

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Advancing Women's Empowerment in Rural Spain

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ABSTRACT:

The seventeenth goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development framework, "Partnerships for the Goals," underscores the importance of collaboration in achieving sustainable progress. This study examines how multi-stakeholder partnerships, as envisioned in SDG 17, contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment (SDG 5) in rural Spain. The research focuses on Pastrana, a small town in the province of Guadalajara, central Spain. The region is characterized by numerous small municipalities, most with fewer than 1,000 residents, according to the National Institute of Statistics. Between February and March 2024, fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants representing diverse sectors and interests. To explore interaction patterns and potential for cooperation, the study applied stakeholder registries, power-interest diagrams, and stakeholder mapping techniques. The findings reveal that partnerships involving diverse actors can strengthen women's participation and leadership in rural contexts. Such gender-focused collaborations foster community cohesion, stimulate local development, and contribute to the revitalization of rural life.

Keywords: Multi-stakeholder partnerships; Women's empowerment; Rural development; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Local governance

1. Introduction

1.1 Rural Development

The notion of "rurality" has always been strictly linked with both agricultural activity and primary sector production; however, current academic literature increasingly acknowledges that rural areas are much more diverse, accommodating a considerable array of land uses, business activity, and social processes that extend beyond the horizons of agriculture (García et al., 1995). As a consequence, the conceptualization of rural areas remains a persistent challenge, given the scope of factors involved and the range of disparate spatial, business, and demographic characteristics that characterize these locations (Armas-Quinta & Macía Arce, 2017). Rural sites, formerly almost exclusively responsible for providing foodstuffs and primary materials for urban centres, have seen a diminished agricultural practice and broader primary sector activity erode the socioeconomic nature of the region (Shucksmith & Chapman, 1998). For the modern era, rural areas have evolved into multifunctional and dynamic territories that are characterized by a range of business activities and rural-cityard interactions that extend beyond their earlier agrarian functions (Rubio Terrado, 2010).

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The need to clearly outline and measure rurality has become prominent, particularly concerning the planning and implementation of place-based growth policies (Cloke, 1977; López González, Crecente Maseda, & Miranda Barros, 2004). Understanding varying rurality levels across varying areas is vital for designing interventions responding adequately to varying localities' specific socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the rise of functions and meanings allotted to rural areas has rendered the notion, per se, inherently ambiguous and uncertain. Consequently, discerning between what is considered "rural" and "urban" became a blurry and contested enterprise (Woods, 2011). This uncertainty has further been confounded by advancements in communicative technologies, transport infrastructure, and social mobility, which have altered established boundaries and recalibrated rural-urban functional interdependencies.

For purposes of policy, good definition of rural areas is best for effective governance, for the simple reason that decision-makers are then in a position to plan contextually appropriate rural development programs, and distribute resources sufficiently (Sabalain, 2011). Previous definitions have been very unidimensional, being founded almost entirely on demographic indicators such as number or density of individuals. Comparatively, recent methods promote multidimensional definitions that embrace the sociocultural, environmental, and economic aspects, acknowledging rurality as a socially constructed dynamic rather than a statistical classification (Sabalain, 2011).

At this point, it becomes essential to rethink the way rurality is assessed while ensuring that the inherent diversity of rural regions is properly represented: such a shift calls for institutions operating at various levels, from local, to regional and national, in order to adopt more nuanced and multifaceted standards that allow for a finer distinction among rural territories; in many Western societies, the boundary between rural and urban is becoming less defined, as numerous functions once associated with urban environments—like information-based services, remote work, and cultural production—are increasingly taking root in rural settings. The disparity in the geographical circumstance and personal perceptions towards the natural, cultural and economic aspects of rural areas has led to a proliferation of mutually divergent definitions within scholarly and institutional deliberations and as a direct consequence, both domestic and international institutions have started to sophisticate their evaluation frameworks for capturing this complexity more adequately, hence, the adoption of transparent, homogeneous criteria for defining rural areas is imperative not just for maintaining conceptual purity but also for developing dependable official statistics, which constitute a cornerstone for the assessment of policy effectiveness as well as equitable resource distribution (Sabalain, 2011).

1.2 The rural context and depopulation problem in Spain

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the division between rural and urban areas was clearly defined and broadly acknowledged, with each fulfilling distinct economic and societal functions; in contemporary settings, however, this separation has become increasingly ambiguous, as rural regions diversify their economic foundations and become more intertwined with urban networks: in Spain, the classification of municipalities by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) relies on population figures rather than density, designating those with over 10,000 residents as urban and those below that threshold as rural (INE, 2023) and recent national statistics reveal that a significant majority, the 76.6

percent, of Spanish municipalities have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, underscoring the scale of rural depopulation and uneven territorial development: it's a demographic decline that can be further illustrated by findings that 63 percent of the least populated town centers, along with more than half of provincial capitals, are undergoing substantial population losses (Bandrés & Azón, 2021). The region of Castilla-La Mancha is a perfect example of this trend considering that it has 631 municipalities falling below the 1,000-resident mark: these patterns reflect the magnitude of rural demographic contraction and they also point to an urgent need for strategic interventions aimed at fostering enduring regional development, reinforcing social ties, and revitalizing economic activity in sparsely inhabited areas.

