

Shepherdesses: new representations of rural women in Spain

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Abstract

This article discusses the practices of representing shepherd women in Spain, who have recently become more visible. New representations challenge stereotyped concepts of gender roles and rurality in such a masculinized context as the livestock sector. One of the main arguments of the article is that shepherdesses narratives and visuals connect with the sustainable agro-social development of the economy from an ecofeminist perspective. The authors conducted a close reading of a selection of productions, including short videos and media interventions about shepherdesses. Among the conclusions, they argue that shepherdesses' media productions and interventions put women at the center of local development processes, with particular emphasis on their role and leadership qualities. Their activities promote and maintain a networked sisterhood that activates intersectional approaches in favor of alternative structures to farming and life in rural areas.

Keywords: shepherd women, rural women, gender representations, ecofeminism, networked sisterhood, *sororidad*

1. Introduction

In 2016, an advertisement for mineral water on Spanish television depicted an image of the working life of a modern woman that had a significant impact. The video told the story of a

young woman from an urban environment who moved to the region of the High Pyrenees to become a shepherd and tend her own livestock. The following year a new version was released in which the young shepherd narrates in the first person the reasons for her decision to leave the city and move to the mountains to raise sheep (Veri Pirineo 2016, 2017). The advertisement was in fact a docuspot that told the real story of Anna Plana, a shepherdess who became an example for neo-rural women. Her story was in a variety of media outlets (Carme Escales 2016; Laura Fábregas 2016; Txell Partal 2016; Mónica Pelliccia 2015). Vanesa Freixa, head of the Escola de Pastors de Catalunya (Shepherds School of Catalonia) where Plana studied, said that she represented what was “ceasing to be the exception to the rule” (Freixa 2020, 11). Actually, there is a growing presence of pastoralist women in Spain with diverse background and motivations who, despite encountering discrimination, are creating their own networks (María E. Fernández-Giménez et al. 2021).

Although the ad could not be framed simply as *femvertising* (Nosheen Iqbal 2015; Kasey Windels et al. 2019; Neema Varghese and Navin Kumar 2020), the TV spot highlighted some of the problems raised by the feminist claims of women livestock farmers. It showed the tip of an iceberg, and was a foretaste of portrayals of transformations in the rural world, a new women’s pastoralist movement. These changes have taken place in parallel with an associative process of self-organization and mutual support among rural women that have emerged in different parts of Spain. One example is Ganaderas en Red (GeR) (Women’s Livestock Farmers Network), a group which in 2016 brought together pastoralists and extensive livestock farmers from small towns in Andalusia, Extremadura, Castilla y León, La Rioja and Madrid (García 2016), and Ramaderes de Catalunya (Ramaderes.cat) (Women’s Livestock Farmers of Catalonia), which in 2018 was founded to promote extensive livestock farming from a feminist and anti-capitalist perspective (Laia Solé and Julia Claramunt 2020).¹

The new networks have been created to vindicate the role and agency of women in the rural world and to propose new ways of producing food and new relationships with nature. But how are they doing this and what are the factors that identify them as a renewed movement

¹ Extensive livestock farming raises animals in the wild on large expanses of land and by means of outdoor grazing. It uses the natural resources of the area in such a way that production is compatible with the environment (see GeR 2020b). Intensive animal farming is an industrial livestock system designed to maximize production that uses large numbers of animals usually confined indoors.

connecting feminism and environmentalism in Spain? These ideas underlie our research questions: How are the shepherdesses' stories and media representations challenging gender stereotypes? (RQ1); and what salient elements of ecofeminism do we encounter in shepherdesses' self-representing and mediatized stories? (RQ2). To answer these questions, we (1) conducted a close reading of the shepherdesses' self-representing texts, and (2) explored how they match some of the salient markers of ecofeminist discourses. Using an inductive qualitative approach, the authors examined the discursive features of the texts that promoted gender equality and matched ecofeminist premises. Two sorts of textual representations were analyzed to achieve these research goals: productions by the shepherdesses' associations and mediatized interventions of their members in the media.

