




## The importance of women in 21<sup>st</sup> century rural Spain: Challenges and opportunities

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### ABSTRACT

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The recent wave of urbanization has resulted in a significant increase in the number of people living in urban areas, surpassing those in rural areas. This concentration of people in cities promotes resource efficiency and economic growth. In Spain, 85% of the population live in urban (and peri-urban) areas, compared to 15% in rural areas. In recent times, the expression “*España Vacía*” or “Empty Spain” has become popular to describe the depopulation problem in rural parts of the country. The objective of this qualitative study was to measure and analyze the opinions and perceptions that rural women have regarding the problems they are currently experiencing as well as their role as change agents in potentially promoting rural socio-economic resurgence both in the short and long term. We implemented a ten-question online survey using Google Forms from March 28th to May 13th, 2024. 216 women residing in towns and/or rural areas from 39 of the 50 provinces in Spain answered the survey. Most female interviewees affirmed that they played a very or fairly important role in rural areas, and most considered that their role would become more relevant in coming years. The depopulation problem was primarily caused by three main issues: a lack of employment, depopulation, and inadequate transportation. Although the role of women is a pillar for their communities, their numbers in rural Spain have been dwindling, and the territories have become, through time, more masculinized, thereby creating the imperative of creating socioeconomic opportunities for rural women to redress the resultant gender imbalance.

**Contribution/Originality:** This article uniquely explores the vital role of women in revitalizing 21st-century rural Spain. By addressing both challenges and opportunities, it sheds light on women's evolving roles in local economies, leadership, and sustainable development, offering fresh insights into how empowering women can transform rural communities and counteract depopulation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Three recurring challenges in Spain's national strategic planning are resolving rural depopulation, managing the demographic challenge, and migration. There is presently a challenge of repopulating rural areas, as 76.6% of municipalities have less than 1,000 inhabitants, while 63% of the small towns and more than half of the provincial capitals are facing considerable depopulation problems (Bandrés & Azón, 2021).

This problem is closely related to the progressive aging of the Spanish population, the increase in life expectancy, and low fertility rates, since around 9.28 million people are now over 65 years of age, that is, 20% of the population (Fernández, 2019) while average life expectancy is now approximately 83 years, something that

generates a negative population outcome when combined with one of the lowest fertility rates in the EU, of just 1.3%.

While the demographic growth of Spanish society is leaning towards stagnation, paradoxically, large cities are experiencing unprecedented population increases due to the migration crisis that has affected Spain since 2019, the year in which it moved to the top three among the receiving countries of applicants for international protection in Europe (González-Ferrer, 2020). Experts predict that Spain's population will rise by approximately 5% over the next 30 years, surpassing 49 million in 2050.

The rural environment in Spain is defined, according to Law no. 45/2007, on the Sustainable Development of the Rural Environment, as the geographical space formed by the aggregation of municipalities or smaller local entities that have populations of less than 30,000 inhabitants and a density of less than 100 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. According to this definition, Spanish rural areas cover a total of 424,552 km<sup>2</sup>, comprising 6,678 municipalities, which represents 82.13% of the total number of Spanish municipalities. A total of 7,574,977 inhabitants reside in these rural areas, representing 16.11% of the Spanish population. Of these more than 7.5 million people, 49.2% are women and 50.8% are men. The challenge of depopulation in rural areas, as we mentioned previously, is one of the most pressing problems facing Spain. The European Union classifies municipalities with fewer than eight inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> as presenting a severe risk of depopulation, and in Spain, 38.1% of municipalities are in this situation.

### 1.1. The Depopulation Problem in Spain

In recent times, the expression “*España Vacía*” or “Empty Spain” has become popular to describe the depopulation problem in rural Spain (Molino, 2016). Other authors, such as Cerdá (2017) have described rural Spain as the Spanish Lapland (Taibo, 2021) who has described it as the “Empty Iberia” (“Iberia Vacía”). The term refers to the progressive depopulation suffered by a major part of rural Spain. According to Gómez Mendoza (2020) this phenomenon is not natural but multi-causal and is also related to the public policies that have been put into place at both the regional and national levels that have, to date, not been effective. Currently, Ministry of Agriculture (2020) estimates that the urban (and peri-urban) population in Spain constitutes 85% of the national whole, while the rural population accounts for 15%. Spanish municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants currently represent 61.4% of all local entities and 40% of the country's surface, accounting for only 3.11% of the national population (Gómez Mendoza, 2020).

According to estimates, 88% of Spain's population will reside in cities by 2050, and rural areas will lose nearly half of their current population. In Europe, there are other countries that are experiencing similar problems. This scenario presents an intriguing opportunity to implement potential solutions, experiment with innovative policies, and compare various responses and actions to identify the most effective solution to the depopulation problem. In Spain, this kind of initiative may be best done at the autonomous community level while encouraging collaboration between different autonomous communities to share experiences in pursuit of solutions to this common problem (Paniagua, 2009; Vicente Pinilla, Ayuda, & Sáez, 2008; Viñas, 2019).

It should be noted, however, that this problem is of a greater magnitude in Spain compared with other European countries. In Spain, there are currently 8,124 municipalities, of which 2,606 have between 101 and 500 inhabitants. Furthermore, there are 1400 municipalities that have fewer than 101 inhabitants. There are three autonomous communities with more than 25% of their municipalities having fewer than 101 inhabitants, namely Castilla y León, Castilla-La Mancha, and Aragón. Furthermore, 79% of Spanish local councils, that is, four out of every five municipalities (6,419 of the current 8,131), have registered more deaths than births in the last 20 years (Sánchez, 2019). According to the projections of the National Institute of Statistics, in 2030 the loss of rural population will continue and even worsen, leading to local communities that are ever more aged and depopulated (Calderón, 2019; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2018; Vicente Pinilla & Sáez, 2017).

