WOMEN AND THE RURAL WORLD.
THE REASONS PUT FORWARD BY WOMEN AS TO WHY THE POPULATION CONTINUES TO FALL IN MANY PARTS OF ANDALUSIA (SPAIN)

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Abstract: In Europe today, depopulation affects not only rural but also some urban areas, albeit with greatly varying intensity. Andalusia is no exception. After describing its striking territorial differences, this article analyses women's opinions about the causes of depopulation and whether these differ depending on their place of residence or compared to men. For this purpose, we carried out 114 in-depth interviews with people with different socio-professional profiles and from different types of territory, although in this paper we study the 19 interviews with women. Our results show that there were important differences between men and women regarding the most important causes of depopulation, and within the group of women, depending on where they lived. For all the women, lack of work was the most important cause of depopulation, although there were differences in some of the other reasons put forward. These findings could be of interest to the different institutions tackling the depopulation problem.

Keywords: Depopulation, women, rural world, gender inequality, territorial imbalance, Andalusia

Highlights

- Depopulation is affecting both European rural and urban areas with unequal intensity.
- The role of women is crucial in trying to halt depopulation processes.
- The perception of the causes of depopulation shows a gender bias.
- The lack of employment is the main cause of depopulation.
- Values of other causes, such as access to public services, depend on the place of residence.

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- The results are relevant to slow down depopulation.

1. Introduction

Andalusia, which is situated in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula, is the most populated region in Spain with 8,538,376 inhabitants in 2023 (17.8% of the total for Spain) and the second largest in terms of surface area with 87,599 km² (17.3%). These statistics are similar to those of Austria and are important to the extent that 15 of the 27 countries in the European Union have a smaller surface area than Andalusia and 13 have a smaller population. Its large size and its varied physical geography and sociodemographic aspects combine to create a very diverse and complex territory. The large flat plains and the countryside in the Guadalquivir Valley contrast with the Sierra Nevada, home to the highest mountains in the Iberian Peninsula. Similarly, the economic and demographic dynamism of the coastal strip linked to tourism and intensive agriculture is in sharp contrast to the inland and mountain areas, which are increasingly deprived and depopulated. Andalusia also hosts the desert of Tabernas, which is not far from the Sierra de Grazalema, the place with the highest levels of precipitation in Spain. At an administrative level, the Andalusia region is divided into eight provinces, which in turn are made up of a total of 785 municipalities.

One of the challenges facing European society today and in the future is its demographic situation given that in the medium and long term, it must respond to existential processes of enormous magnitude and social significance, which will necessarily require a long time to solve and which day after day affect an increasingly large part of its territory, albeit with varying intensity (Molinero, 2022). Spain is no exception and is currently undergoing demographic changes that are not restricted to rural areas. Although these trends are far from new, social and political awareness of them has been increasing recently and they have now become a matter of state in Spain and in the wider European context (Cejudo & Navarro, 2023). The phenomenon we are referring to is the growing concentration of the population in certain specific areas, while others are experiencing depopulation and a relentless, seemingly unstoppable process of aging. Both processes, together with increasing masculinization as a result of women's "enlightened flight" from rural areas (Camarero & Sampedro, 2008), are hitting the remotest, most mountainous areas particularly hard, sometimes resulting in the abandonment of entire villages and other small communities.

2. Theoretical background

In recent years there has been a progressive consolidation in the rural world of a change of paradigm, which has led to the emergence of new attitudes and values that view rural areas as a space for life (Nogué, 2016) rather than as a place for leisure and having fun (Grandi et al., 2022). These rurality values were strengthened by the Covid-19 crisis (Bertolino, 2022; Cersosimo & Nisticò, 2021), which increased the number of people who decided to move to or visit these areas. However, these trends have proved incapable of stemming the outflow of population, although on occasions they have managed to temporarily plug the gap. This "positive" effect of the pandemic was observed in rural areas of Andalusia (Nieto & Capote, 2022) and of Spain as a whole (González-Leonardo & Spijker, 2022) and also in France (Breuillé et al., 2022). However, it was greater in rural areas that were close to big cities, which had good access to public and private services and facilities and fast internet connections (Nieto et al., 2022) and was much less noticeable in remote deep rural areas (Bellés et al., 2022a).

Within this context, the future of rural areas, in terms of both their territorial development and their demographic recovery, is highly dependent on the role that must be played by two fundamental groups in society: women and young people, whether they be from the local area or not. In response to this "enlightened flight" and the reasons that inspired it, in recent years women have been playing an increasingly important role in the recovery of some rural areas of Spain and Europe, albeit with greater intensity in the more populated towns and villages and in those closest to cities (Baylina, 2020). Significant differences have also been observed in terms of age, lifestyles (Vercher et al., 2019) and business

activities, in which alternatives to farming are gradually gaining ground, in many cases boosted by the EU's Leader approach (Alario and Morales, 2023; Cejudo et al., 2020). Farming is also undergoing change (Alario & Cano, 2020). Young people, in search of job opportunities that match their increasingly higher levels of qualification and training continue leaving rural areas in droves (Recaño, 2020). The processes of flexibilization of the labour market driven by neoliberal economic policies after the crisis of 2008 caused unemployment levels to shoot up and greatly restricted welfare protection (Álvarez-Sousa, 2019), so making it more difficult for young people to leave home and obliging others who had done so to return. This situation was prolonged by Covid-19 (Observatorio de Emancipación del Consejo de la Juventud de España, 2022) and to some extent these returns compensated for the fall in the immigrant population, the first to be affected by the economic crisis (Collantes, et al., 2014).

Both crises have now come to an end although their effects continue to be felt, not only in physical and material terms (economic, social, employment, etc.) but also in psychological and mental health terms, effects which are deeply felt, long-enduring and sometimes even devastating for the people and the families that experience them (Benach, 2023). Another important factor affecting women in particular is that the measurement of these effects does not include the unreported work they perform, among others, the "*intense and essential reproductive work that so many women carry out within the family with no salary or contract*" (Benach, 2023: 3). The difficulty in finding work has led many young women to extend their education/training. This often happens in cities, so enhancing an ongoing tendency of people with links to both rural and urban areas, who live somewhere between the two (González-Leonardo et al., 2022).