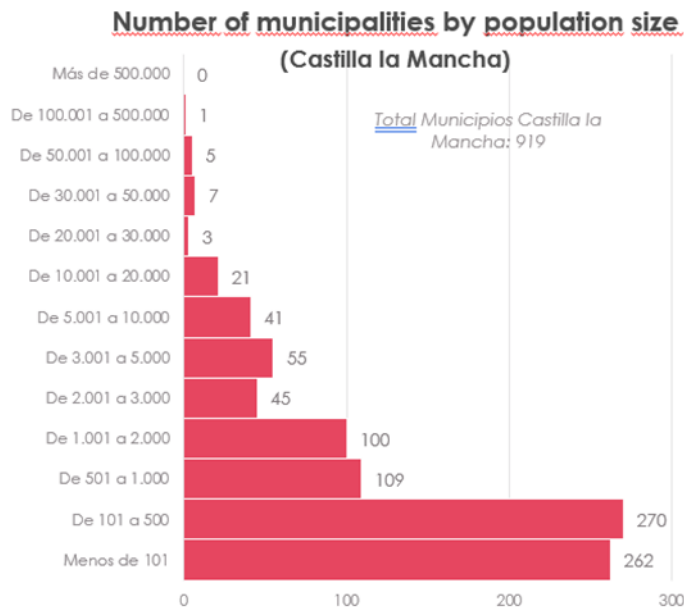


Figure 1: Number of municipalities by population size in Castilla-La Mancha (in Central Spain). (INE, 2021)

The phenomenon of rural depopulation in Spain is an extremely complex and enduring challenge that is strongly influenced by demographic, economic and societal dynamics; among the most significant contributors is an increasingly elderly population with extended life spans, with persistently low birth rates and with the centralization of career and educational prospects in urban centers for individuals of all genders, additionally, migration patterns marked by gender-specific tendencies increased the issue even more considering that women often relocate to cities in pursuit of greater independence and of a simpler access to employment, resulting in a disproportionate presence of men in rural communities (Molino, 2015).

The *España Vacía* (or "Emptied Spain") metaphor has recently appeared on the scene, relating to the current demographic decline, as a relevant conceptual and political reference: it's an expression that identifies the progressive but relentless depopulation that afflicts a large part of rural Spain, which accounts for approximately 15% of the entire national population nowadays (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020). Despite the implementation

of several public policies on both a regional and a domestic level, said actions have chiefly proved inefficient for turning the trend around, thus confirming the structure- and system-related nature of the problem: the rural exodus has caused high territorial gaps that ended up culminating in local economies weakened, lack of services, e.g., deficient road transport infrastructure and medical infrastructure, and elevated social vulnerability for less populated territories (López-González, 2021).

INE (2021) data for Spain show that those provinces with highest density of municipalities with less than 1,000 population are Guadalajara, Soria, and Burgos provinces, which exhibit highest density of municipalities with less than 1,000 population; this study focuses on the province of Guadalajara, which is a region highly affected by depopulation and through a multi-stakeholder analytical framework, the study aims to explore the main challenges, impediments, and difficulties faced by rural women, as well as the factors that have impeded both their own empowerment on the individual level, and the socioeconomic progress of communities they live in.

Forecasts indicate that by 2050, approximately 88 percent of the country's citizens will be living in urban environments, while rural zones are expected to lose nearly half of their current inhabitants (Fernández, 2019) and although similar demographic shifts are occurring across Europe, Spain's situation stands out due to both the geographical breadth of the depopulation and the speed at which it is unfolding: all of these factors place Spain among the most affected nations in Southern Europe, making rural demographic decline a central issue in national policy discussions.

1.3 The role of women in rural Spain

Rurally based Spanish women have traditionally contributed to agricultural activity and household economies, yet their efforts are oftentimes overlooked and remain invisible across both statistical accounts and plans for rural development (Shortall, 2006): this very absence of recognition has perpetuated structural sex disparities, which hinder the participation of women in decision-making processes and their gaining access to economic resources and given the demographic decline currently being experienced, combined with the restructuring of the economy, empowering rural women has emerged as a driving factor for the regeneration of regions anew: strengthening the position of women within the rural economy has more than a bearing on social justice; it is also a strategic agent for the sustainability and innovativeness of regions (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2021); for this very reason, giving women wider access to financial services, training schemes, and education is instrumental for stimulating entrepreneurship, creating jobs, especially in rural areas (OECD, 2020).

Recent researches show that initiatives spearheaded by women in areas like rural tourism, artisanal production and the agro-food sector tend to contribute significantly to the vitality of local economies considering that these endeavours tend to broaden income streams, safeguard cultural heritage and strengthen the social fabric of rural communities (Navarro et al., 2014), moreover, leadership by women tends to be closely associated with inclusive and participatory management approaches bolstering the adaptability and enduring viability of these regions; the promotion of gender equality in rural Spain, therefore, is more than a question of fairness, it plays an extremely important role in advancing sustainable and balanced territorial development.

It should be noted that the rural demographic of Spain changed a lot throughout the decades with a progressive decrease of females residing causing a subsequent rise of the masculinization of rural regions ending up being a source of demographic gaps expanding with severe social and economic consequences. Several interrelated elements contribute to this demographic shift.

The aging of the rural population has become even more pronounced with a growing proportion of individuals that are now beyond retirement age while the birth rates in these areas tend to decline accelerating population shrinkage; another important factor is the relocation of women of childbearing and working age to urban centers caused by the search for better employment prospects, by educational opportunities and by the improved quality of life: it's a movement that caused an evident gender imbalance with rural communities that tend to be composed of men that are engaging in agriculture or manual labor reshaping completely the demographic landscape of rural Spain, weakening social ties and threatening the sustainability of these regions; the simple act of addressing this situation requires targeted public interventions that are aimed at expanding economic and social opportunities for women in rural contexts and legislative and institutional measures that improve access to jobs, education, entrepreneurship and essential services are incredibly important in order to reverse the trend of rural masculinization: tackling this imbalance is both a matter of fairness and also a strategic necessity for fostering long-term regional resilience and renewal.

Historically, there has been an extremely high propensity for females to migrate from rural areas because of the lack of effective access to education, jobs, and social opportunities (Corral *et al.*, 2017); it's a persistent outmigration that has steadily led to rural masculinization going on to create large gender gaps jeopardizing social cohesion and community sustainability. The specific lack of young women has direct demographic impacts that include falling birth rates that lead to rural demographic aging, besides, the smaller number of females constrains the local labour market, reducing opportunities for entrepreneurship, innovation, and social rebirth; in the rural areas of Spain, such demographic and economic changes are extreme a serious challenge for the sustainability of rural communities for the long term, entrenching a cycle of rural depopulation and socio-economic decline.

The increasing gender imbalance in the rural areas of Spain, together with the evolving position of women in these communities is closely tied to the fifth Sustainable Development Goal that focuses on promoting gender equality and empowering all women: it's an objective that is especially pertinent in the context of rural depopulation, where disparities between men and women have clear implications for social cohesion, for demographic stability and for economic vitality: within this framework, two particular targets stand out as especially significant for addressing the challenges faced by women in rural settings (United Nations, 2025).