The extreme extent of the exodus from large rural areas presents a far-reaching problem, leading eventually to the masculinization of these communities. Moreover, the decline in the rural birth rate, motivated by the internal emigration of women of child-bearing age while more young men stay behind to continue as farmers, is at the origin of a progressive aging of rural Spain (Hernandez-Maeso & Cruz-Hidalgo, 2020). Depopulation presents multiple problems of efficiency, such as the provision of essential services becoming stretched and uneconomic (Orcao & Cornago, 2005) and unbalanced demographic structures resulting from years of such differential emigration (González & García, 2003) leading to ever greater structural fragility in these rural areas (González, 2021). More than 3,500 towns in Spain are in danger of disappearing in the next 10 years (Fernández, 2019).

With all these problems, policies have been timidly initiated to combat the depopulation of those Autonomous Communities most affected (Bielza, 2003; Sáez, Ayuda, & Pinilla, 2011, 2016). Despite the good intentions behind these initiatives, Paniagua (2009) found it challenging to apply uniform policies to rural territories that may differ significantly in terms of the wishes and interests of various local stakeholders. Furthermore, the depopulation problem in rural Spain presents a multitude of challenges, making it exceptionally difficult to uniformly consider and address the breadth of objectives (Bosque, Pérez, & Navarro, 2001).

### 1.2. *The Role of Women in Rural Areas*

Historically, women in rural Spain have played a significant role in agriculture and the family economy, but their contributions have often gone unnoticed and unappreciated. In the present day, fostering women's economic involvement is crucial for revitalizing these areas. Supporting female entrepreneurship and enhancing access to financial and educational resources are key to generating new economic prospects. Sectors like rural tourism, crafts, and agribusiness stand to gain significantly from the engagement of women entrepreneurs.

It is important to highlight that the number of women in rural areas of Spain has been steadily decreasing, leading to a growing masculinization of these regions over time. Several factors drive this trend (Tárraga-Davia & Morales-Pérez, 2021).

- The aging population, with many residents already beyond retirement age.
- A declining rural birth rate.
- The migration of women of childbearing age to urban areas, while men often remain to work locally as farmers.

Given these challenges, it is crucial to implement strategies that promote socio-economic opportunities for women in rural areas. Legislative measures are needed to address this issue and prevent further masculinization.

Historically, women have been more likely to leave rural areas, in part due to limited access to education and employment opportunities. This has resulted in a growing gender imbalance, which threatens the social cohesion and sustainability of rural communities. The absence of young women directly impacts birth rates and, in turn, the demographic future of these regions.

The fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, closely links to the masculinization of rural Spain and the role of women. Two specific targets under SDG 5 are particularly relevant:

- Target 5.5: Ensure full and effective participation of women and equal opportunities for leadership in political, economic, and public life.
- Target 5.c: Strengthen policies and enforceable laws that promote gender equality and empower all women and girls at all levels.

This study is groundbreaking as it sheds light on the prevalent issues in rural areas of Spain, specifically the depopulation and masculinization of society, from a gender perspective across the country. Despite the development of numerous policies to address depopulation and gender issues, the problem remains unresolved. At present, there is an urgent need to establish both medium- and long-term solutions and highlight the important

problem that is affecting women in these areas. Furthermore, this study will add to the pool of information available to policymakers, enabling them to understand the needs of the population, predict future trends, and allocate resources effectively. This information is essential to design specific socio-economic programs and initiatives to help the different depopulated areas on a national level. In the next few sections of this manuscript, the following sections will be described in more detail hereon: The first section will cover the study and its objectives, followed by the discussion, and finally, the conclusions.

## 2. STUDY OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

This qualitative study measured and analyzed rural women's views on their environment and their role as change agents.

216 women residing in towns and/or rural areas from 39 of the 50 provinces in Spain answered a ten-question online survey using Google Forms. We selected the online survey format because it was faster, more accurate, quick to analyze, and easy to use for participants compared to other potential sampling methods like face-to-face or online interviews. Furthermore, the study needed a sampling method that would enable the compilation of surveys from all over Spain, and the online survey method did serve this purpose.

Six out of the ten questions were designed to gather socio-demographic data from the women. Compiling this information is especially important as it provides the context to interpret survey results accurately. Furthermore, this type of data aids in comprehending the makeup of the surveyed female population, including factors like age, employment, and geographic location. Moreover, it will help to reveal trends and challenges associated with specific demographics.

The remaining survey questions were carried out to collect the women's opinion on how they perceived:

- Today's rural women play a crucial role. Researchers found that it was crucial for the women to recognize the significance of their role within the municipality.
- Today, rural women face major challenges. It is highly likely that women from various municipalities in different geographical areas of Spain may be facing distinct challenges, such as limited access to transportation and services. The authors identified these latter issues through a literature review they conducted prior to writing this manuscript.
- Women play a crucial role in the socio-economic revival of rural areas. The role of women is of special importance in revitalizing socioeconomically rural areas. Often their position is not recognized. Therefore, highlighting the potential importance of women is critical in this survey.
- The future relevance and importance of women in rural Spain, both short-term and long-term, both socially and economically.

We posed closed questions with predetermined responses (single and multiple). The study did not establish any initial sampling quotas. The researchers were therefore seeking socio-demographic representativeness through the random voluntary participation of interviewees in the surveys. We conducted the fieldwork for this study from March 28th to May 13th, 2024. We decided that 45 days would be sufficient to compile the relevant results.