Finally, depopulation is a subject about which there is a long, well-established tradition of academic research. This issue has been analysed from an array of perspectives ranging from its causes, effects and territorial differences to others proposing solutions and/or assessing the effectiveness of government action to help resolve it. Nonetheless, far from being a subject that has been exhaustively investigated, it remains very much open for research into particular issues or approaches that must be explored in more detail (Pinilla & Sáez, 2021). Aspects such as the uneven effects of natural population decline (a negative rate of natural increase) and total population decline (including the effects of net migration), which do not always occur simultaneously (Nieto, 2021), or the new complementary methodological contribution made by Olga de Cos (2023) in relation to the spatiotemporal patterns affecting depopulation. The same can be said of its causes, which can vary greatly from one territory to the next, even though their results in terms of demographic growth or decline may be similar (Copus, et al., 2021).

These research studies have tended to emphasize the quantitative aspects of the depopulation process, but our main interest and most important contribution lies in finding out what local citizens think about it. In addition to this qualitative dimension, our study introduces two more dimensions. The first centres on analysing the opinions of one of the most important social groups with regard to "territorial emptying", namely women, and the second involves doing so while taking into account the place in which they live, thereby incorporating a spatial dimension based on a territorial typology that classifies rural municipalities that are gaining or losing population from urban areas, according to its intensity, so breaking away from the overly simplistic dichotomy of a rising population in urban areas and a declining one in the country. In this context, the objectives we are setting ourselves in this research are to find out firstly, what the women we interviewed identify as the causes of the processes of population growth / decline, and their relative importance, in the municipalities of Andalusia in the 21st century. Our second objective was to ascertain whether the reasons put forward by women varied according to the type of municipality in which they lived and thirdly, whether the stories told by women were different from those told by men.

3. Research methods and materials

This study is part of a broader research project into the processes of population growth / decline in Andalusia in the 21st century. Within this framework, it is important to ascertain directly from local people what they believe is driving these changes. To this end, a questionnaire was drawn up, which, after exploratory sampling to check its validity and make the relevant corrections, was used in fieldwork in 20 municipalities in Andalusia in 2021. These municipalities were chosen according to their degree of

population growth/decline according to a cluster analysis carried out previously (Figure 1). The following towns and villages were selected: four municipalities from each of the three types of depopulation; 3 municipalities from the two types of growth and 2 municipalities classified as urban. When making the selection, whenever possible we took into account the existence of previous contacts with members of the research team (Table 1). We then carried out 114 in-depth interviews after establishing six socio-demographic profiles according to their relevance in these processes. Three were demographic: women, young people (between 18 and 30 years old), and over 65; one was based on knowledge of the territory: local experts; and two others on their capacity for direct action: businesspeople and mayors.

In this study we distinguished between rural and other municipalities on the basis of whether they received grants linked to the Leader approach between 2000 and 2015, a period covering the last two programming periods before the statistical work for this research began. We would like to point out that the aim of this work and the research project as a whole is not to establish a typification and territorial characteristics on a municipal basis, as Perpiña et al (2024) have recently done, but simply to group Andalusian municipalities according to their population gains/losses. This is a debatable criterion which, like any other, has pros and cons. The formula adopted has the advantage of using criteria established by the European Union for the award of funding for Leader projects, the most emblematic EU rural development policy, which applies to the vast majority of its territories. However, above all, because of the territorial uniqueness of the so-called agro-cities in Andalusia, where high volumes of population and significant agricultural activities coexist and are essential in their territorial articulation (Sánchez and Ruiz, 2023). This is why the density thresholds established for Spain by Molinero (2019) are not used, and the same is true of the classification into three broad categories – urban, intermediate and rural – based on the density used by the OECD (2010) and the European Union, which are, in our opinion, clearly insufficient and pose major problems territorially speaking in the intermediate category. On the other hand, the work of De Cos & Reques (2019), which establishes nine different categories for Spain according to the level of vulnerability of the territories, is very complex to apply in our case. Something similar occurs with the interesting proposal by Reig, Goerlich and Cantarino (2016) in which, in an attempt to internally differentiate the aforementioned categories, they use land use and time distance to centres of economic activity and services as a reference for municipalities of 50,000 inhabitants (Brezzi et al, 2011). The data used are for the period 2000–2020, although those for 2020 refer to 1st January 2021.
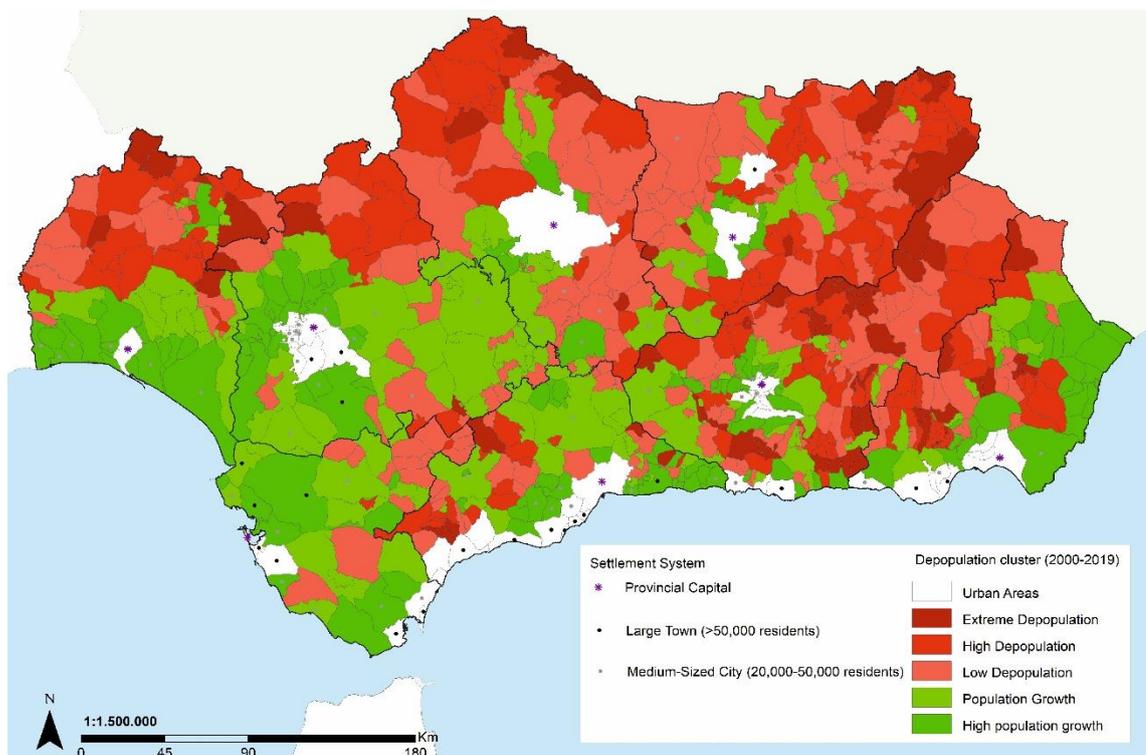

