and lack of time due to caring, domestic and other responsibilities were identified as marginalizing women and compromising their

independence. Literature has shown that women's independence may be hindered by a lack of access to labor markets; for example, in the agricultural sector, women have been entrapped into precarious non-standard contracts (i.e., for a part-time, fixed term or irregular work) (Mastropieri 2017).

We found that the independence of women can be significantly enhanced by WLSIIs based on factors of self-organization and often voluntary work. In our case, WLSIIs were rather smaller-scale and volunteering-based, but nevertheless, can offer a stepping stone for women through skills development. These small-scale initiatives may also diffuse to other areas or grow themselves and then offer actual paid employment or a smaller, extra source of income for women. This can break skeptical views on women's important roles in the economy in rural areas and communities. In that sense, WLSIIs not only offer opportunities for women but also partly challenge patriarchal stereotypes and structures. Our cases also showed that WLSIIs can help women acquire new skills, which enable independence. Literature has also emphasised that social innovation can help women to develop management strategies and marketing skills for improving and expanding their businesses, as well as expanding the direction of family businesses traditionally managed by men (Alkhaled et al. 2019; Sfeir et al. 2019; Noraida et al. 2018), and contribute to independence by enhancing economic security (Masterpieri 2017).

6.3 Control of women over the "rules of the game"

Assumption 3: WLSIIs can help women gain control of decisions made over the "rules of the game" within political and economic realms by enabling action, building networks between WLSIIs and other key actors, and seeking external support.

We found that skepticism towards WLSIIs, economic competition and unfavorable political dynamics and structures (e.g., patriarchal society) compromised control of women over resources, their social initiatives, and lives (Table 5). Literature has recognized that gendered biases in formal institutions often undermine women's opportunities for action (Krook & Mackay 2011; Turker & Vural 2017) while increasing control of women over their social innovation initiatives improves their willingness to participate in political and managerial decision-making (Maguirre et al. 2016). Policy and governance are connected to income, and we contend that control over resources (e.g., financial/economic, social, natural etc., including, for example, access to land) is a crucial issue for women's empowerment, as this is also shown by Moser (2016).

Control is linked to *institutions* (i.e., "rules of the game") that guide, for example, realms of the economy and policy (on institutions, see more e.g., in Nijnik et al. 2021). These can be either supportive or constraining regarding WLSIIs and progress towards gender equality. The case studies showed that, despite challenges, WLSIIs were able to challenge or even transform existing "rules of the game". The "Jana Al Ayadi", "Afoulki", and "Vojvođanska kuća" cases created new "rules" for local economies by showing that women-led cooperatives can also be economically viable. The "Miqqut" case showed an example of how to arrange education and capacity-building activities in a non-colonial manner suited for indigenous and other local women. The Italian "Women Farmers" case transformed agricultural politics in the region by introducing women as active political actors, resulting, also, in changes in regional legislation.

Our findings align with other literature, which has recognized that both informal and formal social networks enhance the transformative potential of rural women entrepreneurs (e.g., seen in Lindbergh et al. 2016; Osei & Zhuang 2020) and that policy support and public funds invested into communities enhance women's capacity to initiate social innovations (Piñeiro-Antelo & Lois-González 2019). WLSIIs can also benefit significantly from connections to external actors that help WLSIIs to grow and gain stronger social acceptance and impact (as shown regarding social innovations in general by Špaček et al. 2022; Nijnik et al. 2022; Kluvankova et al. 2021; Sarkki et al. 2019; Sánchez Rodríguez et al 2021).

6.4 Women's collective agency

Assumption 4: Women's collective agency can be a game changer. Despite the fact that it often requires extensive un-paid work by women involved in WLSIIs, voluntary work by women can be a pilot leading to further growth and expansion of social innovations.

The above findings indicate that women's collective agency can be a game changer at local and regional levels, as shown by the changes achieved by WLSIIs in the five analyzed cases. Often, from the efforts of individuals and extensive amounts of voluntary work, collective agency grew from the women-to-women networks (for more on growth and expansion of social innovations, see Kluvankova et al 2021). The cases also showed that enhanced individual capacities and self-confidence then fed into the larger fabric of collective agency facilitated by the WLSIIs.

For example, a participant of the *Miqqut* course learned important skills from local Elders. Since then, she has founded her own design label and company, brought collections to fashion shows (including International Indigenous Fashion Week in Paris in 2019) and continued to collaborate with other seamstresses and designers. She continues to give back and feed into the sewing and design programs in Nunavut: "*From January to April [2019], I was teaching a sewing program… A lot of the ladies, the participants, were from the women's shelter… and … were really sad that it [the sewing program] was ending, so I thought this [organizing a charitable Fashion show in the capital of Nunavut] would be a great opportunity for us to donate some funds, to maybe donate some sewing machines and materials for them*" (interviewed by LeTourneau 2019).

6.5 Plausible trade-offs linked to WLSIIs

Assumption 5: While WLSIIs show much promise in their contributions to gender equality, they can also involve trade-offs and partial successes.