2. Ecofeminism and rural representations

Several authors have suggested that the link between feminism and ecology should not be taken for granted and their combined analysis should consider the costs and benefits of their relationship (Stacy Alaimo 2008; Cecile Jackson 1993; Val Plumwood; 1993, Karen Warren 2000). Warren (2000, 44) located the ecofeminist philosophy at the intersection of feminism, nature, science, development and technology, and – what is also relevant to our study –, local and indigenous perspectives. Moreover, the ethical condition of ecofeminism is against any *-ism* that promotes forms of domination (racism, sexism, classism, naturism, etc.). From a holistic position, she identified ecofeminism ethics with “a kind of narrative about humans, human-human relationships, and human-non human animal or nature relationships” (Warren 2000, 99) and focused on the impact of our actions on ecosystems more than on specific individuals (Alicia Puleo 2011).

Ecofeminist theories stress that the subordination of women and the degradation of the planet are related in accordance with the logic of accumulation and social systems of oppression (Yayo Herrero 2015; Chaone Mallory 2018, 29). In this vein, ecofeminisms display a critique of the social, economic and cultural model in which aspects related to socio-economic structures take on special relevance. As Amaranta Herrero says (2017, 27), “ecological feminisms are undertaking a new ethical, social, cultural and political project to counter the crisis of patriarchal, consumerist and individualized values promoted by Western societies”. It is a patently political and transformative approach that also overcomes the rural-urban

dichotomy as it involves trained women coming from or returning to the countryside from the city (Mireia Baylina et al. 2019; Maria E. Fernandez-Gimenez et al. 2021) and connects the struggle for gender equality with movements focusing on social justice, democracy, energy sustainability or food sovereignty (Ariel Salleh 2017). Therefore, one layer of ecofeminist discourses is not just the connection between nature and woman/man emancipation but also their links with socioeconomic transformations, and their stand against extractive capitalism and in defense of more sustainable and democratic forms of food production. Ecofeminism articulates a *political perspective* through discourse and action.

Secondly, ecofeminism has adopted an *intersectional perspective* that denounces that gender discrimination is interwoven with class, race, sexuality and disability. The contextual and historical roots of gender discrimination are important if the intersectional roots of ecofeminism are to be understood. A. E. Kings (2017: 72) states that, although ecofeminism has been intersectional from the very beginning, its transition into “a period of application” is more recent. In the last decade, the internet and virtual networks have provided a powerful platform for feminist activism with an intersectional approach (Tegan Zimmerman 2017). Intersectional ecofeminist communication approaches are, also, *non-anthropocentric* (Norie Ross Singer 2020), which means that they regard non-human animals as agents and explore relationships between humans that go beyond their nature as human beings.

Intersectional ecofeminism also goes beyond dualism, which had already been problematized by feminism. Plumwood (1993) revamped this critique and applied it to ecofeminism in the 1990s. Binaries (reason/emotion, culture/nature, mind/body, production/reproduction, urban/rural) are old instruments at the service of hegemonic structures of power and domination, and are not just a matter of patriarchal ideologies but a sort of formatted thought. Freya Mathews (2017, 68) acknowledged the difficulties of avoiding such binaries and suggested that ecofeminism should be “constructed primarily as a discipline of practice”. For our purposes, it is important to see how shepherdesses’ stories deal with dualisms or what Mathews calls the *strategia* in a Global North scenario such as Spain.

Ecofeminist studies have put special emphasis on such aspects as climate change activism (Greta Gaard 2015; Anna Kaijser and Annica Kronsell 2014; Marcela Tovar-Restrepo 2017). However, media and culture approaches are still scarce and little effort has been made to examine how ecofeminist premises are expressed in practice. In our study, we explored the

stereotypes of rural women and gender roles by looking at cultural and media representations of shepherd women in rural environments. The Spanish literary tradition offers popular representations of rural women from a gaze of misogyny or fragility which has its origins in the pastoral novel (Cristina Castillo 2010). Later, shepherdesses were traditionally portrayed through a romanticised lens or attached to innocence. When mass media arrived on the scene in the 20th century, this was still the image associated with rural women in general, and shepherdesses in particular. While there is some research on the general media and the fictional representations of gender stereotypes and working women in Spain (CIMA 2020; Charo Lacalle and Beatriz Gómez 2016), there is very little that focuses specifically on the representations of Spanish rural women. Some research has shown that rural women only play a minor role in regional media and cinema (María Irene Morán and Marcelo Sánchez-Oro 2013; Begoña Gutiérrez 2013). In contemporary media, not only in Spain but also in Europe, representations of the rural setting have maintained a traditional masculinized image in which men are the protagonists and women are relegated to supporting roles (Gunnel Forsberg and Susanne Stenbacka 2013).