- Target 5.5. – Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life.
- Target 5.c. – Adapt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

The present investigation analyses Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) — addressing gender equality for girls and women — through the theme of multi-stakeholder partnerships provided under SDG 17. The case study applies to the area of Almonacid de Zorita, which is located within the province of Guadalajara, Castilla-La Mancha autonomous community, central Spain.

In Castilla-La Mancha, women account for approximately 49.9 percent of the total population: a notable share of this demographic falls within the 40 to 64 age range, and both sexes display an inverted population pyramid, reflecting broader demographic shifts; these various patterns point to a secondary wave of migration from the region to other parts of Spain, particularly to urban centres such as the Madrid metropolitan area, where individuals seek improved educational, career, and economic opportunities; the gender balance becomes increasingly uneven in smaller communities and while women constitute 51.9 percent of the population in the province of Guadalajara overall, their representation drops significantly to 40.9 percent in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants: it's a sharp decline that highlights a pronounced trend of masculinization in rural areas, which carries potential consequences for social cohesion, economic vitality, and demographic stability.

The unequal out-migration of females has a deep effect on both the workforce at large and on the local economies causing immediate effects on family compositions, on fertility and on the sustainability of rural communities. Localities, such as Pastrana, which is defined by a population of less than 1,000 people, reflect such demographic processes: the persistent gender gap reflects the utmost necessity for the implementation of policies for the promotion of the socio-economic empowerment of females, enhanced accessibility for them to local jobs, as well as for community resilience building. They are of vital necessity for addressing structural depopulation and enabling rural areas, on a comprehensive level, to participate in regional development, according to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality.

1.4. Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration through SDG 17

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 seeks to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize partnerships for sustainable development across seven key domains: finance, technology, trade, capacity-building, policy coherence, partnerships, and data. This objective is supported by two principal approaches: one focuses on fostering international alliances spearheaded by governmental bodies, aiming to promote worldwide collaboration and development while the other highlights the importance of enhancing cooperative efforts among various stakeholders across different scales—global, national, and regional. Such alliances serve as crucial mechanisms for exchanging knowledge, pooling resources, and aligning actions to drive advancement across the remaining sixteen Sustainable Development Goals; in contrast to SDGs 1 through 16, which each tackle distinct thematic issues, SDG 17 operates as a unifying structure that integrates the broader agenda: it goes on to underscore the notion that enduring and meaningful progress hinges on inclusive and fair partnerships among a wide array of participants (von Schnurbein, 2020).

The former goes on to advocate for the sharing of knowledge, for the advancement of technology and for the provision of financial assistance in order to bolster

implementation efforts in less developed areas while the latter is more focused on fostering productive alliances among governmental bodies together with private sector entities and grassroots organizations (United Nations, n.d.). Yet, the capacity of these partnerships to promote gender equity and empower local communities is strongly influenced by the distribution of influence and the resources among those that are directly involved; frequently, national and transnational institutions command significantly more financial means, specialized knowledge and decision-making power than local stakeholders or community-based groups with disparities that risk sidelining women's perspectives, especially in rural settings in which their involvement in official governance tends to be quite constrained, and may result in collaborations that can reinforce prevailing power structures instead of challenging them (Sondermann & Ulbert, 2021).

Unequal access to financial and informational resources tends to determine who is participating in a meaningful manner in setting priorities, in designing interventions and in evaluating outcomes; when local women's organizations are positioned primarily as implementers rather than co-decision makers, their capacity to influence strategic direction tends to remain quite constrained and in a similar manner, technical expertise and donor requirements that are frequently controlled by external agencies, may privilege institutional actors over grassroots perspectives: going on to examine the ways these asymmetries operate is extremely important in order to understand whether multi-stakeholder partnerships serve as genuine mechanisms for empowerment or as instruments that can only consolidate existing power structures (A4ID, 2021).

Assessing the transparency of decision-making processes provides an important lens for this evaluation. Transparent mechanisms—such as open budget allocations, participatory governance forums, and inclusive monitoring frameworks—can help ensure that women and local actors are not merely symbolic participants but hold tangible influence over outcomes. Conversely, opaque procedures risk reinforcing dependence on dominant partners and limiting accountability for gender commitments (Sondermann & Ulbert, 2021).

This very research project goes on to explore these various dynamics through a case study of a gender equality initiative in Pastrana, which is a municipality in the province of Guadalajara, in Spain: by applying the framework of SDG 17, the study goes on to investigate the ways collaborative governance can both enable and constrain women's agency in local development; it goes on to analyse the ways resource access, institutional authority and transparency can shape the effectiveness of partnerships in promoting women's empowerment while advancing broader sustainability goals.

2. Study objective

The goal of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder partnerships (SDG 17) in order to promote gender equality and empowering women (SDG 5) in rural areas of Spain: to obtain this, a multiple-case study approach will be used in Pastrana, a rural municipality of Castilla-La Mancha province in the province of Guadalajara, Spain; it's a method that allows for a deep examination of how collaborative governance mechanisms and cross-sector partnerships could enhance the empowerment

of women, open opportunities for local opportunities, and address rural depopulation-related problems at the systemic level.

The secondary objectives involve the following:

- To collate and combine multifaceted viewpoints on the role and rural contribution of females, based on data received from a variety of respondents living within the adopted municipality.
- The objective is to analyse and summarize the interactions, links, and processes between the actors for the promotion of women empowerment for all case studies. The analysis aims at determining a pattern of collaboration, influence, and areas of obstruction towards effective involvement of a number of actors.

3. Methods

This research chose a single-case study method to collect and interpret data, integrating a thorough review of existing literature with semi-structured interviews: the investigation centred on Pastrana, a small town with roughly 890 residents situated in the province of Guadalajara, Spain and according to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics, Guadalajara ranks among the provinces, alongside Soria and Burgos, with the highest concentration of municipalities having fewer than 1,000 inhabitants; over the last twenty years, Spain has seen a 10.9 percent reduction in the number of municipalities with populations ranging from 501 to 1,000, a trend that reflects ongoing demographic shifts favoring urban areas: much of Guadalajara falls within the region commonly referred to as "España Vacía" or "Empty Spain," a term used to describe rural zones experiencing gradual suburbanization and a decline in essential services, it's a pattern, which began in the mid-twentieth century and persists today, that underscores the structural vulnerabilities of these territories and highlights the need for policy interventions aimed at fostering sustainable rural development.