In the quantitative analyses, the sampling error was 6.8% at a confidence level of 95.5%, assuming unfavorable sampling conditions ( $p=q=50\%$ ). The latter's sampling error was considered adequate for the analysis of these results.

The main quantitative secondary sources of information that have been used are the following:

- National Institute of Statistics different publications and statistics have been used. These data have been used both to make comparisons with the information in the study on the rural context and to establish a first approach to the rural environment in Spain and the depopulation challenges that it is currently facing.
- The Registry Data have been used primarily to establish comparisons between the study results and national data. The Register's annual updates make it a highly valuable statistical source. Among the main data types

included in the Registry are basic demographic characteristics—sex, age, nationality, place of birth, and place of residence. The registry also showcases national employment data, segmented based on productive sectors, occupational branches, and professional situations.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the opinions of rural women regarding their environment as well as their own role as agents to potentially change the present depopulation. The survey analyzed the opinions of 216 women residing in 39 of the 50 provinces in Spain, as shown in Figure 1.

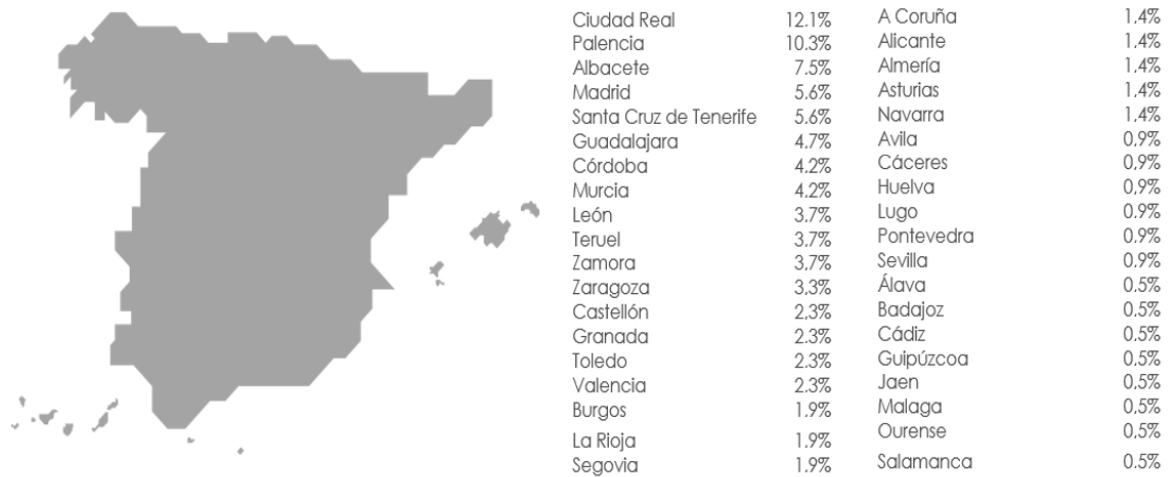
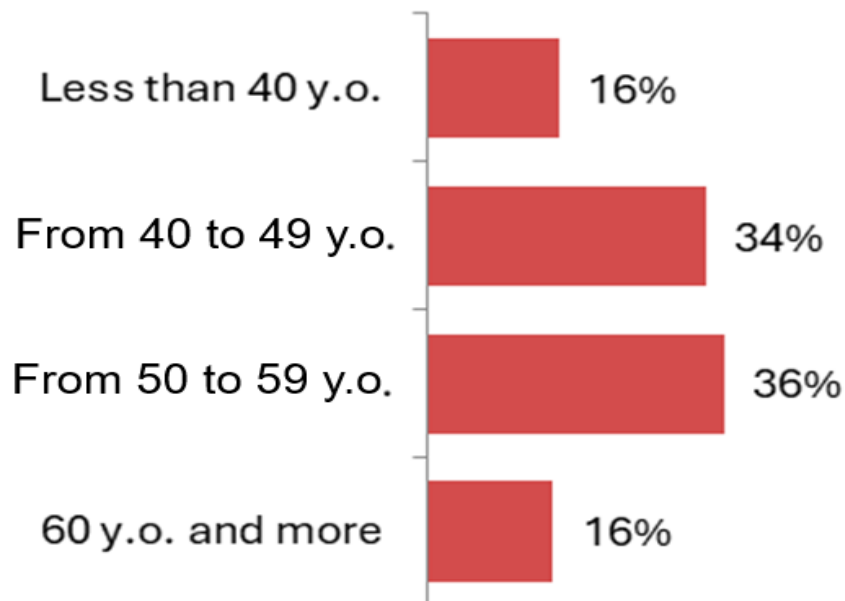
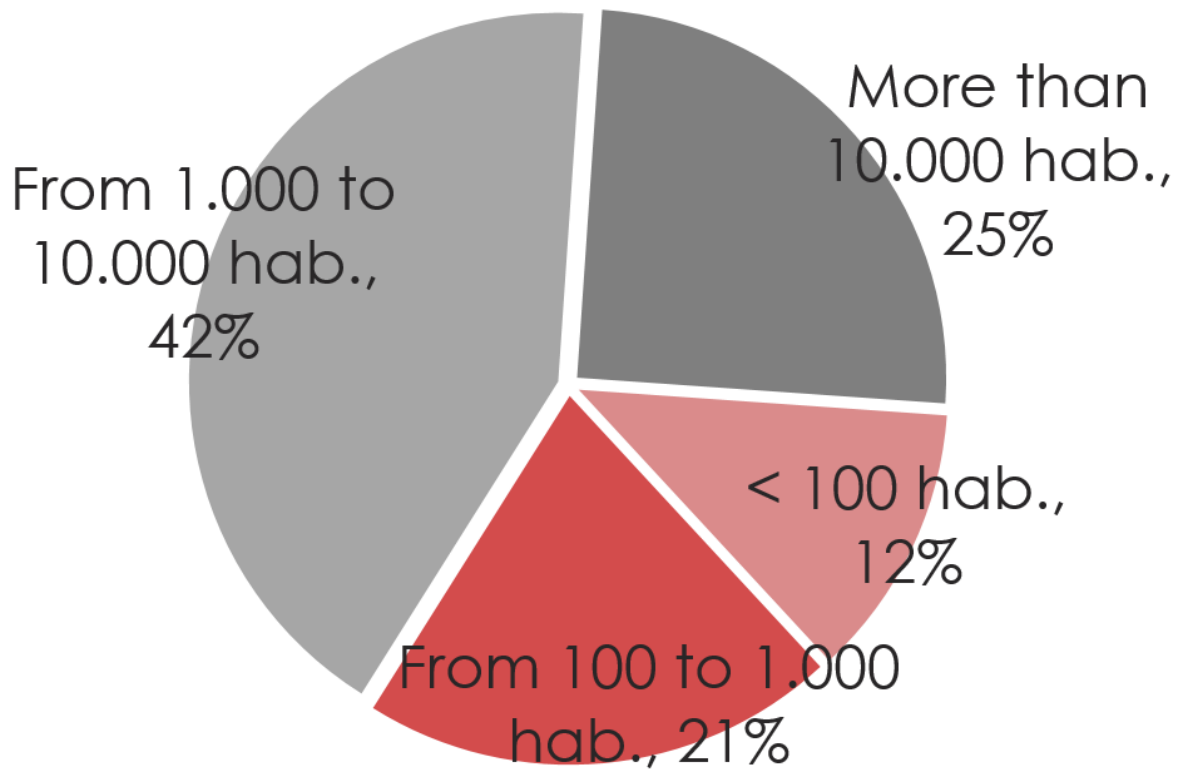