Stereotypes tend to portray rural women as conservative, passive subjects with reactionary ideas who are unlikely to defend feminism, in stark contrast to urban women (Belinda Leach 2015; Barbara Pini et al 2015). On the other hand, women in Spanish rural environments – in addition to their precarious positions – are quite invisible in the official data, although according to some indicators their work is more significant than what the statistics suggest (Luis Camarero 2008). Women who return to rural environments do so for a wide variety of reasons. A qualitative study of cases in Galicia and Catalonia claims that they are looking for a new “more emotional connection with the land,” are more aware of environmental issues, and aim to carry on their family heritage. Many of them “have broken through gender barriers” and have acquired agency (Isabel Salamaña et al 2016, 679). Yet, social norms in the countryside mean that the changes sought by these women are slow to come about (Mireia Baylina et al. 2017, 2019). Overall, there is not a unique pattern for Spanish women’s roles in the livestock sector, and the motivations, goals and challenges they face are diverse: their realities do not fit stereotypes (Fernandez-Gimenez et al 2021).

Beyond numerical under-representation in the livestock sector, rural women are rendered invisible in the context of a symbolic and material patriarchal system that associates femininity with relational social roles and reproductive and care-giving tasks, while

masculinity is associated with agentic and leadership roles as well as productive activities and the more strenuous tasks of life in the countryside. Transformations have nevertheless taken place in rural areas on a global level in recent decades which, as feminist rural studies research points out, are reshaping ideologies and gender relations (Baylina et al 2017; Baylina et al 2016; Baylina et al. 2019; Belinda Leach 2015; Ruth Panelli 2007; Pini et al 2015; Salamaña et al 2016) and occasionally the allocation of productive and reproductive work as well (Anne Byrne et al 2015).

3. Materials and methods

The research reviewed a selection of media and audiovisual productions on open access online platforms. The approach was based on a qualitative textual analysis combined with close reading techniques (David L. Altheide and Christopher J. Schneider 2013; Barry Brummett 2019). Qualitative textual analysis is a useful method for studying representations or storytelling involving ethical values and political ideas. The qualitative analysis of ideas identifies descriptive, critical and normative features of a given discourse, and can also be used to understand social movements and critical thought (Mats Lindberg 2017, 94-95). Likewise, close reading techniques put the focus on ideologies and arguments contained in a wide range of media or cultural outlets – from video storytelling to cartoons or television programs – and can deal with such questions as who is empowered or disempowered in a text (Brummett 2019, 73).

The analysis focused in particular on two organizations producing audiovisual materials on the Internet and appearing in the media: Ganaderas en Red (GeR) and Ramaderes de Catalunya (Ramaderes.cat). The texts were purposely selected, and included vindications of the role of women in the livestock sector that have appeared in the media and have produced self-promotional audiovisuals in the last five years. As well as these organizations, we included other shepherd initiatives like the Escola de Pastors de Catalunya (Shepherds School of Catalonia), directed by a team of women technicians² and led until 2016 by Vanesa Freixa, founder of the school. We also considered online information by other associations of rural women such as Dones del Món Rural (Women of the Rural World).

² See <https://escoladepastorsdecatalunya.cat/qui-som/>, last access October 13 2021.

We selected two types of material: self-made videos, created and disseminated by the associations of shepherdesses; and mediatized representations of shepherdesses in which they were interviewed in media productions. The materials were collected in 2020 and 2021 from a variety of open, public platforms. We found salient productions published around specific dates like March 8th (International Women's Day), November 25th (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women), and around Christmas (when one association problematized consumerism discourses). On the one hand, we analyzed ten open on-line media materials published by shepherdesses' organizations that included nine short videos (GeR 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2019d; 2020a; Ramaderes.cat 2018; 2019; 2020a), and one promotional video (Mercieux and TKSH Films, 2014). Added to this, we studied seven productions that mediatized the representation of the shepherdesses including two TV adverts (Veri 2016, 2017), two radio programs (Pilar Sampietro 2019; Carne Cruda, 2020), one TV program (David Burillo 2017), one independent video (Solé and Claramunt 2020), and one online branded-documentary (Alfredo Lobo 2019). All these materials are duly referenced in the results section. The selection is not meant to represent the complexity of all discourses about women and rurality in Spain, or about all associations of shepherdesses; instead, it provides illustrative materials to conduct our analysis of shepherdesses' representations nowadays.