Pastrana was chosen as the municipality based on the subsequent criteria:

- Located within the province of Guadalajara.
- Possessing a population ranging from 501 to 1,000 inhabitants.
- Limited accessibility via public transportation, such as bus or train connections.
- Restricted availability of large supermarket chains and franchised commercial establishments.
- Potentially restricted access to basic services like schools, pharmacies and fuel stations.
- Situated at least 50 kilometres from the nearest city and lacking modern road infrastructure.

Pastrana presented a very interesting stakeholder context. 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine the perspective of the stakeholders on the role of women in rural Spain. Among the interviewees were the:

- Working women
- Retired women
- Female entrepreneur

- Working men

The interview conduct process occurred between March and July 2024. Semi-structured interviews were created for gaining in-depth information across four main areas: (1) the interviewee's professional history and occupational trajectory, (2) knowledge and experiences on specific matters being investigated, (3) awareness of the landscape of stakeholders for the projects, and (4) perceptions on the role of women in rural Spain. At the conclusion of interviews, respondents were asked to fill out a Power-Interest matrix, on which they categorized the different stakeholders based on their perceived degree of influence and interest for the projects. This approach allowed for a nuanced comprehension of the relationships between the stakeholders and the dispersion of power and interest at a local level.

The information obtained from stakeholder interviews was examined and compiled into a stakeholder register that included the:

- Demographic and professional information for each interviewee.
- The stakeholder's main expectations about the role of women in the municipality.
- Challenges and issues experienced by the stakeholder in the local context.
- Recommendations, ideas or solutions by the stakeholder to address the identified challenges.

The interviews with stakeholders in Pastrana reflect the principles of Sustainable Development Goal 17 by encouraging open dialogue, the sharing of knowledge, and joint efforts among diverse actors: this research is especially pertinent to Target 17.16, which emphasizes the importance of strengthening global partnerships through collaborative efforts that draw on collective expertise, technological capabilities, and financial contributions and by engaging local authorities, representatives from civil society, and members of the community in organized discussions, the study illustrates how the cooperative approaches envisioned by SDG 17 can be realized in practice; it also aligns with Target 17.17, which calls for the development of effective partnerships among public bodies, private sector actors, and non-governmental organizations: the Pastrana case highlights how local, multi-actor collaborations can reflect the dynamics of international partnerships, offering concrete examples of how such models can be applied to promote gender equity and support sustainable development in rural areas.

The information collected during the stakeholder register was then used, using the methodology outlined by Winch and Bonke (2002), to produce a stakeholder map, with the mission of the project at its core. The already identified stakeholders were then placed according to the level of support for the project, while any arising challenges or limitations they might encounter were systematically recorded. Information gained through the semi-structured interviews was combined with the results of the analysis of the stakeholders' power and interest matrices so as to identify crucial issues determining the role and degree of representation of women amongst the rural communities under study. Through such combination, it was easy to have a holistic view of both the social, economic, and institutional factors determining women's participation and degree of influence within such local contexts.

4. Results

While the findings of this study are derived from qualitative interviews conducted in a single municipality and therefore cannot be generalized to all rural territories in Spain—where demographic, cultural, and institutional conditions may vary considerably—they nonetheless lay important groundwork for the future design and implementation of targeted interventions or policy programs aimed at mitigating population and socio-economic decline in the rural regions of “Empty Spain” and supporting the revitalization of these disadvantaged areas

In the municipality of Pastrana, thirteen stakeholders participated in interviews. The individuals who participated were divided into clear groups, with the corresponding number of interviewees for each category given in parentheses:

- Retired woman (1) – Many of the retired women had been housewives and are now living alone.
- Female workers (9) – The nine female workers interviewed worked in a number of different sectors.
- Male worker (1) – The male worker works in the local library.
- Female entrepreneur (1) – The female entrepreneur had developed several restaurant businesses in the municipality.

All interviewees were asked for their views on two general topics: (1) their community's depopulation problems and (2) the contribution of women's input on their local authority. Data obtained have been diligently assembled into a stakeholder register, a copy of which appears in Annex 1 towards the close of this chapter. The main issues perceived by interviewees related to the depopulation problem in the municipality of Pastrana are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Main issues perceived by interviewees related to the depopulation problem in the municipality of Pastrana

WORKING WOMEN	RETIRED WOMAN	FEMALE ENTREPRENEUR	WORKING MAN
Scarce resources for young people	Few services	Difficulty finding support and grants for entrepreneurship projects	No industry
Difficulty balancing work and family life	Very few people	Considerable uncertainty for businesses and their long-term sustainability	Many retired people
Low salaries	Essential services are missing (nursery, pediatrician, cinema, child benefits)	Fewer services	Lack of young people
Few people living in the village	Food is expensive	Fewer people visit the village	Lack of services such as pediatrics
High rents		No leisure or entertainment options for young people	Lack of transport
Few services (pediatrician, geriatric care, butcher, fishmonger, furniture store)		Uncertain future for the village	
Aging population /No young people			
No support for new businesses			
Difficult to find a job			
No industries such as agriculture			
Many empty houses in the village (difficulty renovating homes; many only used on weekends)			
Lack of transport / Poor transport connections			

The stakeholder analysis carried out in Pastrana highlighted a rich and varied network of local actors spanning the public sector, private enterprises, and civil society organizations: while interviewees shared a strong commitment to the municipality's social and environmental welfare, their views on local development reflected differences shaped by their individual roles and experiences; key aspirations among participants included fostering greater community engagement, raising the profile of local businesses, and reinforcing institutional backing for sustainable rural progress, however, several persistent challenges were identified, such as limited job prospects, ongoing depopulation, inadequate services for both youth and the elderly, and restricted access to funding and technical assistance for entrepreneurial ventures; stakeholders also pointed to a lack of coordination among local institutions and insufficient communication between municipal authorities and residents: to address these issues, commonly proposed strategies involved encouraging joint initiatives, upgrading infrastructure and digital access, and implementing programs aimed at attracting and retaining younger populations.