Fig 1. Map of Andalusia highlighting the different types of municipality according to changes in the population 2000–2019. Source: Censuses of Population. Map drawn by the authors

The interviews had an average length of 60 minutes. The sample is exploratory in nature. Respondents were recruited in different ways. Firstly, previous contacts of the researchers, the use of social networks, as well as direct requests to political representatives were used. From there, the snowball technique was used. A convenient procedure with its pros and cons. Among the disadvantages, the possible biases coming from each of the informants when proposing their contacts. However, this disadvantage should not be overlooked and the research should avoid making generalisations about representativeness. Among the pros, as Sierro (2019) points out, this technique 'guarantees a priori a discursive availability for the discipline of conversational interaction. Moreover, the interviewee will show a willingness to cooperate that would normally be lacking if he/she were randomly subjected to the questionnaire's interrogation. This is the starting advantage that the interviewer will be able to exploit later in the interview situation itself. In a way, the qualitative interview design strategy is a network capture game. The grid search will facilitate our approach to the interviewee' (p. 345–346). After contacting the interviewees, they set a date and a time for the interview in a "neutral" location, in most cases a space loaned by the Town Council. The fieldwork was carried out between October 2021 and January 2022. Almost all the interviews were carried out in person and when this was impossible, through Google Meet. They were then transcribed and the results of the Likert tables were statistically analysed with the SPSS software.

This research focuses on the female profile, so we analysed a total of 19 interviews. Eleven of them were conducted in municipalities with a declining population and eight in places where the population was growing (Table 1). With the use of the in-depth interview as a qualitative analysis tool, the aim was not to achieve a sample that meets the criteria of proportionality/statistical representativeness (Taylor and Bogdan, 1990; Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012), which are essential in the survey, as the researchers do not intend to generalise the opinions expressed, in this case, to all Andalusian women. The aim is to delve into the discourses of a sample of women spread across 19 Andalusian municipalities chosen according to their quantitative population loss/gain. The number of interviews conducted was determined when it was considered that the saturation point had been reached (Saunders, et al, 2018).

Tab 1. Identification of the interviews. Source: Cejudo & Navarro, 2023. Drawn up by the authors

Territorial clusters	Municipality	Province	Identification of the interviewee
Extreme depopulation	Alboloduy	Almería	Interview 1
	Belmez	Córdoba	Interview 2
	Castilléjar	Granada	Interview 3
	Encinasola	Huelva	Interview 4
High depopulation	Cambil	Jaén	Interview 5
	Cañaveral de León	Huelva	Interview 6
	Serón	Almería	Interview 7
Slight depopulation	Doña Mencía	Córdoba	Interview 8
	El Rubio	Sevilla	Interview 9
	Quesada	Jaén	Interview 10
	Prado del Rey	Cádiz	Interview 11
Increase in population	Fuente Vaqueros	Granada	Interview 12
	Rota	Cádiz	Interview 13
	Villanueva del Rosario	Málaga	Interview 14
High increase in population	Burguillos	Sevilla	Interview 15
	Cártama	Málaga	Interview 16
	Lucena	Córdoba	Interview 17
Urban	Atarfe	Granada	Interview 18
	Dos Hermanas	Sevilla	Interview 19

The average age of the women interviewed was 43, with ages ranging between 25 and 55. Many of them had university degrees, although in the municipalities with declining population we also found women with lower levels of education. In general, they had been living in their municipalities "all their lives", although we also found various cases of women who had returned to their hometowns and others who had no previous links with the town in which they now lived. They were mainly salaried workers from the service sector and there was also a retired woman and an unemployed woman. Most were married or lived with a partner and had children to care for. Single women or married women without children were the exception as were widows and divorced women.

The aim was to ascertain their opinions regarding the current situation of the municipality in which they lived, in relation with three basic questions: the possible causes of depopulation and the importance of each one; the shortcomings or not in public and private facilities, services and infrastructures; and about what they would need for them to stay in their municipality or for them to move to a municipality suffering from depopulation. The results presented here are above all the product of a qualitative analysis of the stories told by the women interviewed regarding the causes of the demographic growth/ decline of rural municipalities in Andalusia in the 21st century, and the relevance of each cause. The other questions they were asked enabled the interviewees to "explain themselves", to extend and develop their explanations of the causes and their relevance. To go beyond mere narrative description, we differentiated between the opinions provided according to the municipality of residence, establishing at the outset two main categories: those that are losing population and those that are gaining. The in-depth analysis of their accounts enabled us, firstly, to identify the main categories/dimensions to which the women refer. In the second stage, we then compared, contextualized and specified the final ultimate reason they gave in their accounts.

4. Results

The accounts provided by the interviewees enabled us to establish four large categories in which to group the reasons put forward for rural depopulation. The first category was related to economic aspects. The second was more territorial and was linked to shortcomings in basic infrastructure and services and access to them. The third was linked to the social and psychological need to "enjoy oneself" when not working. And the fourth was associated with gender roles in relation to work inside and outside the home, and caring for and looking after the family.

4.1 The economic dimension: work and housing

There are two aspects most commonly associated with the economic dimension.

4.1.1 Lack of work as the ultimate driver of depopulation

Regardless of the municipality in which they live, the women cite either the lack of work or the quality of the jobs on offer as the essential reason causing people to leave their place of residence. Most go to other more dynamic municipalities or cities in search of a job or of a better job. This is why many of their comments focus on the decisions facing young people and are directly linked with two fundamental issues. On the one hand, the very limited diversification of the economy in much of rural Andalusia, which in one way or another remains heavily dependent on the farming sector, and the weak business fabric in these areas. There is also the fact that many of the jobs on offer are unsuitable for young people with increasingly high levels of academic qualification and training.

"Now, because there are no employment opportunities, because there is no industry" (Interview 2).

"There are no companies, there is no industry (…) They don't make it easy for industries to come and set up here" (Interview 6).

"Today people leave for money reasons, and if you don't have money, you go to the nearest place where you can find work" (Interview 14).

4.1.2 Housing as an asset against depopulation

Housing is an important issue in the accounts offered by the women we interviewed to help us understand the abandonment of the countryside. All the women agreed that in rural areas, it is cheaper to buy or rent a house, and that the houses are larger and closer to nature. This was a key aspect during the Covid-19 lockdown in response to the harsh restrictions imposed on the urban population in particular. These are the main common themes in the various explanations offered by the interviewees. However, differences between them appear when it comes to appraising the importance of housing as a vector for depopulation.