We followed an inductive process in the qualitative analysis and close reading, and allowed the topics and concepts to emerge from the texts. This involved collecting the main statements and arguments from each text, investigating ideas on women's roles, social and economic issues, the environmental positioning of the narrators, and contextualizing their ideas or noticing the formats and genre of the videos. We analyzed both the visual and textual features of the texts. The materials presented a rich variety of formats. Some were highly creative productions created by the shepherdesses' associations with a poetic tone, or around political campaigns, while others were media interventions in which they explain their projects.

4. Results

4.1. The tip of an iceberg

Obviously, there were shepherd women in Spain before the mid-2010s but the year 2016 was a turning point in the visibility of shepherdesses thanks to a commercial initiative: a TV advertisement for Agua de Veri (mineral water) featuring shepherd Anna Plana and aired on mainstream channels. Two versions of the advert (2016 and 2017) showed an empowered, determined woman who decides to move to the Pyrenees to raise a family and tend a flock of sheep.

In both videos, Plana appears resolute and determined in the face of the harshness of the elements. The figure of the young female shepherd is contrasted with older men who gaze on her with surprise and amazement. Some binaries are activated within the narrative (rural/urban, man/woman, young/old). Her agency is problematized from the beginning because they question her ability and doubt that she, a young city woman, can withstand the harsh climate and working conditions of the Pyrenees. The male community eventually accepts her as one of their own (“She’s one of us now”), but they still treat her paternalistically by referring to her in the diminutive (*la pastorcilla*, the little shepherdess).³ The male narrator explains that his view of the young shepherdess changed when he realized she was pregnant. It was then they knew she would stay. The second version of the advertisement summarized the initial and final status quo to the fullest, focusing on the problematization of the culminating moment: the image of the lone shepherdess gazing over the immensity of nature (Veri Pirineo 2017). There was also another major change in the second version: the narrator was now the shepherdess. This was meant to increase her empowerment by stressing her ability to sustain herself in her profession and in a mountain environment. The commercial narratives played with the binaries but, at the same time, just the presence of the shepherdess in the village and the mountains, her work with the sheep and her determination to challenge the elements problematized them.

Subsequently, the shepherdess told her story to journalists and had a better chance to speak for herself, though it was still filtered by the journalistic view. Her story had a considerable impact in the Spanish media, which picked up the story and published interviews with the protagonist (Carme Escales 2016; Laura Fábregas, 2016; Txell Partal 2016; Mónica Pelliccia 2015; Marc Testart 2016a; 2016b; Jordi Ubach 2016). Plana did not hide that her

³ This name is a translation of *la pastoreta* (Catalan diminutive for shepherdess), which is apparently how she was known by the local people (Laura Fábregas 2016).

determination to become a shepherd was also motivated by an advocacy for feminism in the masculinized agricultural-livestock sector. Her stance is a response to those who doubted her ability (Pelliccia 2015). Her story was later recognized and highlighted as an example of a new way approaching the role of women in the Catalan rural world and increasing their visibility (Jordi Casas 2019). A few years later, her story was chronicled in a biography (Laura Gordó 2020) that was much more of a self-portrayal than any of the previous texts. Her mission, Plana says, was to keep extensive livestock farms alive. Her commitment expressed feminist concerns, and she was conscious of the impact of the primary sector on the environment. Though this aim was not fully evident in the mineral water commercial, when closely read and contextualized, Plana's story clearly articulated a self-centered, feminist discourse, with strong environmental values. Overall, the commercial was the tip of an iceberg, or just one salient story among dozens.