Figure 1. Geographical distribution of interviewees in percentages, based on a total of 216 interviews.

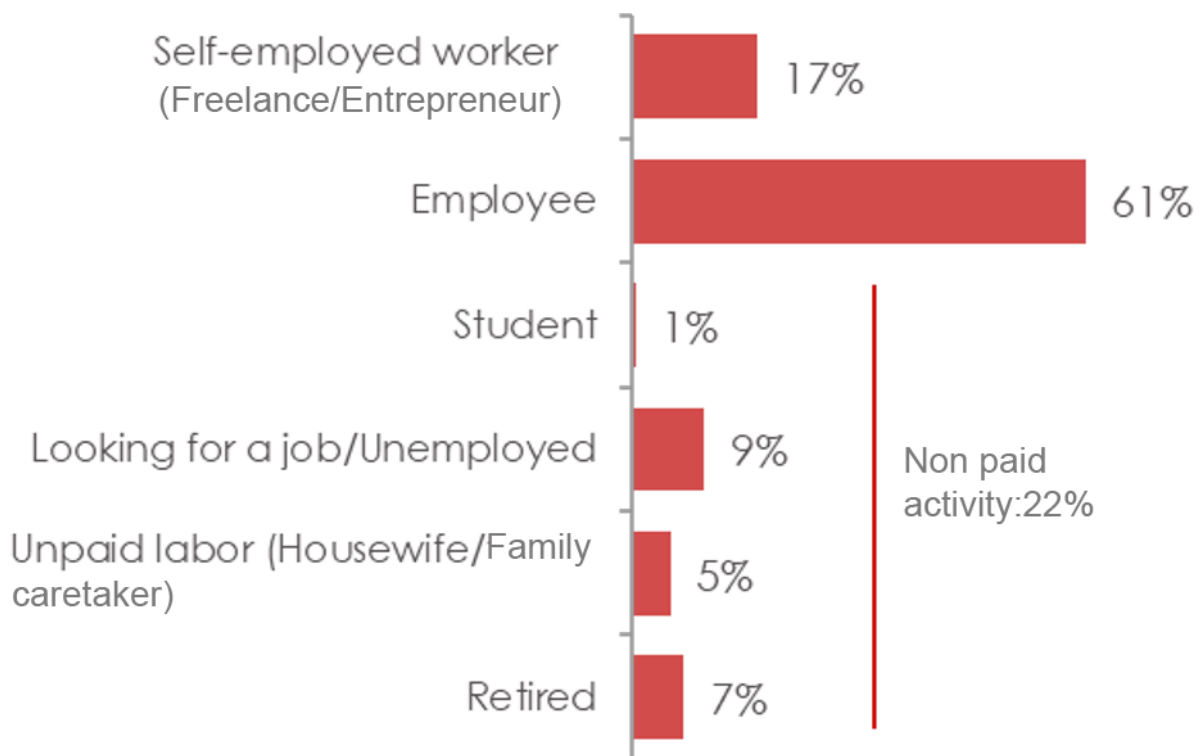
The highest concentration of respondents was from the provinces of Guadalajara, Palencia, and Albacete (i.e., in the autonomous communities of Castilla la Mancha and Castilla León). The age profile of the women surveyed ranged from 40 to 59 years. Most resided in municipalities with populations of between 1000 and 10,000 inhabitants. Almost 80% of them were working, and 17% of them were self-employed (Figures 2-4).



Figures 2. Demographic information of the interviewees; with regard to their age.



Figures 3. Demographic information of the interviewees; with regard to their geographical location.



Figures 4. Demographic information of the interviewees; with regard to their profession.