In relation to the issue of depopulation in the municipality, the primary challenges posed by interviewed actors are given below. For the analytical purposes, both-sex respondents with identical professional profiles were clustered together, since the authors identified that impacts of depopulation have the same effects on both sexes within the professional context shared between them.

The interviewees were also asked about how they viewed and considered the role of women in the village: the gender dimension emerged as an important cross-cutting issue and women, in particular, highlighted persistent inequalities in terms of recognition, participation, and access to resources; several female interviewees pointed to the difficulty of reconciling family obligations with professional or entrepreneurial activities, emphasizing the need for greater institutional support and more flexible local policies, at the same time, many women were identified as active agents in community engagement and cultural initiatives, underscoring their central role in sustaining the social fabric of Pastrana: addressing gender-specific barriers was therefore perceived as a necessary condition for achieving more equitable and inclusive rural development.

The stakeholders listed in Figure 1 were also categorized according to whether they were happy or not about the role of women in the municipality. The supporters were categorized by stars. Although the trends extracted from the stakeholder map are further described in the Discussion of this chapter, it is possible to observe that all stakeholder interviewed supported the role of women in the municipality, there were therefore no reticent stakeholders. The problems experienced by the different stakeholders were represented by the rectangles with rounded edges and the solutions to these problems by rectangles with straight edges.

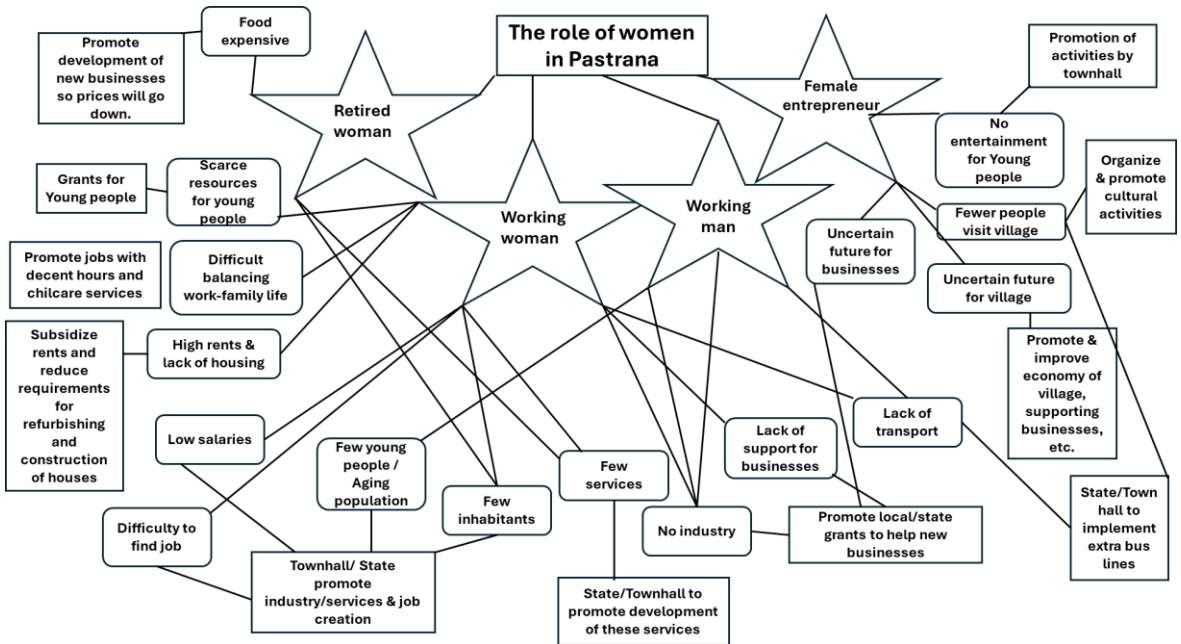


Figure 2: Stakeholder map showing the different perspectives of the interviewees regarding the role of women in Pastrana.

5. Discussion

The potential value of this project is considerable, as it offers salient findings on the driving forces shaping rural development and gender integration in Spain. The study examines the perceptions of a broad range of stakeholders regarding the evolving role of women within rural society. Over recent decades, many of these territories have suffered persistent depopulation and socio-economic decline, leading to processes of economic and social desertification that threaten the long-term viability of rural settlements (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011; Tárraga-Davia & Morales-Pérez, 2021). These demographic and economic transformations have not only reduced the availability of essential services but have also deepened structural inequalities, disproportionately affecting women, whose access to employment, leadership roles, and social networks remains limited.

Consistent with existing literature linking rural depopulation to gender inequality and restricted access to services, this study reinforces and extends prior scholarship by

providing field-based evidence that underscores the central role of women in community resilience and rural regeneration. Authors such as Collantes and Pinilla (2011) have emphasized the undervalued contribution of women to the revitalization of rural areas; this research strengthens those arguments by demonstrating that active female participation contributes directly to improved social cohesion, enhanced local governance, and more sustainable development outcomes in depopulated regions of Spain.

Leveraging a multi-stakeholder framework consistent with the ethos of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, the study adopts an integrative approach to understanding how women's empowerment functions as a strategic driver of rural revitalization (UN, 2015). By engaging local governments, entrepreneurs, community organizations, and citizens, this framework facilitated the identification of both structural barriers and tangible opportunities for inclusive development. It also revealed the broader social and economic benefits that can emerge through collaborative governance—such as closing gender gaps, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting more resilient, sustainable, and adaptive local economies. Furthermore, this framework highlights the interlinkages between gender equity, institutional cooperation, and territorial sustainability, illustrating how multi-level partnerships and gender-responsive policies can collectively contribute to reversing rural decline and fostering more equitable and dynamic rural communities.