4.2. Intersectional counter-stereotyping

An illustrative example of feminist environmentalism is Ramaderes de Catalunya, an association that defines itself as a “group of women livestock farmers”: “We’re women, we’re livestock farmers, we’re shepherdesses, we’re mothers, we’re partners and we’re united” (Ramaderes.cat 2020b). They are primarily an on-line community and are reluctant to create a formal association or entity to intermeditate with authorities (Rosa Matas 2018). Social media and the internet are tools that offer networking, community connections and a source of mutual support and solidarity in a very arduous profession where people learn by doing and where moments of solitude in the face of complex challenges are commonplace. Their storytelling is full of features that we can refer to as networked sisterhood (*sororidad*, in Spanish). Their solidarity brings together feminist concerns, intersectional counter-stereotyping which challenges discriminations of gender, class and place, and animal welfare vindications.

The video *Sense pastors no hi ha revolució!* (Ramaderes.cat 2018) begins with text on the screen, the motto “Doblement invisibilitzades, ens mantenim mobilitzades” (Doubly invisibilized, we remain mobilized), which alludes to the positioning of the group as vocal proponents of the intersection of a dual identity of gender and class/place: as women and as members of the livestock sector. The video uses a narrative device in which the content of the voiceover is contrasted with the content of the image. Different female voices make

statements referring to existing prejudices and sexist beliefs related to the characteristics of women and activities considered inappropriate (“Will you be able to herd livestock on your own?”, “Aren’t you afraid to walk through the forest by yourself? What if you don’t have phone coverage to make a call?”, among others). The women in the images perform tasks that contradict the assumptions of these statements and challenge gender mandates that consider physical strength, dirt, handling of tools and driving bulky equipment to be the business of men. The video ends by affirming the presence of women in the sector with the hashtag #sompastores (we’re shepherdesses) and the slogan “Sense pastores no hi ha revolució” (Without shepherdesses, there’s no revolution), which parallels the feminist slogan “Sense les dones no hi ha revolució” (Without women, there’s no revolution).

Sóc tota la meva fortuna (Ramaderes.cat 2019) focuses on a poetic text written and narrated by a member of the feminist shepherding movement. It is at once a poem and an essay that shows the perspective of a woman who defines herself as someone who is in opposition to the roles assigned to women in the past and the gender norms of female submission and passivity (“The story says that I was born for modesty and for pleasure. To serve. To be silent. Until yesterday, I was only a shadow”). The images show her working with animals and doing tasks related to shepherding along with images of her caring for the animals holding her baby. The scenes suggest a certain romanticism to life in the countryside, but a discourse of struggle appears over them: “I build myself on top of those who say I cannot. I walk over those who decide all this is not made for me.” The story is full of metaphors in which the protagonist expresses her identity as a unique, free, autonomous, and capable being in opposition to the discourses that have limited her life and defined what is improper for her (“They will not veto my life. They will not condition my challenges”). It is also a story of solidarity and bonding. The protagonist changes from an individual to a collective perspective and expresses herself in the plural (“We are not alone”), part of a historical injustice that unites women who have had to overcome the same impositions, the same fears.

The discourse of Ramaderes.cat, which had more than sixty members (Rosa Talamàs 2019), focuses on respect for the environment and sustainable rural development from a feminist perspective. The clip produced for International Women’s Day on 8 March 2020, *Doblement invisibilitzades, doblement mobilitzades* (Doubly invisibilized, doubly mobilized) (Ramaderes.cat 2020a) summarizes the many aspirations of the group and emphasizes that their struggle for rights promotes the emancipation of all women in rural as well as urban

areas. Its narrative encapsulates the feminist and environmentalist propositions of an association that promotes gender equality, and revitalizing and reappraising the value of rural areas with innovative and sustainable proposals. In addition to gender roles, their discourse challenges other stereotypes associated with these rural initiatives.

This reflective position is also found in GeR, a group involved in projects led by pastoralist women in various places in Spain (Cantabria, Extremadura, Catalonia, Madrid, Andalusia, and Leon). Its videos display a great deal of creativity as well as a mixture of narrative genres including poetry, music and theatre. In the video *Somos (We Are)* (GeR 2020a), broadcast on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March, the strength and hope that the union brings to the women of the network is expressed in the form of an audiovisual poem that highlights also what these women bring to the global feminist movement, i.e. overcoming the limits imposed by gender norms ("We are the exception to hundreds of rules"), a new movement that can transform society ("We are awareness, we are a path," "We are a seedling in a parched field"), and an engine of innovation and sustainable development ("We are ingenuity and we are effort", "We are the cure for this madness").