For the women who live in areas in which the population is rising, housing is only of minimum importance, whereas for those who live in areas with declining population, it is a significant issue. These women offer quite similar narratives, putting the emphasis on the problems involved in purchasing or renting a house. Firstly, they describe the "*low level of supply*" and complain that those which are on offer are in poor condition; in other words, they require new tenants to incur additional costs by having to refurbish the house, and even more when a complete overhaul is required. They also describe some of the historic quarters of these towns as "*totally uninhabitable*" with "*unwelcoming, deserted streets*" where no one lives. The houses are all closed up and the heirs of the previous dwellers no longer look after them, so cutting their social and emotional ties with the village. As they see it, "*the heirs close the village*".

"There are houses which have been abandoned, the families don't live there anymore. They don't feel any ties of any kind" (Interview 6).

Secondly, their narratives highlight the low level of demand for housing, especially amongst young people. Many of them go through an initial itinerant stage living part in the country and part in the city, while they are studying and/or starting out on their working lives, often while still living in the family home. This temporary situation, halfway between two different places, means that they do not buy a house in their hometowns and villages because they do not really live there. When they find work and somewhere to live outside their home areas, buying a second home in the village is impossible due to the precarious employment and financial situation in which they find themselves, in which a huge effort is required to buy or rent the house in which they normally live. Similarly, for young people who decide to stay in their municipalities, mainly because they work there or nearby, the problems involved in renting a house that is directly fit to live in often lead them to settle in neighbouring towns.

"There have been cases of schoolteachers who were posted to work in this area and they have stayed because it suited them better and at the weekends, they would go and visit their hometowns and that's all" (Interview 5).

4.2 Territorial isolation: availability of and access to basic services and infrastructures.

After the problems finding work, the next most important issues they mention are the shortcomings in basic services, infrastructures and facilities. These take the form of problems accessing these services, which cause the women we interviewed to feel "*alone*", "*isolated*" and "*second-class citizens*" compared to city dwellers. However, in this section, important differences can be observed between the women who live in areas in which the population is falling and those who live in urban areas or areas with demographic growth.

4.2.1 On essential services: health and education

There is a general consensus that health services are more limited in places with declining population compared to those where it is on the rise. They do not have 24-hour emergency services, doctors have fewer visiting hours, the paediatrician only sees patients on certain days, etc. We heard similar stories about educational services, where they felt particularly buffeted by cutbacks in year-groups (e.g., children of different ages being grouped together in the same class), teachers, classrooms, budgets, materials etc. They view this situation as "unsustainable" in the medium and long-term. Rural schools are eventually

forced to close as educational facilities are centralized in the capitals of the sub-regions or in larger municipalities.

"There are fewer and fewer children in the schools, the day will come when the school ends up closing (…) This is what they do. They make them do first and second year [of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO)] outside the town" (Interview 4).

However, in spite of this consensus as regards the shortcomings in the provision of health and educational services, there is disagreement when it comes to assessing the quality and the attention they provide.

We found on the one hand that women from municipalities with declining population stressed that the quality and the attention that their children receive at school are much better than that offered in cities or other larger municipalities. The result is that their children receive more personalized attention from the teachers, something that would be impossible if there were lots of children in each class. This enables teaching staff to attend to their pupils according to their individual needs. The same story applies to health care: personalized care and more time per patient, aspects that they mention again and again.

"The situation with the doctor here is bad … but if you look around now, we are in a situation that they are worse off in Madrid than we are when it comes to doctors, In terms of schools, well yes we have just lost a unit at the school, but my nephews and nieces in the cities don't have the same quality of education that we have, that my children have" (Interview 6).

By contrast, the women who live in areas in which the population is rising have a different outlook. They do not have such a positive view of these issues for two fundamental reasons: they have more services to choose between and more specialized services on offer. This means that they have much better access to all of them.

Another important aspect is the availability of certain more specialized services which are not provided at a municipal level such as regional hospitals, 24-hour emergency services, high schools with a sixth form, vocational training centres, old people's homes, etc. According to the group of women interviewed, access to services of this kind is another important reason behind the emptying of the village. When they are not available locally, access to these services is not only limited by the time required to reach them but also by the individual situation of the person concerned. If the person is independent, and can get around by themselves with their own car, having to travel some distance to see a doctor or attend a class is not necessarily a limiting factor, it is however if they do not own their own vehicles and depend on relatives or on public transport with problems of connectivity, frequency and timetables. This penalizes the elderly population in particular and is made worse day after day with the reduction of services of this kind in these areas.

"Before, the elderly people stayed here longer and now the elderly people tend to leave because … before there was a bus service, you had more options… and now, of course, they have to go further… they go to Aracena, they have to go to Huelva, to Seville… and the elderly people, well, yes, they … they spend their last years outside the village, unfortunately" (Interview 6).

4.2.2 About private services

The opinions put forward by the interviewees vary considerably according to the particular service in question.

Indeed, there is a degree of consensus between them all that there has been a substantial reduction in local shops, especially in terms of the diversity of products on offer; in which the range of shops has been reduced basically to food and small shops where you can find "a little bit of everything". They complain that for years, they have had to travel to cover their basic necessities, as the variety of products offered in large supermarkets and shopping centres is not available in their towns and villages. The attempts to maintain local retail have so far been in vain.

"The retailers association used scratch cards to encourage people to buy and they gave you bags or some sort of symbolic gift. Later, perhaps you won 20-euro tokens which you could exchange in businesses in

the village. They applied various retail sales techniques that encouraged people a lot. I miss that, you know? It was very simple, or they gave you a stamp and you filled in a card and you entered a raffle" (Interview 7).

This was combined with an unstoppable upsurge in internet shopping in rural municipalities especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, an observation shared by all the women. This has extended, or universalized, the use of a service, which regardless of the degree of rurality enables people to make orders immediately, in online shops with an enormous variety of products and at lower prices.

*"This is the village that receives most packages in the entire area" (*Interview 10).

Another basic private service about which a general consensus exists is the continuous, incessant cutbacks in banking services with the closure of branches and even of cash machines. They emphasize how important these services are, not only for business people but also in the day-to-day lives of the local population and in particular of elderly people in the areas where population is falling, so converting them into real financial deserts.

"(…) *they even took away the Savings Bank. That did immense damage because now if they want to draw their pension, elderly people have to pay for a taxi,"* (Interview 6).