### 3.1. The Importance of Women in Rural Spain

Women are key players in the whole depopulation context of rural Spain. 93% of the women interviewed (Figure 5) affirmed that they recognized that they played a very or fairly important role.

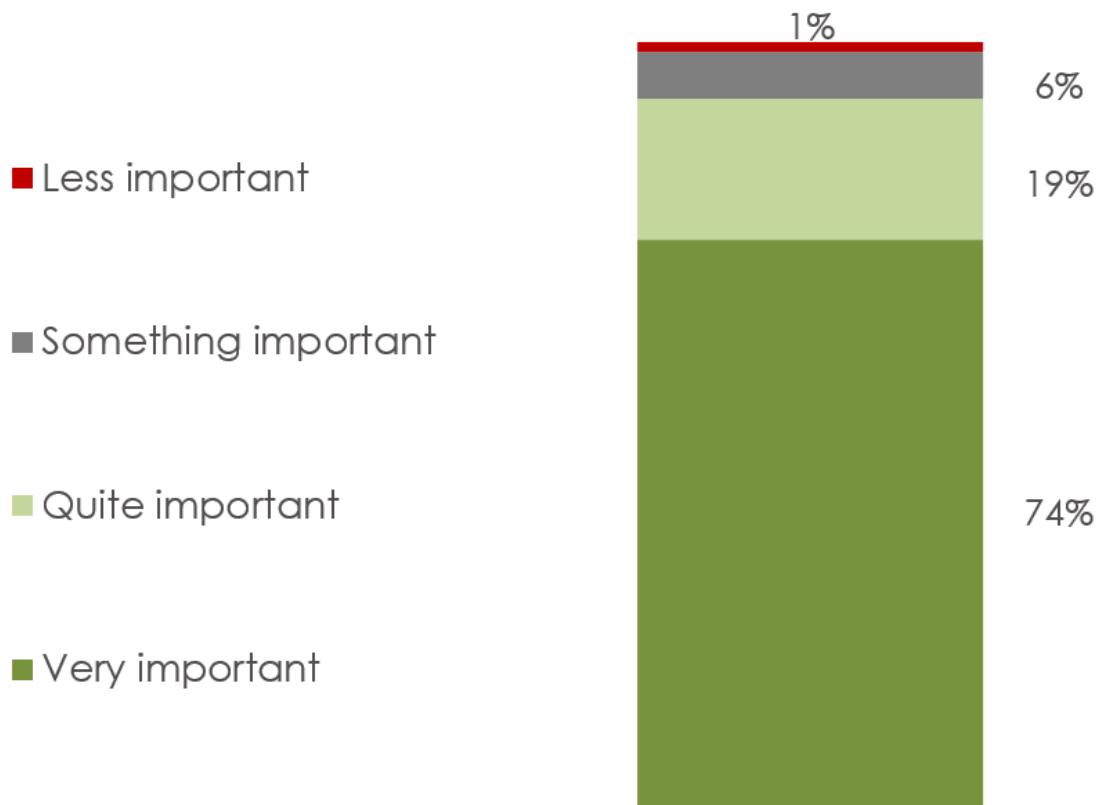


Figure 5. Degree of importance of women in Rural Spain.

The demographic profile in rural municipalities in Spain is characterized by the masculinization of the population, low birth rates, and aging of the population, all of which pose a threat to the demographic sustainability of the most vulnerable rural areas. In rural areas, there is a more pronounced decline in birth rates compared to the national level, a masculinization of the population, and a feminization of the older population, which is observed both in rural areas and nationally. However, a report from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishery, and Food demonstrates that the degree of masculinization increases as the municipality's size decreases.

Historically, women have been more likely to migrate from rural areas, partly due to the lack of access to education and employment opportunities. This trend has led to an increasing gender imbalance, posing a threat to the social cohesion and sustainability of rural communities. The departure of young women has a direct effect on birth rates, which in turn influences the demographic future of these regions. The fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, closely links to the issue of masculinization in rural Spain and the role of women.

### 3.2. The Effects of Depopulation in Rural Spain

It would be coherent to highlight that the problems of depopulation affect both men and women. The main problem that the female interviewees identified was the lack of employment and work opportunities (i.e., even when almost 80% of the interviewees are working). The women also identified the depopulation of rural areas and the lack of transportation, as illustrated in Figure 6.