GeR disseminates videos that denounce the conditions of inequality experienced by women in the rural world and connects them with global claims of feminist and environmentalist movements. In *25N GeR contra el machismo (25N GeR against Male Chauvinism, in reference to the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women)* (GeR 2018), they offer an examination of the roots of gender-based violence, presenting situations of normalized *micromachismos*, or everyday instances of sexism and machismo in society. *Navidad consciente (Conscious Christmas)* (GeR 2019b) presents a Christmas carol with a punk rhythm to ring in the Christmas holidays with an anti-consumerist message. *¿Te suena? (Sound Familiar?)* (GeR 2019a) is a collaborative production made with Ramaderes.cat in which the two associations demand full recognition of women in rural areas and question the sexism they face in their daily activities, such as the belief that they should work in the service sector.

These videos are self-representations of shepherdesses which bring together environmental and anti-consumerism claims, activate feminist solidarity networks and fight against stereotypes that depict rural women as incapable, passive subjects. Their discourse relates gendered, discriminatory social structures to the sexual division of work and unsustainable

models of production. Their claims are linked, as we will see, to alternative views of the productive farming model from an intersectional perspective that considers gender, class, place (the rural), and socio-economic inequalities.

4.3. *A new political model of production*

The mobilization of rural women in the livestock sector is directly related to the food sovereignty movements. A program by Radio Exterior de España called *Vida Verde* (Green Life) dedicated a spot to Vanesa Freixa, founder of the Escola de Pastors and creator of the fabric brand Xisqueta, and Gustavo Duch, member of the magazine *Soberanía alimentaria* (Food Sovereignty) (Pilar Sampietro 2019). This was a mediated story of shepherds in which Freixa and Duch criticize the depopulation policies in mountain villages, forced expropriations due to the construction of reservoirs, and how these areas are being neglected and forgotten. Duch emphasizes that the cliché of shepherds has been superseded, and that these projects are in opposition to intensive industrial livestock farming. The story activates an intensive-extensive binary.

Intensive, industrial farming is contested and related to the degradation of the rural environment: the new generation of men and women returning to the countryside bring value to the tradition of shepherding, helping to create new perspectives for local development. GeR or Ramaderes.cat define themselves on the basis of this dichotomy: they are extensive livestock women who are opposed to intensive farming. The shepherdesses argue that extensive farming is a production system that protects the resources of the region, helps to maintain biodiversity by conserving autochthonous breeds and the diversity of pastures and other plant species, and looks after animal welfare, since animals spend their entire life cycle in their natural habitat (Solé and Claramunt 2020; GeR 2020b). Thus, the shepherdesses describe a non-anthropocentric relationship with nature and with non-human animals. In line with ecofeminist values and the holistic perspective of Karen Warren and Val Plumwood, their images and texts show an emotional bond with nature and sensitivity to animals, which are not mere means of production. GeR highlights this emotional and political commitment in the association's motto “La tierra en el alma, el viento en el pelo y el ganado en el corazón” (The land in the soul, the wind in the hair and livestock in the heart) (GeR 2020c).

Another example of mediated representations is an episode of the radio podcast *Carne cruda* (Raw Meat) (2020), one of the most successful alternative podcasts on the networks, which examined the question of livestock farming, food sovereignty and the role of women based on the experience of GeR. In an interview, one of the association's members pointed out that ideological reflection had played an important role in her decision to change her life and leave Madrid to breed sheep in the countryside in accordance with the agroecological values of extensive livestock farming. However, they usually argue against being labelled under any cliché. "We're not hippies," affirms one of the participants in the video *Ramaderes, pastoreo sin tópicos de género* (Shepherdesses, grazing without gender clichés) (Lobo 2019). The protagonists are members of Ramaderes.cat who explain that they are women with university degrees who left the rural environment and have now returned to it, or who come from a town, and have undertaken an extensive livestock project for environmental reasons and in search of a higher quality of life.