Furthermore, this framework also identifies the inter-linkages between partnership for achieving the goals (SDG 17) and gender equality (SDG 5); active political, business, and cultural participation by women can have multiplier effects that cascade beyond individual economic empowerment, generating innovation, community resilience, and overall dynamism in rural areas (Paniagua *et al.*, 2018): the study identifies that policies aimed at turning around rural depopulation should thus include gender-sensitive policies and provisions for enabling women to take central positions in shaping economic, social, as well as cultural developments and by documenting the daily realities and insights of stakeholders in local government such as Pastrana, the study also contributes to growing evidence regarding how localized SDG implementation may provide lessons transferable to other rural contexts facing similar demographic, economic, and social pressures, the results indicate that gender-sensitive, inclusive rural development strategies are not just ethically required but are also strategically key to creating long-term territorial sustainability, social cohesion, and community well-being. The Pastrana stakeholder registers reflected a mixed range of indigenous actors including working women, retired women and female entrepreneurs. Of these groups, respondents demonstrated a high degree of place attachment and heightened awareness of the structural problems rural Spain is experiencing. In general, interviewees supported positive attitudes towards working together and community-driven projects, valuing their capacity to build local development and social cohesion. Differences were stark, though, regarding the capacity to propel decision-making processes. One of the common challenges with the use of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the systematic failure to demonstrate their potential, particularly because there is poor access to aggregated outcomes, "lessons learned," and transferable knowledge from past projects.

By project implementation and component spread, the research aims to contribute to the world's repertoire of SDG-based experiences to ease collective learning

as well as project management of the follow-up projects that apply integrated, multi-stakeholder approaches: within such collaboration, the means, capacity, and capabilities of different social actors are thereafter converged, so the creation of innovative points of view and responses to issues of complicated sustainability is encouraged and to this end, this research supplies valuable information to policymakers and governments, offering more realistic data on which to predicate adequate interventions to combat depopulation in rural Spain; it's a vision that closely aligns with the values that drive the 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator, which was launched by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and The Partnering Initiative in 2020 in collaboration with many international partners: the project seeks to increase organizational capacity to form and sustain productive partnerships towards supporting the SDGs by leveraging their internal policies, strategies, institutional systems, and organizational cultures for productive collaboration (Stibbe & Prescott, 2020). The present research adds to this agenda by demonstrating how multi-stakeholder participation can work not only as an instrumental device, but also as a process of transformation for the resolution of entrenched socio-economic problems in rural settings.

5.1. Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration through SDG 17

Spain is also challenged today with the reversal of depopulation in the rural areas. An estimated 76.6% of Spanish municipalities contain less than 1,000 people, with 63% of small towns and more than half of the provincial capitals suffering extreme demographic contraction (Bandrés & Azón, 2021). Based on the Ministry of Agriculture (2020) statistics, the urban and peri-urban areas now account for approximately 85% of the combined population with the remainder occupying rural areas (15%). Municipalities with populations below 1,000 people occupy 61.4% of all local jurisdictions and encompass almost 40% of the Spanish territory but contribute just 3.11% of the Spanish people (Gómez-Mendoza, 2020). This uneven balance highlights the scope of the rural depopulation effect and the impact on territorial cohesion and sustainable development. The findings of this study reveal that stakeholders in Pastrana share a common understanding of the main structural challenges affecting rural communities. The issues most frequently cited by interviewees included a weak local economy, insufficient transport infrastructure, the lack of essential public services, an ageing population, and the scarcity of employment opportunities—particularly for younger residents, who are often compelled to migrate in search of better prospects. Despite these constraints, participants articulated a shared vision of promoting sustainable rural development through enhanced cooperation, greater social participation, and economic diversification. A recurring theme was the need to improve the visibility of local businesses and foster stronger coordination among different actors at the local level. Several stakeholders emphasized the importance of encouraging entrepreneurship, especially among younger generations, as a potential strategy to mitigate depopulation and stimulate local economies. Furthermore, there was broad agreement on the necessity of greater institutional support, more effective communication channels between local authorities and citizens, and expanded opportunities for training and capacity building in areas related to sustainability and innovation.

The challenges facing rural Spain are multifaceted, deeply intertwined with economic, social, and infrastructural dimensions: a central issue is the limited availability of employment, particularly for young women, which perpetuates cycles of outmigration and demographic decline; this scarcity of jobs is compounded by low population density, which undermines the viability of local businesses and discourages external investment (Martínez-Vérez, 2025), simultaneously, the erosion of essential public services such as transportation, healthcare and education, further isolates rural communities.

According to the OECD, regions like Castilla y León are increasingly burdened by aging populations and shrinking rural settlements, leading to heightened demands on healthcare and long-term care systems, while also suffering from chronic underinvestment in transport, digital infrastructure, and regional economic development (OECD, 2023): these service deficits not only diminish quality of life but also weaken the region's ability to attract new residents and economic activity. Furthermore, the lack of recreational and culture centres for the youth is also of concern: research shows that the lack of such centres contributes to the feeling of alienation and disconnection among the youth with the consequence of speeding the depopulation process (Carrasco-Cruz, 2025). This requires policies in support of cultural infrastructure investment in order to maintain and attract the youth.

Additional obstacles include limited access to financial aid and subsidies for new initiatives, as well as bureaucratic hurdles that complicate the execution of local projects: these challenges are not unique to Spain; similar issues have been observed across the European Union, in response, the EU is actively supporting programs that address key areas such as public service provision, digital transformation, sustainable transportation, improved urban-rural connectivity, housing development, and the encouragement of entrepreneurship in non-urban communities with fewer than 10,000 residents: targeted regions for these efforts include Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura, and Castilla y León (European Commission, 2023).

Persistent concerns about the long-term sustainability of local businesses emerged as a central theme, reflecting the wider demographic and economic strains affecting rural Spain: aging populations and diminishing economic activity pose serious threats to the viability of these enterprises (Martínez-Vérez, 2025) and tackling these challenges requires both medium- and long-term strategic planning: one proposed solution involves crafting a comprehensive national policy, supported across political lines, that targets four key areas: regulatory reform, administrative tools, financial investment, and the implementation of focused (García, 2019); it's a broad framework that should be complemented by tailored, region-specific actions that address the unique conditions of "Emptied Spain", a term describing rural areas facing depopulation and service decline; such targeted efforts are essential for reversing demographic trends and fostering the sustainable renewal of rural communities.