4.2.3 Infrastructure defects: Digital illiteracy and isolation

Most of the women from the municipalities in which the population is falling do not consider internet access as an important reason for people to abandon the area. This is because most of these municipalities, and even their outlying hamlets, have had an optic fibre network for some years now and they can connect to the Internet quite satisfactorily. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this enabled many people to return or to move to these municipalities where they could work or study seamlessly from home. However, some of those interviewed describe the situation differently. Firstly, there were some who said that services of this kind were not available in their area and that they considered this a basic reason for people deciding to leave due to the limitations it imposed when it came to starting a business, working or studying. There was also a second group who although they had an internet connection, claimed it did not have the necessary quality to enable them to work from home, hold video meetings, etc. In other words, they did not have ultrafast (over 100 Mb/s) broadband lines, which is what the European Union have been financing.

"Yes, we are connected. I mean it would be wrong for me to say there was no connection, but there's no fibre. So, we have a connection but with the limitations of finding a suitable place … because for video meetings during the pandemic, it was a real sweat for me (…) and I live in the village. What happens if you live in the caves and you have no connection or no aerial or you can't afford to buy yourself the minimum gear" (Interview 3).

By contrast, the women in the municipalities or towns in which the population is increasing regard poor or no access to Internet as a very important problem and a clear reason for depopulation. In their accounts, there is an underlying stereotype vision of the rural areas in which the population is falling, as desolate backwaters, devoid of life, with an ancient aging population, with no young people, etc. However, in most cases, this stereotype has little to do with the real situation in Andalusia today and perhaps matches other rural areas of Spain better. The women interviewed automatically assume that poor or no internet connections would drive people out of rural areas.

"I thought that all the villages had internet (…). If there is no internet or the connections are poor, I would of course think that this was a very important reason for leaving" (Interview 19). In addition, and perhaps because these women do not have problems accessing ultrafast broadband, they tend to cite the importance today of the digital divide or digital illiteracy as a reason why people are leaving rural areas. Indeed, access to these services, which are increasingly permeating more and more aspects of our daily lives through the digitalization of our homes, of government, health, education, banking, etc. divides and discriminates not only against particular territories, but also against certain groups in society, above

all on the basis of their date of birth. This problem is particularly serious in rural areas due to the aging of the population.

4.3 The social need to be able to enjoy our free time

Both groups of women have a similar view about the lack of leisure alternatives, although this was more important for those who live in municipalities, which are losing population than for those in which it is rising. They all agree that this problem is worse for young people.

The first group made it clear that in their young days, they had more leisure options in that there were more discotheques, night clubs and night-time leisure venues. A particularly common theme is that the importance of this question depends on one's age. Most of the interviewees were adult women and mothers, who stated that their young children had a range of different leisure alternatives, organized either by the Local Council or by private companies. As a grown-up, adult women who are financially independent of their parents, they can get in their cars or take a bus to access these services and therefore do not see this issue as an important reason for leaving their village. They say that the same applies to the elderly, for whom the Local Council also offers various activities. Getting together on an informal, everyday basis in public spaces or bars also fulfils this function.

"Well, I'm of a certain age now, so that if you're asking me, well the answer is no. If I want to go to the cinema, I can make the journey. If I want to go to a shopping centre, I go. I don't think it's a problem for small kids either, because there are plenty of activities for them" (Interview 8).

In these rural areas, leisure options are most limited for teenagers and young adults. Sometimes socializing is limited by the fact that they are so few in number. It is difficult to form stable groups of friends, a process that becomes virtualized on social networks. Another problem is that the type of leisure on offer in their towns is closely related with nightlife and alcohol and they are often obliged to drive quite long distances to cover these and other needs.

"*But if you're talking about a small group of young kids of 15 to 20 something years old, well I can tell you that there is no disco, just a music bar, and there are no other alternatives … so of course it's not a problem for me, but perhaps it is for young people*" (Interview 8).

The second group of women only believe this issue could be of some importance for young people, viewing it as practically irrelevant for adults and older people.

4.4 The gender dimension: social control and gender rules

One particularly interesting issue is gender. For the group of women as a whole, gender roles are of little or no importance in the abandonment of rural areas. Although they say that some people still have a more traditional mentality, they believe that society has advanced a great deal on this question.

This overall vision contrasts quite sharply with the views expressed by women in areas that are suffering severe depopulation, for whom gender issues are a very important cause. They base this claim on the higher proportion of the population with an old-fashioned mindset, especially in terms of their social and emotional relations with women and within the work environment. They also made it clear that it is difficult for women in these areas to find a job as within the traditional roles assigned to them, they are "excluded" from certain types of farm work which are heavily masculinized. This reduces the job options available to women to caring for people, working in shops or working in the relatively small public sector in the area.

"A lot depends on the circles you move in and there are some circles in the village in which the roles are not quite so clearly marked (…) Here… How does that affect us? Well, there's a very high unemployment rate amongst women (…) The labour market is complicated in this area, but for women it is much more complicated, much more" (Interview 2).

By contrast, those who live in areas where the population is rising said that although these issues existed, they did not believe that they were sufficient reason to make people leave rural areas.

"I don't think this is a reason for people to leave … because you say… to never come back (…). Look, it's one thing to say it might affect you, that you don't like it, but it's not so bad as to make you leave the village" (Interview 17).

Another aspect directly related with this dimension is the possible existence of social control, of a lack of privacy, which can drive people to leave. The various stories told by the interviewees show that they do not regard this issue as important. Additionally, new residents from urban areas state that their perception of this question has changed. They ended up viewing what they initially considered to be "*an unpleasant sensation and situation*" as "*positive*" to the extent that it helped them to get to know their neighbours, to establish links with them and as a result increase their social relations in the neighbourhood.

"As time has gone by, I've learnt to appreciate it. At first, I found it quite overwhelming, but now I see it as a positive" (Interview 2).

This same idea that "*neighbourly relations*" are a form of social control can also be found in the women who have always lived in these areas.

"It has pros and cons because feeling less free also involves forming a bond and personal relations that can also be very enriching (…) Those cool summer nights (when neighbours would gather together in the street after dark to chat and enjoy the cool air) *which went on until one or two in the morning … that… it is true that you might feel quite tense, but if you look back, when life allows you to do so, you can see that no, it was not social control. No, it was a form of interpersonal relations that resulted in stronger bonds between the neighbours"* (Interview 3).

Two more questions on this issue. Firstly, the residents of municipalities that were losing population and of those where the population was rising, both rural and urban, said that social control should not be seen as "inherent" to rural life in that it also occurs in cities, albeit with less intensity due to the isolation from one's neighbours imposed by city life. Secondly, the women who lived in areas hit by emigration emphasized in their accounts the comparison between past and present. When they were young, they had less freedom, they were more constrained by the social pressure of "*What will people say?*", which meant that they lived under much greater tension. Nowadays, however, they stressed that what other people might say about them does not bother them so much and they accept the fact that anything that happens to someone in the village will be "*commented on*" because everyone knows each other.