Vanesa Freixa is one of the leading voices in Televisió de Catalunya's program *Viure als Pirineus* (Living in the Pyrenees) (David Burillo 2017). The program is broadcast on a channel with a large audience, so its impact is greater than in other alternative media. It reports on different ways of life and career paths on both sides of the Pyrenees and shows the interview process for young people willing to attend the Escola de Pastors, including four women. One project designs clothing made with a locally produced wool called Obrador Xisqueta, which aims to offer high-quality handcrafted fair-trade products. In the report, women play leading roles and explain the projects, while men remain in the background (Burillo, 2017 min 13-16). Testimony from women artisans involved in livestock farming is also included in the video *Obrador Xisqueta. Lana y desarrollo local* (Xisqueta Workshop: Wool and Local Development) (Marine Mercieux and TKS Films 2014). As noted by Warren (2000), this sort of initiatives intertwines local/indigenous perspectives rooted in a small community on a project that brings newcomers and local people together and includes claims to promote environmental restoration, women's empowerment, local development, economic sustainability, cultural heritage and social values. It contests the dichotomous approaches of tradition and modernity, rural and urban, rustic and fashionable, primitive and educated.

These projects illustrate current initiatives in which women have a prominent role in rural revitalization and development. Livestock women unite with women in other areas of

agriculture in associations such as Dones del Món Rural (Women of the Rural World), whose objectives include influencing the policies of the Catalan government's Department of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries to "empower women in the primary sector" (Grup de Dones del Món Rural 2020). Their website affirms that social networks were key in the formation of the group. The group manages its own news forum where they air their concerns on how to face challenges and provide opportunities for rural women. The primary objective was to give visibility to women in agriculture and defend their interests. But the political demands of the pastoralist women's movement also link food sovereignty and sustainable development goals. An example of this political position can be found in *A la PAC le pido* (To the Common Agricultural Policy, I Ask), a video by GeR (2019d) which is based on an adaptation of the lyrics to a popular song. The video refers to the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, demanding that public policies in the agricultural sector incorporate a feminist perspective, promote environmentally friendly and sustainable actions as well as local consumption to curb climate change, advance rural entrepreneurship with less bureaucracy, and address the needs of small producers rather than favoring large landowners and agribusiness interests.

5. Return to the communal

The representations and ideas of shepherdesses seek to distance themselves from agro-industry, intensive agriculture and mass production. Silvia Federici (2010) explains that feminism is of great importance in the creation of the commons, a role that she calls "reconstruction," recalling the slogan "no commons without community". In her view, it is not a question of conceding the task of reproduction to women, but of collectivizing the work of caring that has been assigned to women in a sexualized structure. The shepherdesses' narratives analyzed in this article view pastoralism, nature, reproductive labor, the economy and leisure time as a whole. Their individual commitment requires a collective and collectivized agency in which their companions, partners, and the people of the villages and areas where they conduct their activities are essential. Thus, Ramaderes.cat and GeR regularly depict women engaged in shepherding activities while carrying babies or with young children, offering an interesting way to overcome the traditional dichotomy of productive life and reproductive life. They challenge the sexual division of labor by laying claim to their role at the head of livestock farms, and because they also demand real and

effective male co-responsibility in domestic and caring tasks (e.g. “Si tú puedes, yo puedo... si yo puedo, tú puedes” (If you can do it, I can do it ... If I can do it, you can do it) (GeR 2019c).

Ecofeminism is a movement that confronts two interrelated forms of capitalist exploitation, the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature while promoting the values of the commons (Terran Giacomini et al 2018). In the words of Yayo Herrero, it focuses on the *we economy*, an economy focused on satisfying collective needs that seeks “new forms of socialization, of social and economic organization that allow us to free ourselves from a development model that prioritizes the monetary over sustaining life” (Herrero 2015, 9). As such, pastoralist women’s projects can be viewed from the perspective of feminist political ecology, which addresses the demand for access to common pool resources by human and non-human individuals, and in which gender relations are fundamental to understanding these processes of ownership and beneficial use (Rebecca Elmhirst 2011; Chizu Sato and Jozelín María Soto Alarcón 2019). From this perspective, the demands of women pastoralists subvert not only the system of intensive and mass production, which is capitalist in nature, but also gender inequalities in the communal system that used to exist where it has been introduced.

