

A photograph of a woman with her hair pulled back, smiling and looking slightly to the left. She is wearing a sleeveless, light-colored dress with a dark, diamond-shaped pattern. The photograph is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. The background of the entire page is a gradient from orange on the left to magenta on the right, with a white wireframe mesh pattern at the bottom.

WECHO

The ECHO
of MOUNTAIN
WOMEN

ANALYSIS,
DATA REPORT
AND POSITION
DOCUMENT

A project by Fondazione Nuto Revelli
in partnership with Coordinamento Donne di Montagna
YWCA-UCDG onlus and Paraloup Impresa Sociale

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INTRODUCTION

“ *Where **WOMEN** leave, the **MOUNTAIN** dies* ”

This document describes and contextualizes the results achieved by the *Wecho: l'eco delle donne di montagna* project (“Wecho: the echo of mountain women”), carried out between January 2021 and June 2022 by Fondazione Nuto Revelli in partnership with Coordinamento Donne di Montagna, YWCA and Impresa sociale Paraloup under the Culture of Solidarity Fund Call by the European Cultural Foundation.

We here report the outcomes of our research not to end the project, but to start a process leading to the recognition of the vast social and cultural capital represented and preserved by mountain women for all of society, as they contribute to the momentum towards a new model for development, with creative impulses that can support life in Alpine areas with awareness.

The project stems from our connection to the running themes in Nuto Revelli’s research with women who lived in the mountains near Cuneo in the 1960s-1980s, when depopulation began in the area: the recordings of his interviews with them are kept at the historical archives of the Foundation, and were published in 1985 by Italian publisher Einaudi under the title *L’anello forte: la donna, storie di vita contadina*, republished a few years ago in a new edition curated by Antonella Tarpino.

In a recent interview for the Rai Cultura Ricordati di non dimenticare web series dedicated to Nuto Revelli, Carlo Petrini, founder of Slowfood, highlighted how Revelli practiced “listening as a form of political action” to bring attention to the lives, memories and traditions of those who were abandoned by the political world because they lived in difficult, deserted and remote territories.

We started from this legacy to listen to what women need to be able to go live or stay in the mountains today, and to highlight the theme of gender within strategies for the rehabilitation of inland areas.

The W-echo project (W for women + Echo, that is, the echo of mountain women) was born with this ambition: to ask mountain women what they need, to be leading characters in their own future in the mountains. Our goal was to spark a collective awareness and, more in general, a process of female political empowerment.

The project was also based on the recognition that women still preserve great strength and immense transformational potential, and that mountains are a place of possibility, where women can unleash their creativity, albeit in the face of great suffering at times: from segregation within the family in a patriarchal society to personal crises – experienced by many women, in the past and in the present, after they first moved to the mountains – to the unexpected effects of the lockdowns due to the global pandemic.

The first part of the project was carried out applying the Philosophy for Community philosophical practice, by Silvia Bevilacqua of Associazione Propositi di Filosofia: with this method, we pinpointed 4 key questions that were later presented to an international community of mountain women. The 151 interviews collected in response (videos, audio files, texts) were then processed using the Nuvolar algorithm to create an interactive online database we hope can continue to grow over time.

The project allowed us to activate new networks of collaboration, both with ambassadors who helped us spread the call – such as Istituto Cervi, Biblioteca Archivio Emilio Sereni, Alleanza nelle Alpi and CIPRA Italia (Commissione internazionale per la protezione delle Alpi) – and with organizations interested in collaborating on gender issues in the Alps, including Fondazione Compagnia di Sanpaolo, Prime Minister - Scuola di politica per giovani donne, European Network for Rural Development, and Tim Academy.

During the “Giornate per le Resistenze” on Sunday, 24 April 2022, we presented the outcome of the Wecho project in person at Borgata Paraloup, the alpine cultural center and former partisan hamlet redeveloped by Fondazione Nuto Revelli (Rittana, Cuneo), to a large and varied audience. Some of the women who participated in the project were present, as well as mountain writers and journalists, politicians, cultural operators, artists and people interested in the issue of female empowerment and in the development of mountain areas. It was a day of shared reflection in an informal setting, which strived to engage anyone who believes they can contribute to the debate on the topic, even if they are not specialists or professionals.