5. Discussion

5.1 The economic dimension

The women's accounts coincide with the overall opinion of the entire group of interviewees. The possibility of having or finding a proper job is the most important cause of depopulation for 92.8% of the 114 people interviewed and for 97.5% of the women (Cejudo et al., 2023a). In this sense, we should note that the interviewees' accounts consider that the labor market is the formula that allows them to undertake, alone or as a couple, a life project independent of their parents. For this reason, in their stories they tell us that they do not find the possibilities of becoming independent either in their municipality or in their immediate environment since, if there were, they would not leave their place of residence. They are aware, therefore, of the need for mobility to be able to access it beyond the place where they live (Table 2). This reveals a "new version" of the rural poverty that triggered the massive rural exodus of the 1960s (Recaño, 2023), when according to the results of the first socioeconomic survey conducted in Andalucia in February 1967, 77.3% of the population felt that "a stroke of luck" was the only way out of their dire situation and that other options such as "tenacious hard work" were doomed to fail (Ayuso & García, 2023).

There are two different aspects that must be considered here. Firstly, that relating to the labor market which, historically but now with greater intensity, acquires a supralocal scale, in line with the mobility of the population linked to it. Indeed, on the one hand, accessibility and mobility, specifically automobility (Urry, 2004), is key to understanding the rural/urban relationship in labor, cultural, social, economic

terms... (Vitale, 2022), and which is transforming both the rural societies that are being built and the urban ones into more porous ones (Camarero Rioja, 2024). On the other hand, this way of getting around, given the weakness of public transport in rural areas, deepens territorial inequalities as well as those of the most vulnerable groups living there: the disabled and the elderly, young people in training or unemployed, migrants without resources... (Binder and Matern, 2020).

Tab 2. Assessment of the causes of depopulation, female profile % (114 interviews). Source: Drawn up by the authors

Type of municipality	Gender	Irrelevant	Low relevance	High relevance	Fundamental	Total
Little work						
Loses population	Female			10.0	90.0	100.0
	Total	2.9	4.3	21.4	71.4	100.0
Gains population	Female			25.0	75.0	100.0
	Total		4.7	27.9	67.4	100.0
Few public services						
Loses population	Female	27.3	27.3	9.1	36.4	100.0
	Total	34.3	5.7	11.4	18.6	100.0
Gains population	Female		25.0	37.5	37.5	100.0
	Total	4.7	16.3	32.6	46.5	100.0
Accessibility to educational, health, commercial centres...						
Loses population	Female	18.2	36.4		45.5	100.0
	Total	27.1	32.9	20.0	20.0	100.0
Gains population	Female		12.5	50.0	37.5	100.0
	Total	4.7	16.3	44.2	34.9	100.0
Deterioration of housing						
Loses population	Female	30.0	40.0	10.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	45.6	26.5	13.2	14.7	100.0
Gains population	Female	25.0	50.0		25.0	100.0
	Total	28.6	42.9	21.4	7.1	100.0
Lack of leisure alternatives						
Loses population	Female	36.4	27.3	9.1	27.3	100.0
	Total	24.6	33.3	18.8	23.2	100.0
Gains population	Female	25.0	25.0	12.5	37.5	100.0
	Total	7.0	25.6	41.9	25.6	100.0
Social control and lack of privacy						
Loses population	Female	50.0	20.0	30.0		100.0
	Total	49.3	28.4	19.4	3.0	100.0
Gains population	Female	62.5	25.0		12.5	100.0
	Total	31.7	39.0	14.6	14.6	100.0
Strong traditional gender roles						
Loses population	Female	50.0	10.0	30.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	52.2	29.0	15.9	2.9	100.0
Gains population	Female	37.5	12.5	37.5	12.5	100.0
	Total	26.2	31.0	35.7	7.1	100.0
Lack of/poor internet connection						
Loses population	Female	90.9		9.1		100.0
	Total	70.1	17.9	4.5	7.5	100.0
Gains population	Female	12.5	25.0	37.5	25.0	100.0
	Total	18.6	23.3	27.9	30.2	100.0

On the other hand, it would be wrong to believe that, given the declining significance of agricultural employment, that rural and/or nature tourism can become engines for development in a new "monoculture" for all these areas (Somoza & Somoza, 2023). This idea gathered new force during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dot Jutgla et al., 2022; Zaar, 2022), although the results must be quantified and analysed in the short and medium term. We also know that while rural tourism businesses with funding from Leader have been consolidated in some areas (Navarro et al., 2018), there are others in which 50% of these businesses closed shortly after opening (Engelmo et al., 2021); highlighting that schemes of this kind can have destructive rather than multiplying effects (Canovés et al, 2017). This should not cause us to underestimate its positive effects for the population and for the dynamization of the local economy (Serano & Hernández, 2023), providing that it is managed in a way that adapts to the specific socioeconomic situation of the area (Martínez et al., 2023; Díaz-Soria et al., 2023). In addition, remote working, in which many unfounded hopes had been placed, is far from becoming an alternative for the areas undergoing depopulation. Firstly, because this way of working is not an option in the vast majority of jobs. Secondly, because in those jobs in which it is possible, many public and private companies remain unsure as to whether to maintain or introduce it now that the pandemic has come to an end.

Finally, because its introduction is highly dependent on the availability of ultrafast networks, so penalizing the most inland and most peripheral areas compared to the more dynamic areas closer to cities (Bellés et al., 2022b) (Table 2). Another issue is that the type of work that young people are looking for to be able to continue living in their home areas is one that matches their increasing level of education and training, and one in which women no longer suffer the effects of gender inequality (Shucksmith, 2004; Camarero & Sampedro, 2019; Alario & Morales, 2023) (Table 3).

Apart from the lack of work, the fact that people already owned or could buy second homes (González-Leonardo & Spijker, 2022) played a fundamental role during the pandemic in the arrival of new settlers and in the return of those who "never quite emigrated completely" (Gracia, Gil-Albarova & Gracia, 2021). This is reflected in the importance that the interviewees placed on this factor in the processes of rural depopulation, to the point of considering it a powerful asset to prevent it (Hernández-Ramírez et al., 2022). However, this phenomenon is strongly affected by the age, family and employment situation, nationality and above all economic situation of the groups involved (González-Leonardo et al., 2022). It is no surprise that the decision to move house in search of a new lifestyle, a trend that is currently on the rise in Spain, is restricted to certain quite privileged groups (Yrigoy et al., 2023). The image that city dwellers receive of country areas is of villages that are full of "closed" or "available" houses, which makes them think that access to such properties is "easy" and that they are "cheaper". This explains why the women we interviewed who live in these houses do not consider this variable important. They overlook both the state of many such houses, which require large investments to make them habitable, and their availability for sale in that many of them are now in the hands of descendants of the original owners who have few ties with the village.