Tab 6. Five plausible trade-offs linked to WLSIIs. Source: authors own elaboration

Plausible trade-offs relevant for WLSIIs	Explanation
Time vs. returns	Participation in WLSIIs often requires time commitments. However, invested time does not always provide hoped-for gains and returns, and may determine an overload for the women involved.
Women-to-women vs. mixed networks	While women-to-women networks provide safe spaces and are often empowering, they may not be able to change the patriarchal structures and attitudes of males who are not part of these networks, even if men can also contribute to positive change towards gender equality.
Personal vs. structural change	Self-confidence is often an important prerequisite for and outcome of WLSIIs, but this self-confidence may obscure the fact that structures marginalizing women are most often located outside rural women themselves, and as such out of reach of personal changes. In addition, Ahl & Marlow (2021) have critiqued the idea that "she who dares wins", because structural barriers still exist that marginalize women, and thus personal actions of women may often not be able to change these structures.
Social vs. economic innovations	While there is certainly much promise in WLSIIs and their ability to contribute to change towards gender equality, they are often civil society, third sector initiatives often based largely on unpaid work. Thus, participation in social innovation activities may shadow economic innovations and claims to increase appropriately paid formal work opportunities for rural women.
Groundbreaking behavior vs. strengthening negative stereotypes	Women in WLSIIs can show, through example to others, that there are different ways to be a woman that exists outside of cultural stereotypes. However, sometimes acting too boldly outside the norm may actually be stigmatizing and reinforce negative stereotypes.

Despite the promising aspects linked to WLSIIs and their contributions to gender equality, they rarely offer fast or complete solutions to larger societal problems and persistent structural inequalities. Instead, success is usually partial. In some cases, the WLSIIs may even reproduce the status quo characterized by gender inequality, for example, gender-specific division of labor often remains when women work at home or at voluntary third-sector jobs that are unpaid or poorly paid. Table 6 outlines five plausible trade-offs linked to WLSIIs.

6.6 Limitations of the study

Our study has some limitations. Our empirical methods diverge across the cases because the collection of the empirical materials was not primarily targeted to examine WLSIIs, but social innovation in general (except the Miqqut case focusing on extensive ethnography in a remote location). This means that we do not have materials that would allow quantitative analysis nor strict comparative analysis. Instead, we use inductive qualitative content analysis to answer our research question, and can also identify theoretically relevant findings on the elements of agency, structural features, and their interrelations. We identify emerging common themes across the cases that help to understand the contributions to gender equality and the challenges that the WLSIIs are facing.

7. Conclusion

Gender equality is an important goal and challenge in rural areas worldwide (e.g., UN SDG 5). Initiatives led by women, such as the WLSIIs examined in the present paper, have much promise to address this challenge. However, while the literature on social innovation has boomed during the last decade, focus on women-led social innovation has been scarce (for exceptions see Lindberg et al. 2016; Maguirre et al. 2016; Maestripieri 2017; Ali et al. 2018; Gorriz et al. 2020; Gramm et al. 2020). The present paper contributes to better understanding elements of agency linked to rural WLSIIs, structural features enabling or hindering gender equality, and ways by which WLSIIs can advance gender equality especially by overcoming structures that still, today, continue to marginalize rural women. In general, our approach contributes to understanding the challenges rural women face, as well as elements supporting agency that can help progress towards gender equality promoted by WLSIIs. We focus especially on solutions, because problems with achieving gender equality are already widely documented (e.g., Ahl & Marlow 2021; Sarkki et al. 2021; Hernando 2022).

So far multi-case analyses on WLSIIs have been missing, and links between WLSIIs and gender equality have been undertheorized. To close these gaps, we have applied grounded theory to examine whether, and how, WLSIIs have facilitated progress towards gender equality in five cases from rural areas located in Europe, Africa, and North America. Grounded theory proved suitable for analyzing five cases from different contexts so that theoretical constructs were not imposed on the cases, but the diverse cases were used to enrich and build theoretical assumptions on the WLSIIs ability to improve gender equality. By employing a grounded approach, we were able to create content and detailed themes under the meta-categories of elements of agency and structural features that were demonstrated to be empirically relevant for explaining WLSIIs' ability to improve gender equality.

Key to our approach was to operationalize the agency-structure interplay by highlighting elements of agency and structural features. The identified categories of elements of agency (self-confidence, networks, and capacity) are likely to have relevance for understanding the abilities of WLSIIs to improve gender equality, also, in cases and contexts beyond those analyzed in the present paper. The structural features identified by us– gender identity, (in)dependence, and control of women over the "rules of the game" – are intermediary concepts between grand societal structures (such as policy, law, economy, culture, social organization, and values) and women's concrete everyday realities. These structural features can be utilized in subsequent studies to help detect and understand what supports or hinders women's agency, opportunities, and well-being.

Our findings also suggest that the elements supporting agency are generated by, but also a prerequisite for, the emergence of WLSIIs. This appears as a paradoxical statement but is understandable from

the viewpoint of the structure-agency interplay and the notion of virtuous cycles. Looking at the WLSIIs through the structure-agency lens and the grounded theory approach opens avenues for identification of virtuous cycles of development, wherein actions by the WLSIIs further boost women's agency and can generate impacts and even change marginalizing structures beyond the immediate context of the WLSIIs. This thereby contributes to progress towards gender equality.

Among the most promising findings of this paper is the idea that women's collective agency can be channeled through WLSIIs. Women's collective agency has been proven to be important for diverse geographical and cultural contexts and should be recognized by policy makers as a mechanism that has great promise for enhancing women's capacity, well-being, and opportunities, and thus enhancing gender equality. The transformative power of WLSIIs largely lies in women's collective agency, and thorough examination of the ways by which the agency of women emerges and can be supported remains a topic of further interest. However, caution is in order. While we purposely focused on the potential of women-led social innovation initiatives to support agency and challenge and even change societal structures marginalizing rural women, we have also outlined five examples of trade-offs (Table 6), where women's engagement with the WLSIIs may have even had negative implications.

Our findings can be used in subsequent studies, especially to better understand how elements of agency linked to WLSIIs can contribute to changing structures marginalizing rural women. To this end, we discussed five assumptions in section 6, that can be tested in further studies, also to fill the gaps left by our paper. In the future, there is a need to compare WLSIIs from diverse contexts by using systematic methods to account for diversity of contexts, aspirations, actors and structures within which WLSIIs operate with the aim to improve the lives of rural women.

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