In closing, we must mention Pinella Ventre, a partisan woman from Cuneo who fought in Paraloup’s Italia Libera band during the Italian resistance to Nazi-Fascism, and the wife of Dante Livio Bianco. We chose her as the face of Wecho. Her story and the story of other women are also showcased at the Laboratorio Anello forte in Paraloup, which is a space and a library dedicated to the memory of mountain women and women partisan fighters.

We dedicate the Wecho project to her, and to all the women who fight their own form of Resistance in the mountains, every day.

Chapter 1

CONTEXT of the PROJECT

We here briefly report some considerations on the value of the project, which is both deeply rooted in history and extremely current.

1.1 Mountain women in the 20th century

We know that during the 1900s the mountains witnessed the affirmation of a massive female presence. The expression “where women go, the mountain dies”, indeed, was often quoted and repeated by the women involved in Wecho: the echo of mountain women.

This female presence was due to the fact that men were often absent due to wars, or had emigrated for the season or for longer periods to earn money to bring back home. However, women were not just the garrison of the territory, but represented the engine of life in the mountains because, in addition to daily chores, they were in charge of children and of alternative forms of income integration, such as small jobs collecting medicinal herbs, mushrooms or small fruits, weaving, and other activities. Thus, women were “the first to get up and the last to go to bed”.

An observation that sums up both the strain caused by their load of work and the various ways they were deprived of freedom due to being subjected to male power. A testimony in Nuto Revelli’s *Anello Forte* claims, “the only thing we did wrong was we were born too early”. This reveals a disconsolate awareness and offers a glimpse into a life of material and spiritual hardship, for women who strived for something different but were able to change their conditions only in part – starting a process that following generations would be able to take on and complete. Some of these women could not stand the situation and responded to repression by running away from oppressive male figures and from a social order that inhibited their self-realization and free expression.

1.2 Mountain life in the 21st century: what has changed

The story that emerges from the words of the women who took part in the Wecho project has a completely different flavor. The survey we will present in further detail in the following sections notes how people used to run away from the mountains, while now part of the population has decided to return. This phenomenon is well known in contemporary literature, which however does not report any official statistics (De Rossi, 2022). We will describe part of this movement, which appears to reverse last century’s exodus and is motivated both by a strong sense of belonging and by the belief that the mountains can be the place for a possible future.

In particular, we can already reveal that the motivations supporting this movement, both in tangible and in ideal terms, are tied to ethical and ideological reasons: life in the mountains is perceived as being connected to psychological and physical well-being; landscape and community life are highly valued; there is a desire for life in closer connection to nature and to one’s own self; and women sense the potential of living in a space where they can be protagonists and own their freedom of expression. A freedom that, in the experience of the women who took part in the project, seems to come easier in the mountains than elsewhere: indeed, the mountains are often the only place where they are able to be themselves.

1.3 What has *not* changed

The connection between the presence of women in the mountains and the development of local territories and businesses has yet to be proven, but women’s role at the center of home care is a fact. However, mountain policies or the debate around them do not reflect any of these specific gender issues. For example, we found no articles about our area of interest on a sample of magazines and websites focused on mountain policies.

Our first analysis – while not claiming to be exhaustive – reveals that conversations about life in the mountains, whether from a cultural or political angle, seem not to consider this particular part of the population. For example, the 2014 Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne (SNAI) (Inland National Strategy) never mentions the words “gender”, “women”, or “equality”. Inequality is viewed through the lens of the contrast between people living in so-called “hubs” (towns and cities where basic services are present) and those living in “peripheral areas”, far from services and therefore considered as part of the “inland”.