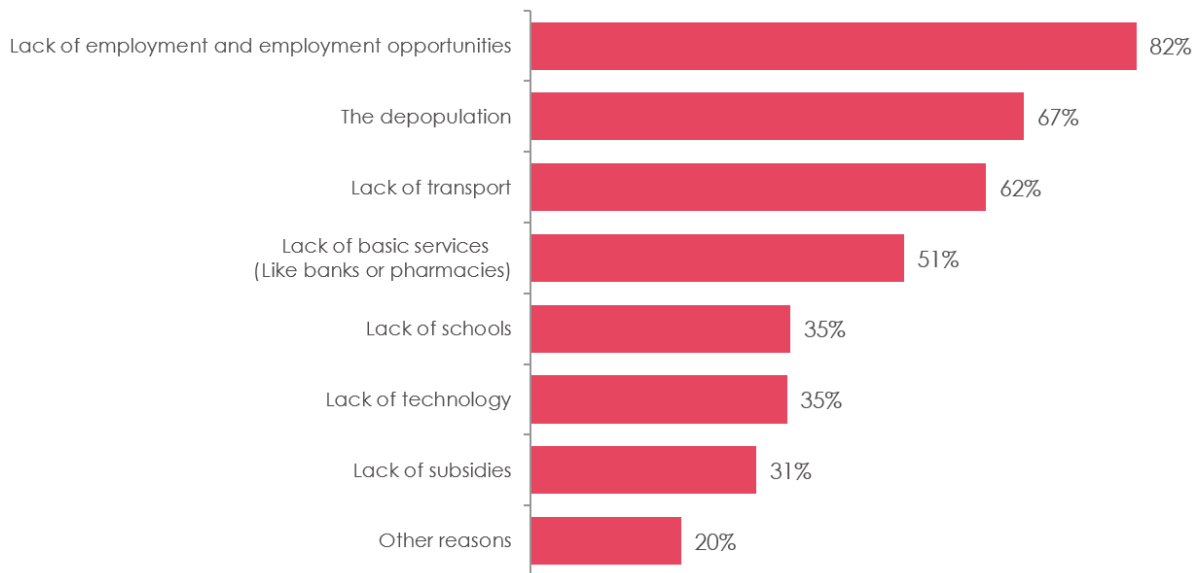


Figure 6. Main problems experienced by women living in rural areas in Spain.

This study's employment data underscores the challenges faced by rural populations. The total employment rate in rural areas is 56.8%, with women at 51.6% and men at 60.6%. The gender gap in employment is, therefore, nine percentage points in favor of men. If this information is compared with the national data published by Eurostat<sup>3</sup>, it reveals that the employment rates at a national level are higher than those registered in rural areas, with a national employment rate of people between 20 and 64 years old. 65.7%.

The wave of urbanization in the last few decades and the resultant growth of cities have promoted resource efficiency and economic growth, aided by higher investment and employment than in the rural world (Reynaud & Miccoli, 2018). In Spain, the second half of the 20th century was the key period in which this rural exodus gained momentum, generating large population movements from rural to urban environments (Pinilla & Sáez, 2016). The process, which began in the 1950s, reached its maximum level of internal emigration in the 1960s and slowed down towards the end of the 1970s. The depopulation of large rural areas is becoming a common problem in an increasing number of countries that suffer from similar phenomena (Lukic, Stojavljevic, Durdev, Nagy, & Dercan, 2012; Preiss, Martin, & Debussche, 1997; Reynaud & Miccoli, 2018). Large cities and their metropolitan areas will grow larger and less sustainable as issues like housing access and local social segregation worsen in the country's main capitals. On the contrary, numerous rural municipalities, along with small and medium-sized cities, are likely to experience a decline in economic activity, leading to significant social and cultural losses.

According to figures from the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (2019), between 2001 and 2019, the national population increased from 41,116,842 inhabitants to 47,026,208 (Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, 2019) however, in that same period, 62.7% of Spanish municipalities lost population. In the last decade, depopulation has become a widespread and broader process throughout the country, affecting not only the smaller municipalities. Within the National Strategy against the Demographic Challenge of 2020, formulated by the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, there is a set of actions proposed by the Ministry of Labor, Migration, and Social Security. We anticipate that these two ministries will collaborate to encourage repopulation in Spain's rural areas. However, to achieve effective results, we must strengthen this inter-ministerial work.

The repopulation of 'Emptied Spain' in recent years has become a priority for all public administrations (Zurro & Rueda, 2018). In fact, the problem has become so severe that it has become a matter of State priority (Velázquez-Gaztelu, 2017) and has thereby resurfaced on the national agenda and in all public policies (Ortega, 2017).



The lack of services clearly affects women. This could potentially contribute to the decision of some women to migrate to urban areas. Improving the offer of services would mean greater possibilities for both the professional and personal development of rural women.

Another challenge that hinders the promotion of gender equality among the rural population is the use of technology. The advancement of technologies clearly favors men, although the difference is not too striking. The COVID-19 context has confirmed that promoting technology in rural areas is necessary to improve the quality of life, prevent depopulation, and provide women and men with the same digital opportunities as in urban areas.

The aforementioned elements contribute to the fragility and inflexibility of the economy in rural Spain, making it less effective in retaining educated individuals who may seek employment opportunities elsewhere. The scarcity of human capital restricts the potential for socioeconomic activity in these areas. Many of these job opportunities are temporary due to the dynamics of agriculture and food production systems, as well as the seasonal nature of vacation periods, which coincide with the return of natives to their home areas.

Economic factors play a crucial role, the most depopulated areas being so as a consequence of economic downturns that have historically affected those particular areas (Vicente Pinilla & Sáez, 2017). Moreover, the abandonment of rural areas by younger people has led to a decrease in the birth rate and to the aging of the overall population. All of these factors have resulted in a growth in the number of municipalities with populations of less than 1,000 inhabitants (Vicente Pinilla et al., 2008). This was very much the case with the Great Financial Crisis that affected Spain, as elsewhere, in 2008 but which here particularly affected young people of working age (Bandrés & Azón, 2021) mostly in the Spanish regions of Murcia, the Canary Islands, and Castilla La Mancha (Cortés-Ruiz & Ibar-Alonso, 2021).

Therefore, we must transform the policies that have only been enacted on paper into action and proceed with their implementation. All levels, including European, national, local, and even the regional Autonomous Communities, require increased institutional support. Although the latter have the power to organize such matters within their own territory, they usually limit their time and effort to exercising their technical functions, such as urban planning, transport, and housing, as well as daily management activities, without integrating within their strategic planning and their development policies serious medium-term and long-term objectives to combat rural depopulation.

Therefore, we urgently need to establish medium- and long-term solutions. A way forward might be to put flesh on the bones of a state policy agreed upon by all political groups and to determine the four basic axes of action, which include regulatory instruments, administrative instruments, budget allocations, and the execution of specific proposals (García Jiménez, 2020). Specific actions, tailored to the urgent needs of "Emptied Spain," should accompany the establishment of a general framework. All of the aforementioned measures are necessary to reverse the dramatic population decline.