Pastoralist women’s discourses help to foster an economic and social system where access to the communal, such as pastures, acquires a complex dimension that strikes a balance between environmental, social justice and gender equality issues. This is a transformative dynamic which, beyond the binary distinction between visible men and invisible women, requires an intersectional feminist approach in which gender intersects with other variables such as educational level, social class, place or cultural background (Floriane Clement et al 2019). Interestingly, it is precisely those women in the agricultural sector who have higher than average levels of education and environmental awareness (Baylina et al. 2019) who often return to the countryside from the city, are trained in shepherd schools and have the digital resources and skills to create videos and promote associations, who participate in these processes of re-ruralization (Baylina et al. 2019).

Moreover, the portrayals analyzed reveal a resolve to return to the collective. For example, exploiting sheep wool involves weaving a network of actors in the region: shepherds who tend the sheep and provide the raw material, others who know how to extract the wool, others who weave it and dye it using artisanal techniques, others who make the fabrics, and yet

others who know how to market and sell it. For the project to work, all the members of the network have to cooperate and contribute. And they also have to make a profit. Lastly, society must understand and appreciate that the cloth resulting from this process cannot be sold at the same price as a mass-produced piece. Other products of extensive grazing, such as cheese, are under the same scheme, as local artisan products distinguished by their quality. They have an added value that merges ethnographic elements and new rural development strategies focused on the eco-economy (Pallarès-Blanch 2014).

6. Conclusions: ecofeminist sisterhood

The cases examined in this paper demonstrate a shift in the discourse of shepherdesses which has impacted the traditional stereotyped representations of rural women in Spain. This shift now offers an image of feminist rural women who are empowered, who have leadership skills, and who are promoters of local development initiatives. These qualities indicate that gender relations are undergoing a process of transformation from stereotyped and patriarchal conceptions of the rural environment. Changes are slow and these women have to cope with sexist situations in their daily activities. They still live in a male-dominated rural world that is experiencing an exodus of the younger generations, and have little institutional support or social recognition.

Our research questions focused on how the shepherdesses' stories and media initiatives are challenging gender stereotypes (RQ1), and, what are the salient elements of ecofeminism that we encounter in their self-representing stories (RQ2). We found that Spanish shepherdess movements are challenging patriarchal stereotypes of women and femininity in a variety of ways. One salient aspect is the creative, often poetic, form in which these videos and messages are expressed to confront gender norms. But what generally defines the many different stories, whether they are mediatized or self-representations of the shepherdess, is a sisterhood movement that links feminist, class and environmental claims. That is to say, it is an ecofeminism deeply rooted in gender solidarity among female workers from the same sector, extensive livestock farming, that uses technologies as new ways of networking and visibility. We have seen how their stories sometimes activate, others problematize, binary thinking about rural/urban, nature/culture or traditional/modern. We have also seen that they promote an emotional, non-anthropocentric approach in their relationship with the animals

and nature. Finally, they display intersectional discourses which give rise to a triple revolution – feminist, environmental and socio-economic – and challenge the power relations of gender, class and place.

These movements are geared towards the individual empowerment of women farmers as qualified, skilled, autonomous women who are key drivers of innovation and creativity in the agri-food system. On the other hand, they strive for social justice through the collective strength of networks of solidarity and mutual support, a partnership they regard as an example of sisterhood in recent history. The representations of shepherdesses analyzed in this article point to ecofeminist ideals, and common features link these feminist movements to environmental issues. Shepherdesses portray themselves as women with the capacity and technical skills to lead economically sustainable extensive livestock projects. And their discourses are not limited to calling for gender equality and recognition of women in the sector; they also defend extensive livestock farming as a production system with a clear distinction from intensive farming, one that is better integrated with natural cycles and more committed to animal welfare. It is a perspective of environmental sustainability that takes an interspecies stance while seeking to maintain biodiversity and supporting native breeds of cattle.

These initiatives are linked to the criticism Vandana Shiva (2014) expressed in her work on ecofeminism, which not only highlighted the role of women in global food security but also condemned the “cult of growth” and how processes of globalization, liberalization and industrialization are leading to the collapse of our systems. In her lecture at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, Shiva (2013) contrasted the obsession with growth with the concept of a happiness indicator that would make sustainability and progress compatible. This idea, which can only be global, resembles the proposals put forward by shepherdesses in Spain. Ultimately, shepherdesses have self-organized into a supportive group that, through networked media initiatives, is transforming the portrayal of women and rurality, promoting emancipation from gender inequalities and fostering sustainable regional development that affects communal spaces in rural areas.

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