5.2 The territorial dimension

The shortcomings in public facilities and services have been and remain a fundamental aspect in the decision to leave or move to rural areas (Collantes & Pinilla, 2023). The constant cutbacks in these services as the population has fallen, the state of the roads and the limited availability of fast communication routes, the often sprawling, scattered distribution of housing and the increasingly aged population, among other issues, cause difficulties in terms of accessibility (Delgado, 2019) and inefficiency in the provision of these services (Nieto, 2021). Geographical isolation, which was one of the basic factors triggering the rural exodus in the mid-20th century (Recaño, 2023), is once again coming to the fore. In the province of Granada, for example, this argument is supported by the fact that the towns, villages and other settlements located more than 30 minutes from a public hospital are suffering severe losses in population, while those situated less than 15 minutes away are enjoying important gains, and those situated between 15 and 30 minutes away are in the transitional group between winner and loser areas (Cejudo et al., 2023b) (Table 2). Similar findings regarding public services were made in the neighbouring region of Castilla-La Mancha (Ruiz & Martínez, 2022) or regarding the lack of basic private services such as banking with the closure of branches and cash machines, together with the digital illiteracy of a declining, increasingly aged population, which condemns local people to financial exclusion (Alonso & López, 2021). Within this context, medium-sized towns and sub-regional capitals, which offer access to basic services and infrastructures for the population, play a crucial role in both the articulation of the territory and social cohesion (Ríos et al., 2023), and are an essential requirement in any decision by city-dwellers to move to the country (Bellés et al., 2022a).

Although the fact that there are fewer services is not regarded as such a severe problem as the lack of work, 48.7% of all those interviewed considered it to be important or fundamental. However, these values range between 70 and 87.5% in urban areas and in rural areas with increasing population, while in those in which it was declining it was between 26 and 37.5%. These differences were even more noticeable when it came to accessibility. This issue was considered important or fundamental for almost 100% of town-dwellers and people from the most dynamic rural areas, while for those from the areas where it was falling most sharply, the values ranged between 26 and 45.8%. There are therefore contrasting viewpoints between those who do not live in areas with declining population, who believe that the availability and accessibility of basic services is an essential reason behind depopulation, as compared to those who live in such areas for whom it is relatively unimportant. It would seem that the great improvements achieved

in these areas since the interviewees were young remain engraved in their memories. They also seem to have got used to the current, far-from-perfect services, so blurring their current vision of this question, something that does not affect those who have not lived in these areas.

This duality in relation to the significance of accessibility to public and private services and depopulation expressed by the interviewees is in line with the existing data in terms of the distance to be traveled or the travel time required to access them. The existing studies, on the one hand, show that the vast majority of the Andalusian, Spanish and European population has good or very good accessibility to them, since most of them live mainly in urban and periurban areas. But, on the other hand, they also show that rural areas, especially the most inland and remote ones, present deficient levels of accessibility to them, which are progressively worsening. They coincide with the least dynamic territories and with constant and increasing population losses (European Union, 2024; Cejudo et al., 2023; Vitale et al., 2022; Goerlich, 2021; Alloza et al., 2021; OECD, 2020; Kompil et al., 2019; Rodríguez, 2014).

5.3 The social and psychological dimension of leisure and the quality of life

The women we interviewed claimed that the quality of life in rural areas is better than in the cities or large municipalities due to the housing conditions, their proximity to and contact with nature, the lower levels of stress, and the mutual support mechanisms between neighbours, which provide a safety net for the most vulnerable groups in society (Belanche et al., 2021). These advantages bring them closer to what Pérez Yruela (2014) defined as a "*good life*" or "*knowing how to live*". They also claim that citizens participate more actively in local institutions, where young people and women are prepared to step up and play their part, so enabling a new form of territorial governance to be constructed (Baylina & Rodó-Zárate, 2020) on the basis of collectively shared dimensions (territories, relations, times through which they have lived). In this way, they achieve what Jørgensen, Fallov & Nielsen (2021) define as "*governance efficacy*", a phenomenon that helps explain why in these remote peripheral areas the social challenges can be managed in spite of the demographic decline (Table 2).

In this context, as happened with the question of public services, there are two contrasting views regarding its significance for rural depopulation in a context in which for almost 70% of those interviewed this question is only slightly or not at all important. Having said that, it is worth emphasizing that this factor is more important for the residents of municipalities in which the population is falling than for those in which it is rising. In any case, they all highlight the fact that the most affected group in this case are young people, an opinion that is ratified by 68.9% of all those interviewed between 18 and 34 years old, who regard it as crucial or very important, while the figures are quite the opposite in the over-55s and reach 56.3% in the 35–54 age group. Against this backdrop, many young people construct their social identity via the use and abuse of alcohol, and their lives acquire significance through social networks. Within the patterns that govern our globalized society, traditional gender roles and strong social control seem to be gaining influence (Pavón-Benítez et al., 2021).

Those in areas affected by depopulation therefore have different views regarding their perception of what and how country dwellers wish to spend their free time compared to those in areas where the population is increasing. The "idyllic" vision of a rural world blessed by peace and quiet, where one can rest and enjoy nature (Cloke, 2006) to which city dwellers respond and in which rural inhabitants of a certain age take refuge, clashes with the way of life, activities and services demanded by young people in these areas and currently not available to them. This idyllic outlook on rural life was also criticized by researchers who highlighted its socioeconomic and environmental problems (Halfacree, 2007), and from feminist positions (Baylina & Berg, 2010) suggesting that it was marred by discrimination and even domestic violence against women within rural society (Wendt, 2009; Little, 2015; 2017). It is also important not to underestimate the sense of inferiority and alienation that young people in rural areas feel compared to their urban counterparts (Llorent-Bedmar et al., 2021).

5.4 The gender dimension

On this question, two quite different aspects should be highlighted. Firstly, the importance that the interviewees gave to what we refer to as social control and a lack of privacy (Table 3). Secondly, the different opinions offered by men and women on certain key aspects, a sign of quite clearly defined gender roles based on different perspectives and life projects especially for young women in both Andalusia and across Europe (ESPON, 2017; Wiest, 2016).

In the first aspect, as happened with services, their outlook is affected by the memory of worse times in the past compared to which their lives today are not so closely controlled. In addition, and this is also significant, "knowing about" other people is becoming part of relations between neighbours, of relations of mutual support, and in this way it takes on a positive dimension, especially for new country-dwellers (Baylina et al., 2016). This leads to an increase in face-to-face personal relations in a context in which virtual relationships through social networks are progressively extending their influence amongst the general population and in particular amongst the younger generations.