We also noted that, sampling over one quarter of the agreements made under local strategies approved within SNAI’s framework, only one refers to gender inequalities, and in particular to the gap in terms of IT skills.

That said, the local services SNAI intends to restore are meant to benefit the more vulnerable categories of society, in which we might include women, and attention for youth employment is generally likened to women’s.

Chapter 2

METHOD and TOOLS

Before diving into the research, tracing the values, issues and desires that emerged from the voices of the women we consulted, we should explain the method followed in carrying out the survey. Between January and June 2021, we activated a research community of 25 women from different backgrounds, who joined us online and in person to discuss and think together, during 4 meetings designed to identify the relevant questions that would represent the main survey tool used during the research project.

During the meetings, we followed the Philosophy for Community (P4C) approach, inspired by Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children, which takes philosophy back to its practical and social dimension to spur participants' critical thinking. Philosopher and facilitator Silvia Bevilacqua supported us in these activities.

Our goal was to identify questions with vast symbolic and semantic significance, which allowed participants the greatest freedom of interpretation and expression of their subjective point of view. We deliberately defined a set of existential – as they will be later described – questions, so the women answering could choose the meanings and words they considered most suitable for their own self-determination.

1 / Who are you?

2 / What would you like to do?

3 / What do you need to do it?

4 / Why should it take place in the mountains?

On top of these questions, we added an invitation to share a message ("an echo") to women, which we undertook to spread.

Before we began enrolling participants, we reflected on the target (women who live or often visit the mountains) in connection to our goals and on the communication channels that would allow us to reach such target. Given the low telephone and internet coverage in some of Italy's more remote areas, we chose to spread our message using two of the most flexible tools possible, to encourage female participation while respecting the slower pace of the mountains.

First of all, we created a questionnaire and made it available on the project's webpage in 5 languages (Italian, English, French, Spanish and German). The first section included the four questions we had defined, allowing participants to answer freely; the second section was more structured and included profiling questions (first and last name, age, city, occupation). In addition, we also offered the chance to share testimonies via audio recordings and videos, submitted via the popular app Whatsapp. These options were introduced to meet the needs of women who live in territories where there is little to no internet connection – but were actually used much less than we expected.

Finally, during the campaign (between November and December 2021) we carried out a series of qualitative interviews in the Stura Valley (in the province of Cuneo) – the area of Borgata Paraloup, Fondazione Nuto Revelli's alpine cultural center – in order to collect local voices and encourage wider participation.

Before diving into the analysis, a few useful considerations. We realize the campaign we created – due to the language we adopted and the communication channels we chose (word of mouth, e-mails and newsletters, Facebook) – probably didn't appeal much to young and very young women, as we will see. The very use of the word mountain "women" instead of "girls" or "inhabitants" likely intrinsically influenced which interlocutors felt targeted or not. Furthermore, choosing a binary language (male/female) may have (unintentionally) made the people who don't identify in such dualism feel excluded.

These hindsight considerations do not devalue the research we carried out.

All the precious material we gathered is freely available on the www.wecho.eu website. To index and share it, we used the platform created by the innovative, digital startup Nuvolar, which is Fondazione Revelli's main technological partner. This tool indexes multimedia databases automatically, allowing users to search by keyword and providing a graphical representation by relevance and frequency, therefore highlighting any relationships between terms and concepts.

Chapter 3

RESULT ANALYSIS

We analyzed the answers to the questionnaires and the interviews in line with the criteria followed for the qualitative survey – that is, striving to understand people, rather than the relations between variables. To understand unique and common life trajectories, as well as some general trends, we resorted to classification categories that emerged after reading the qualitative material. We captured the meanings, terms and motivations that recurred in interviewees' answers, and tried to interpret them by using semantic macro-categories. We carried out this process both by comparing the answers from different women and by considering the direction of the life trajectory itself, looking for correlations both across material and in depth.

The clusters resulting from our interpretation were then organized into pie charts, to reflect the categories into which most answers fell. However, from the researcher's perspective, even the most marginal categories are relevant, as clues to interesting phenomena and a source of further reflection and new hypotheses.