The participation of women is essential in bringing back the socio-economic context of depopulated municipalities of rural Spain. We asked female interviewees how important they believed their role was in bringing about a socio-economic revival in rural areas of Spain. The results showed that most (98%) were convinced of their leading role in achieving a socioeconomic resurgence in rural areas (Figure 7).

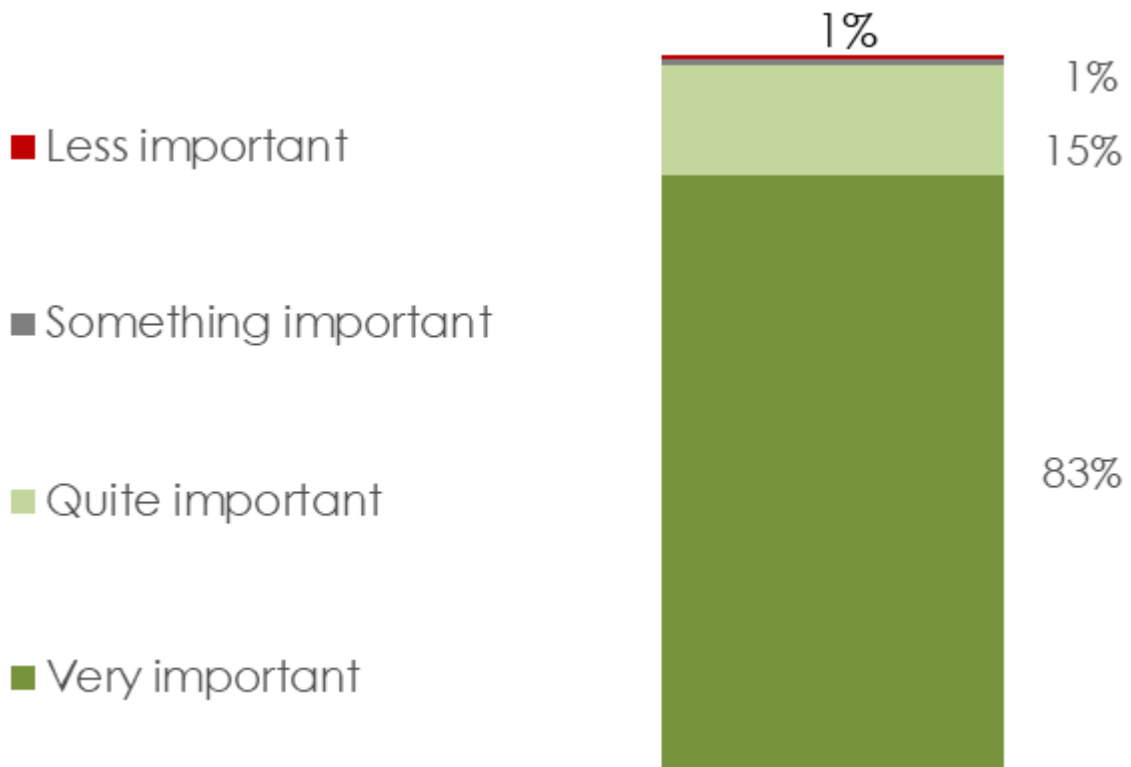


Figure 7. Perspective of rural women on the importance of their role in bringing about a socio-economic revival in rural areas of Spain.

Not only did the women interviewed perceive their role as a protagonist in the current performance and function within the rural context in Spain, but they were also convinced that this role would continue to increase in the future. 70% of the female interviewees considered that their role would become more relevant in coming years (Figure 8).

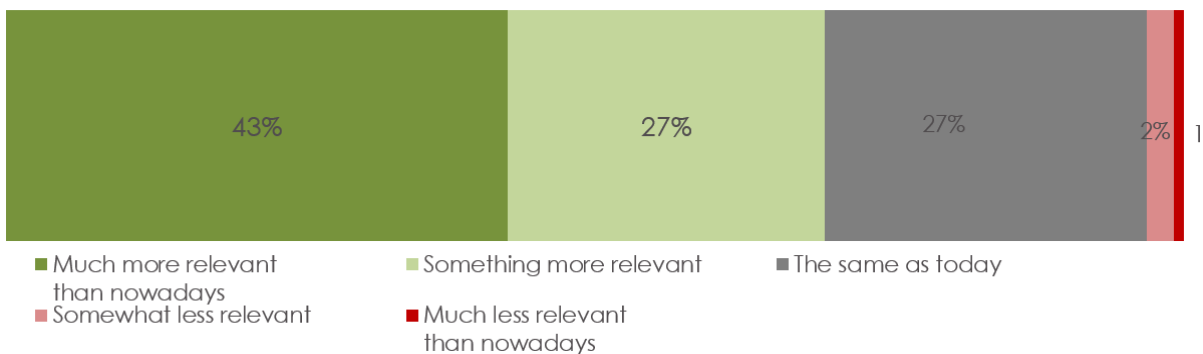


Figure 8. Perspective of female interviewees on the evolution of the relevance of women in Rural Spain.

Women are key to revitalizing municipalities in Spain that are currently experiencing depopulation. Over time, the number of women in rural areas in Spain has decreased, leading to a more masculinized landscape. Therefore, it is crucial to implement strategies that can enhance socio-economic prospects for these women. Masculinized areas have been characterized by low population densities, reductions in employment opportunities, demographic imbalances, and population aging.