It is time to turn policies found on papers into practical action and proceed with effective implementation. Greater institutional support is called for at all government levels: the European Union level and national, regional, local government levels, and Autonomous Communities. Even if such communities hold the competence adequate to face such issues within their region, their concern remains oriented towards technical activity such as urban planning, transport, and housing and regular administrative

responsibilities without the inclusion of effective medium- and long-term plans regarding the depopulation of the Spanish rural areas.

To face such challenges, interviewees proposed several measures aiming at reactivating the local economy and reinforcing social cohesion. The most recurrent proposals involved the development of shared projects between public authorities, local associations, and private initiatives. Various actors proposed the creation of incentives for entrepreneurs and the launching of support programs for the development of small businesses. The enhancement of digital connectivity and transport infrastructure has also appeared essential in order to attract new populations and provide better access to services. Lastly, interviewees emphasized the importance of valorising the cultural and natural patrimoine of Pastrana in the form of a key tool for the development of tourism with a sustainable profile and community pride. In general terms, such measures proposed testify to the widely expressed intention of making the municipality more dynamic, inclusive, and resilient.

5.1. Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration through SDG 17

The potential value of this study is considerable, as it offers salient insights into the driving forces shaping rural development and gender integration in Spain. The study examines the perceptions of a diverse range of stakeholders regarding the evolving role of women within rural society. Over recent decades, many of these territories have experienced persistent depopulation and sustained socio-economic decline, leading to processes of economic and social desertification that threaten the long-term viability of rural settlements (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011; Tárraga-Davia & Morales-Pérez, 2021). These transformations have not only reduced access to essential services but have also deepened structural inequalities, disproportionately affecting women, whose opportunities for employment, leadership, and social participation remain constrained.

Consistent with previous scholarship linking rural depopulation to gender inequality and restricted access to services, this research reinforces the arguments advanced by authors such as Collantes and Pinilla, who underscore the undervalued role of women in rural revitalization. By providing field-based qualitative evidence, the study strengthens these perspectives, demonstrating that enhanced female participation contributes to greater social cohesion and local development in depopulated regions of Spain. Leveraging a multi-stakeholder framework aligned with the ethos of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, the project enabled a holistic understanding of how women's empowerment can act as a strategic driver of rural regeneration. Through engagement with local governments, entrepreneurs, community organizations, and citizens, this approach identified both structural barriers and tangible opportunities for inclusive development while also revealing the broader social benefits of collaborative governance—such as narrowing gender gaps, fostering community cohesion, and promoting more resilient, sustainable, and adaptive local economies (UN, 2015).

Gender emerged as a key cross-cutting theme throughout the stakeholder analysis, revealing how structural inequalities intersect with local socio-economic conditions to shape the opportunities available to women in rural Spain (Tárraga-Davia & Morales-Pérez, 2021); female participants consistently pointed to enduring disparities in recognition, participation, and access to resources, which continue to constrain their

involvement in economic, social, and political spheres: these inequalities are further intensified by the demographic and infrastructural challenges typical of depopulated rural areas—such as limited job prospects, aging populations, and insufficient public services—making it even more difficult for women to thrive in these settings (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011; OECD, 2023). A number of female interviewees mentioned the trade-offs in terms of balancing family obligations with professional or business activities, noting the shortcomings in terms of adequate children's care service provisions and restricted availability of flexible work regimes. Such limitations redounds with prevailing evidence in the literature concerning rural gender inequality in that the research shows that rural women tend to face the double burden of economic obligations and household responsibilities and this tends to confine them in participating in the formal labour markets and in terms of displaying community leadership (Paniagua *et al.*, 2018; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2022).

Empowering women in rural areas is therefore not merely a matter of fairness—it is a strategic imperative for fostering sustainable development and strengthening community resilience. Interviews highlighted that women often play leading roles in initiatives related to social welfare, cultural enrichment, and education, and their active involvement in volunteer groups, artistic and cultural programming, and local governance was repeatedly cited as a cornerstone of cohesion and innovation within the municipality (Bock, 2015; Shortall, 2022). Several interviewees emphasized that empowering female populations and enhancing gender equity could generate multiplier effects on Pastrana's overall development by strengthening social networks and increasing the community's adaptive capacity (Agarwal, 2018). Addressing gender-specific barriers was thus widely recognized as an essential precondition for building more inclusive and equitable rural development, aligning with the broader objectives of the 2030 Agenda—particularly SDG 5 on gender equality (UN, 2015).

Nevertheless, future research should broaden this analysis beyond Pastrana by comparing multiple rural municipalities across Spain or Europe to capture diverse demographic, institutional, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies would be valuable for assessing whether women-focused initiatives lead to enduring demographic stabilization or socio-economic revitalization. Additionally, examining how factors such as digital connectivity, sustainable tourism, or entrepreneurship training influence migration trends—especially among younger women—remains an open and promising empirical question that warrants further investigation (Cánoves *et al.*, 2016; European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2021).

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an essential condition for the development of more inclusive and equitable rural development and as the strategic priority which is in tandem with the overall agenda of the 2030 Agenda especially the SDG 5 concerning gender equity.

Women also mentioned an array of challenges among which some overlapped with the more general depopulation worries among rural populations like limited availability of transport means, lack of adequate basic infrastructure, ageing of the population, and limited job availability—especially among the female youth (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011; OECD, 2023); all of these challenges form an outmigration and social vulnerability dynamic, particularly among the youngest age groups who can seek better education and economic prospects in other places: retired women also mentioned feeling socially excluded because many of them remained alone following the death of their husbands and outward migration of their offspring for work or education purposes: these cases reflect the intersection between demographic transition, exclusion and gender and the significance of policies sensitive to such cumulative vulnerabilities (Paniagua et al., 2018; EIGE, 2022).