In the following sections, we therefore present the results that emerged from the research, organized by questions and connected by cross-references between one and the other.

3.1 Who are the 151 women who answered?

We report here only some of the observations regarding the first question we asked, "Who are you?". The question was deliberately existential and allowed room for interpretation, opening up to many different meanings on top of the most common answer regarding one's job or occupation. The question was perhaps perceived as too unsettling and complex by the 10% of the women who did not answer.

Among those who did reply, a strong gender theme emerged: being a mother and having children was very often mentioned in defining one's identity, although we must note the introduction to the questionnaire perhaps made this question leading, because the expression "mountain women" was repeated three times in the title and subtitle alone.

Likewise, we must highlight the fact that many women (31 out of 151) included in their description "being a mountain woman" or stressed their "roots in the mountains", which are aspects that later recur in the reasons why they have chosen to live in this specific context. Where one chooses to live is another recurrent theme in the definition of respondents' identity. Although not all of them live in the mountains (as living in the mountains is also included in their wishes for the future), they all at least want to – and with determination. It's never about a short stay, an experiment that happened by chance.

We note responses are uniform in this sense, and also in that no woman involved in the survey found herself living in the mountains out of obligation or inertia: indeed, those who fail to move or stay in the mountains suffer great pain and existential upset. Only in a few but relevant cases did dissatisfaction and frustration emerge as the final balance expressed by the women: there are 3 cases in which the choice was not successful and participants said they had to give up life in the mountains because it was incompatible with paid work or having to take care of others.

Apart from these cases, the formulation of the questionnaire certainly influenced the target, who self-selected for a survey that, with its language, led to a proud affirmation of their identity and their experience (indeed, all participants were strongly motivated and eager to testify and launch their echo). The results of the survey were also affected by a "snowball" effect, that is the tendency to gradually attract a growing number of similar respondents by accessing the first ones' circles of acquaintances and social networks.

However, since this research was qualitative in nature and the survey did not aim to be statistically relevant, we can conclude the concept of choice has an extremely significant scope, as the common theme of the entire project.

3.2 2 Where are they from?

Let us now consider the origin of the respondents, beginning with the caveat that “origin” can be interpreted in different ways.

Indeed, we do not know if respondents answered with their place of birth or the location where they currently live, nor do we know how specific their answers are. In some cases, they mention a city and not one of the many smaller towns that gravitate around that province, and it is impossible for us to know whether they simplified or actually live in the city (only a few explicitly state it). Some respondents may actually live there (as part of their aspirations seems to imply) but we cannot know if they are those who answered mentioning a large city, or those who interpreted their “origin” as their place of birth but currently live at least part-time in the city.

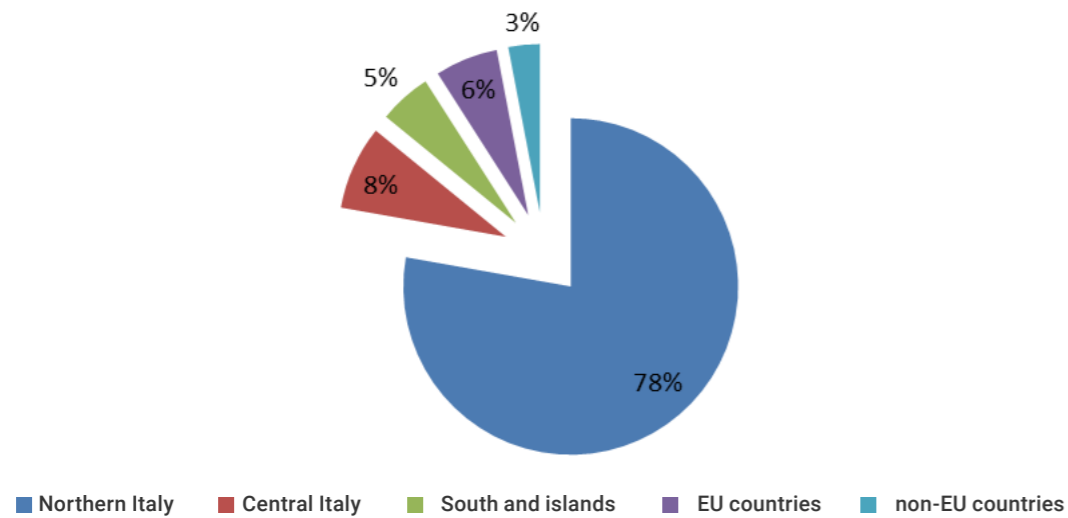
In any case, 78% of respondents come from Northern Italy, and 64% of these from Piedmont. Therefore, we can conclude the research focused especially in this region, where Fondazione Nuto Revelli is headquartered and has its local network. Among the other regions in Italy, the most engaged were Emilia Romagna and Friuli Venezia Giulia.