What is an immediate priority is the design of improved and better-defined policies to better understand the causes of depopulation and of the masculinization of rural Spain. People have primarily blamed public policies for the exodus from rural areas. However, the reasons for this phenomenon are more complex, potentially involving a combination of factors such as technology, business, and territorial and societal-based phenomena. To reverse these trends of rural exodus and secure the future of women in rural Spain, several key challenges must be addressed.

First, improving access to education and employment opportunities is essential to empower women to build their lives in rural areas. Vocational training, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship programs specifically targeted at rural women can open pathways for economic independence and professional growth, ensuring they do not feel the need to migrate. Additionally, better infrastructure and social services are crucial to improving the quality of life in rural communities. Investments in healthcare, childcare, and transportation would enable women to balance family responsibilities with career ambitions, making rural living more sustainable. Access to digital technologies is particularly vital, as it can help rural women participate in the broader economy through remote work and e-commerce.

Díez-Gutiérrez and Rodríguez-Rejas (2021) have proposed a series of potential solutions that could be undertaken to reverse the present depopulation problem of rural areas in Spain.

- Access to social housing.
- Tax exemptions for cooperatives, small businesses, and self-employed people that remain or establish themselves in rural areas (Esteban, Pérez, & Gargallo, 2018).
- Guaranteed rural basic income aiming to guarantee a minimum living standard.
- Help migrants to promote them living in rural towns (Collantes, 2010).
- Broadband access of at least 100 Mbps.
- The creation of a Rural Public Bank to facilitate credit and financial support under advantageous conditions (Carmona & Simpson, 2019).
- Minimum public passenger transport service that will help to overcome the isolation and difficulty of communication in rural areas, which is one of the fundamental challenges to promoting the repopulation of rural areas.
- Promote the creation of cooperatives, small businesses, and autonomous initiatives that promote local production, such as beekeeping, fish farming, livestock, and the use of forest and mountain resources (Demaria, Tinoco, Del, & Moreno, 2014).
- Creation of employment, which includes traditional professions but also non-face-to-face activities related to robotics, web design, and computer programming.
- The reactivation of local proximity markets, which facilitate the direct sale of products from rural areas (Mauleón, 2012).
- Ensure the survival of schools in rural areas.
- Implementation of gender equality policies to prevent the masculinization of the rural environment, promoting equality between men and women, supporting initiatives around the interests and expectations of women (Esteban et al., 2018).
- Guaranteed health and social services.
- Promotion of sustainable rural tourism.
- Policies to promote research and development in rural areas: Plan public 'micro-poles' of research and technological development in rural areas (Koutsou & Vounouki, 2012).
- Creation of social fabric and solidarity networks: Improve the image of the territorial reality of rural areas.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The repopulation of 'Emptied Spain' in recent years has become a priority for all public administrations (Zurro & Rueda, 2018). In fact, the problem has become so severe that it has become a matter of State priority (Velázquez-Gaztelu, 2017) and has thereby resurfaced on the national agenda and in all public policies (Ortega, 2017).

Despite the enactment of specific policies and regulations in recent years, their implementation remains a problem and challenge (Méndez, 2013; Navarro, 1990; Taulelle, 2001). However, the population shift towards urban areas and their development over the years has resulted in a growing gap between the development of laws for rural

areas and the actual needs and realities of the rural world. This situation has gone almost unnoticed in the eyes of the country's leaders (El Hueco, 2021). Moreover, the allocation of public funds tends to overlook the small municipalities, as public investment tends to prioritize urban areas, thereby leaving the small municipalities with no funding to sustain their basic public services, which further aggravates rural depopulation (García Jiménez, 2020).

This brief study underscores the crucial role women play in enhancing the socioeconomic context of rural areas in Spain. Undoubtedly, women play a crucial role in revitalizing rural areas, not only in Spain but also in other European countries that are currently experiencing a population exodus from rural areas. In Europe, Spain is likely the country most affected by the issue of rural depopulation. Over time, Spain's rural areas have seen a decline in the number of women, leading to a more masculinized landscape. Therefore, it is crucial to implement measures that can enhance socio-economic opportunities for these women. To effectively address the depopulation and masculinization issues in Spain's rural areas, we must develop and implement better-designed policies, a process that will take time to complete. Most of the women interviewed (i.e., almost 80%) recognized that among the main problems and challenges affecting rural areas were the lack of employment and work opportunities. They also identified the need for increased transportation and more efficient routes. The female interviewees emphasized that their role was crucial in bringing about socio-economic change in rural areas of Spain, and they would play a leading role in achieving a socio-economic resurgence in these areas. According to a report prepared by the Spanish Ministry of Territorial Policy and Public Function (Ministerio de Política Territorial y Función Pública), it was shown that for the year 2017-2018, the percentage population of women was greatest in medium to large cities (i.e., from a population size of about 10,000 inhabitants) and decreases depending on the size of the municipality. The same report affirms that the depopulated areas have undergone a demographic shift towards masculinity, resulting in a decrease in the female population and an increase in their average age. There are studies that present the role of women as being crucial and key in addressing the depopulation problem in Spanish rural areas. It is therefore imperative to analyze their role as well as the causes and consequences that arise from this demographic context now evident in rural areas in Spain (Tárraga-Davia & Morales-Pérez, 2021).

Women in rural areas become pillars of their communities, as they are a social group with great capacity and a willingness to transform their social reality. Therefore, it is essential that regional and national institutions provide them with greater support in the activities they carry out. Rural women are becoming more professionally qualified, which is contributing to their increasing migration to urban areas in search of new job opportunities.

In conclusion, the survival and prosperity of rural areas in Spain profoundly influence the future of women. By addressing systemic inequalities, providing economic opportunities, and promoting social services, rural Spain can retain and empower its women, fostering communities that are both vibrant and sustainable.

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**Transparency:** The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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