Secondly, if we look at the entire group of 114 interviewees and we analyse the results according to sex, significant differences can be observed in the results for the different causes (Table 3). For example, 82.5% of women considered employment opportunities to be a fundamental reason for depopulation, as compared to just 56.7% of men, a difference of almost 25 percentage points, a figure that was very similar in the areas where the population was rising or falling. The lack of services is also considered more important by women than by men (50.8% compared to 45.8%), a figure that reaches as high as 80% in the case of women who live in urban areas or in rural areas with increasing population. These differences are even more notable when we look at accessibility, which is an important or fundamental aspect for 60% of women and 49.7% of men; and 84% in the case of women from towns or rural areas with increasing population. Finally, as regards social control and the lack of privacy, the figures are 17.2% for men and 26.3% for women respectively. Once again, the differences are more pronounced in the municipalities in which population is rising where just 11.8% of men considered this an important issue compared to 41.7% of women. In other factors, such as leisure options, housing or internet access, the differences between the sexes are less obvious, although in terms of internet access, there were significant differences in the areas in which population is increasing but not in those in which it is falling.

Tab 3. Assessment of causes of depopulation by gender % (114 interviews). Source: Drawn up by the authors

Type of municipality	Gender	Irrelevant	Low relevance	High relevance	Fundamental	Total
Little work						
Loses population	Male	3.3	10	30	56.7	100
	Female	2.5		15	82.5	100
	Total	2.9	4.3	21.4	71.4	100
Gains population	Male		11.1	33.3	55.6	100
	Female			24	76	100
	Total		4.7	27.9	67.4	100
Few public services						
Loses population	Male	33.3	46.7	6.7	13.3	100
	Female	35	27.5	15	22.5	100
	Total	34.3	35.7	11.4	18.6	100
Gains population	Male	5.6	5.6	44.4	44.4	100
	Female	4	24	24	48	100
	Total	4.7	16.3	32.6	46.5	100
Accessibility to educational, health, commercial centres...						
Loses population	Male	26.7	40	16.7	16.7	100
	Female	27.5	27.5	22.5	22.5	100
	Total	27.1	32.9	20	20	100
Gains population	Male	11.1	16.7	44.4	27.8	100
	Female		16	44	40	100
	Total	4.7	16.3	44.2	34.9	100
Deterioration of housing						
Loses population	Male	43.3	30	13.3	13.3	100
	Female	47.4	23.7	13.2	15.8	100
	Total	45.6	26.5	13.2	14.7	100
Gains population	Male	38.9	38.9	16.7	5.6	100
	Female	20.8	45.8	25	8.3	100
	Total	28.6	42.9	21.4	7.1	100

Lack of leisure alternatives						
Loses population	Male	20	33.3	26.7	20	100
	Female	28.2	33.3	12.8	25.6	100
	Total	24.6	33.3	18.8	23.2	100
Gains population	Male	5.6	27.8	50	16.7	100
	Female	8	24	36	32	100
	Total	7	25.6	41.9	25.6	100
Social control and lack of privacy						
Loses population	Male	44.8	37.9	13.8	3.4	100
	Female	52.6	21.1	23.7	2.6	100
	Total	49.3	28.4	19.4	3	100
Gains population	Male	41.2	47.1	11.8		100
	Female	25	33.3	16.7	25	100
	Total	31.7	39	14.6	14.6	100
Strong traditional gender roles						
Loses population	Male	60	30	10		100
	Female	46.2	28.2	20.5	5.1	100
	Total	52.2	29	15.9	2.9	100
Gains population	Male	23.5	35.3	41.2		100
	Female	28	28	32	12	100
	Total	26.2	31	35.7	7.1	100
Lack of/poor internet connection						
Loses population	Male	64.3	25		10.7	100
	Female	74.4	12.8	7.7	5.1	100
	Total	70.1	17.9	4.5	7.5	100
Gains population	Male	16.7	33.3	22.2	27.8	100
	Female	20	16	32	32	100
	Total	18.6	23.3	27.9	30.2	100

The quantification using a Likert scale clearly shows, bearing in mind the number of cases analysed, that on the one hand and within a globally shared vision about the importance of the different reasons that cause people to leave rural areas, there are very significant differences between men and women in line with the different gender roles that continue to exist in the rural world, in which women are primarily assigned the role of carers for dependent people and as housewives in an increasingly aged rural society (Camarero & Sampedro, 2016). In addition, the narratives in which each woman expressed her opinions vary according to the area in which they live. Women tend to express themselves much more forcefully than men on aspects such as the shortcomings in terms of access to services and infrastructure or in relation to social control and privacy. This is probably because, due to the social role assigned to them, it is women who mostly use these services and mostly suffer social control.

6. Conclusions

Many factors come into play in the depopulation problem that certain rural areas are suffering, in our case in Andalucia. This means that the formulas for dealing with them are necessarily complex and require constant, prolonged interaction between all the public and private institutions and the different tiers of administration, together with the active involvement and participation of local citizens and associations. The results are often not immediate.

Recognizing the complexity of rural issues and the necessary interconnections between collectives and territories is essential for an overall understanding of these processes to the extent that, although the causes may be the same, their explanation and the proposals for tackling them within an increasingly globalized world must be framed within the local context in which they appear and for which they are applied.

In this sense, the particular perceptions of the different groups within the society of these issues are determining factors that must be taken into account to the extent that they are the product of both the personal and social circumstances of each individual and of the socio-territorial context in which they live. This can be observed for example in the different accounts provided by men and women who live in the same area or within the group of women according to their place of residence regarding the respective importance of the reasons explaining the decision to leave or to settle in country areas. So much so that

they often express opposing views, they "do not know each other", almost as if they were talking about two almost "parallel" realities.

Consequently, the initiatives of public administrations seeking to mitigate depopulation processes must be implemented through a multi-scale and participatory approach. This approach should be based on multi-level governance, address a range of issues across different levels, and combine short-term urgency with medium- and long-term considerations. In this context, it is crucial to gain an understanding of the diversity of the territories affected, as well as the similarities and differences between their inhabitants in terms of the underlying causes and potential solutions. This knowledge is essential for the effective design of appropriate actions.

Finally, as it happened in the rural exodus of the mid-20th century, the urgent need to survive is once again the main cause driving people to leave rural areas today. The lack of basic services and infrastructure or poor access to them and the persistent gender roles that continue burdening women with the responsibility for homemaking and caring for the most vulnerable people within society, also play their part in these decisions.

Acknowledgements

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