Limited employment opportunities for women, especially younger women, have further contributed to the masculinization of rural society in Spain: depopulated areas have consequently experienced a relative increase in the male population, while the number of women has declined and is generally older, as observed in municipalities such as Pastrana; it's a demographic imbalance that underscores the critical role of women in addressing rural depopulation and sustaining community vitality: research emphasizes that women's participation in economic, social, and leadership activities is essential for fostering resilience, innovation, and sustainable development in rural areas (Tárraga-Davia & Moralez-Pérez, 2021); addressing these challenges requires integrated strategies that combine gender-sensitive policy interventions with measures to improve employment opportunities, access to services, and social inclusion for women across all age groups: in several interviews, the concept of entrepreneurship emerged as a central mechanism for stimulating rural development and female entrepreneurship, in particular, represents a powerful tool for revitalizing local economies and fostering social innovation (Paniagua et al., 2018; Tárraga-Davia & Moralez-Pérez, 2021).

Women-led initiatives, which span sectors such as organic agriculture, rural tourism, and technology-based enterprises, not only generate employment opportunities but also contribute to the sustainability and resilience of local communities by diversifying income sources and promoting environmentally and socially responsible practices (OECD, 2023; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2022).

Additionally, active participation in leadership positions in cooperatives, agricultural associations, and local development organizations on the part of women is redefining conventional power relations and promoting more inclusive, egalitarian, and collaborative management systems (Paniagua et al., 2018): by incorporating innovative measures and collaborative forms of governing, female entrepreneurs contribute to the reinforcement of social networks, increased community cohesion, and role model status among youth, enhancing the overall process of rural reinvigoration; all of these observations show the strategic relevance of promoting female entrepreneurship through selected training initiatives, availability of funds, and the creation of supportive institutional conditions conducive to enabling the leadership and innovativeness of rural women,

nevertheless, in Pastrana, entrepreneurship potential is limited due to the aged, retired profile of the inhabitants: since many people retired at the nuclear power station during their active years, they do not possess the experience nor the entrepreneurial culture to create new innovative initiatives. Thus, external assistance is necessary to initiate new projects and tap the potential of the municipality. An interesting prospect comes in the form of rural tourism, with the village enjoying an otherwise unique natural setting. The involvement of all women in tourism initiatives may offer the sustainable route to economic reinvigoration while supporting gender-inclusive development approaches.

6. Conclusions

The study shows clearly that addressing the complex challenges of rural depopulation in Spain needs an integrated, multi-stakeholder approach that can systematically incorporate gender considerations; the case that has been analysed involving Pastrana showed that the involvement and empowerment of women are the main core of any effective rural revival strategy and by simply analysing the perspectives of regional stakeholders that included municipal officials, entrepreneurs and residents, makes it clear that sustainable rural development varies a lot according to cooperation, collective responsibility and coordinated action across social, economic and political fields; revolving around this framework, SDG 17 serves both analytical and practical purposes while promoting policy coherence, institutional coordination and inclusive social mobilization on a regional scale.

The study goes on to reveal that rural depopulation is more than a simple demographic concern, it's a multidimensional process that is strongly driven by structural imbalances, by restricted access to services and by deep-rooted economic decline: among the main obstacles there are limited employment opportunities, inadequate transport and digital infrastructure and insufficient family–work reconciliation mechanisms; it's these challenges that disproportionately affect women and their potential to drive transformation constraining them with unequal access to information, decision-making spaces and institutional support: overcoming these barriers requires both a targeted short-term policies and also long-term cultural and institutional change that values women as agents of innovation, governance, and community resilience.

Importantly, the feasibility of proposed interventions varies a lot according to strengthening financial and administrative capacity at the municipal and regional levels and while stakeholders tend to advocate cooperation, practical implementation often goes on to face constraints such as limited budgets, bureaucratic fragmentation and overlapping competences between local and national authorities; not having an adequate funding mechanism, trained personnel and accountability frameworks, even well-designed initiatives risk to fail to achieve sustained impact, therefore, effective governance structures that can ensure transparency, local participation and cross-sectoral coordination are extremely important in order to transform policy recommendations into realistic and actionable rural development strategies.

The study is particularly useful to show the vital yet frequently overlooked role of women in their community as leaders, social innovators and promoters of cultural cohesion, in fact, their active engagement in volunteer organizations, in cultural projects

and in small-scale enterprises shows a strong commitment to the sustainment of the vibrancy of rural life and investing in training, dedicated funds and enhanced digital connectivity might even generate significant multiplier effects that could trigger entrepreneurship, social innovation and broader rural regeneration; it's a perspective that shows that advancing gender equality (SDG 5) and fostering partnerships (SDG 17) are mutually reinforcing objectives that can strongly enrich both the sustainability and the inclusiveness of the development of rural areas.

This work adds to the growing academic dialogue about the localized implementation of the SDGs, offering various concrete lessons that can be useful for policy formulation and practice; the analysis of municipalities like Pastrana allows the research to bridge knowledge gaps and to provide empirical evidence in order to inform national and international efforts toward rural revitalization; the various findings also go on to underscore the importance of developing monitoring and accountability mechanisms that include transparent budgeting, participatory planning and independent evaluation in order to ensure that proposed actions are both feasible and effective: the creation of repositories of lessons learned and best practices might even be useful to further facilitate knowledge exchange among policymakers, scholars and local communities while enhancing collective capacity to design and deploy context-sensitive interventions that can help the development of sustainability in rural areas.

Lastly, rural rejuvenation in Spain varies a lot according to sustained political will, long-term strategic thinking and cross-ministerial coordination: the various policies must move beyond rhetorical commitments and toward consistent investment in infrastructure, education, entrepreneurship and social innovation; the engagement of women and youth as integral actors in these processes is both a moral duty and also a strategic necessity for the endurance of rural communities: the evidence gathered from Pastrana shows clearly that inclusive participation, partnership governance and gender equity are useful organizing principles for building dynamic, resilient and socially cohesive rural societies; countering depopulation requires a multidimensional effort aligning demographic, economic, social and gender perspectives while also enhancing institutional capacity, accountability and financial viability: by placing women's empowerment at the core of regional development strategies, the various stakeholders can mobilize human capital while promoting inclusive governance and implementing flexible, evidence-based policies that are specifically tailored to the unique needs of every single territory.

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