The survey also included 7 women from Southern Italy and 11 from Central Italy. Among the latter, a couple specifically mentioned the crucial impact of the 2016-2017 violent seismic phenomena in Central Italy: causing severe damage and displacing some 41,000 people, their effects continue to block local development due to the slow rebuilding process. No other observations were developed regarding specific replies, due to territorial diversity.

Finally, we note the research also included 14 women from France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Slovakia, Norway and Austria. Outside Europe, women from Armenia, India and Peru responded.

Table 1: Geographical origin of the women who took part in the research

*Source: Own elaboration



3.3 How old are the participants?

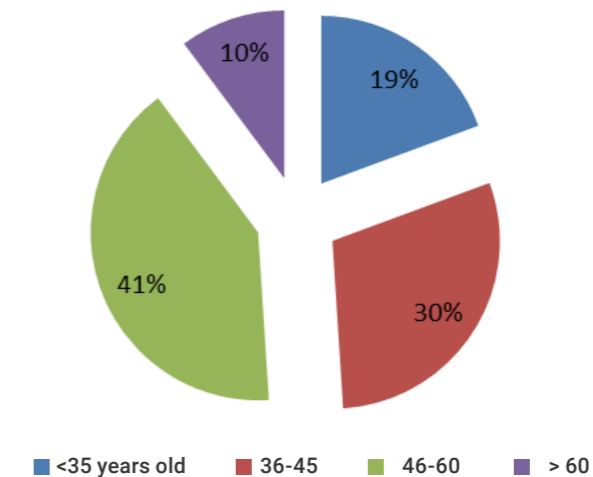
As regards the sociographic data of age, it is interesting to note how the respondents are divided into two symmetrical parts: half of them are under 45 and half older. The data that seems relevant to us, however, concerns the tails of this distribution, which shift the average towards a more mature age. Only 3 of the 151 women are under 26, while 10% of the total are over 60. This may be due to the snowball effect we mentioned above, but also to the formulation of the questions.

We can imagine that the successful experiences reported and the heartfelt testimonies are also tied to age, or to life paths that have stabilized over time. Even the aspirations expressed

by participants rarely involve a radical change of life, and more often are in continuity with the activities already carried out. Very often, respondents' wishes coincide with what they are already doing, which they would like to implement at the service of the community, or with something that is well integrated with their prevailing professional activity, which however they want to shift more towards a dream to which they are unable to dedicate most of their time at the moment.

Table 2: Age of the women who took part in the research

*Source: Own elaboration



3.4 What is their current occupation?

Let's begin by noting that one's profession does not always define them: however, when integrated with other information, it is an element that sheds light on the life of mountain women. First of all, the women who answered often carry out more than one professional activity. Indeed,

“ In the mountains you cannot live off of one thing alone. in the **MOUNTAIN ECONOMY a FAMILY must be able to rely on DIFFERENT THINGS** ”

(Barbara, from Gaiola, CN)

The quotation we chose here reminds us that, often, different jobs complement each other, and that many mountain women have diversified sources of income.

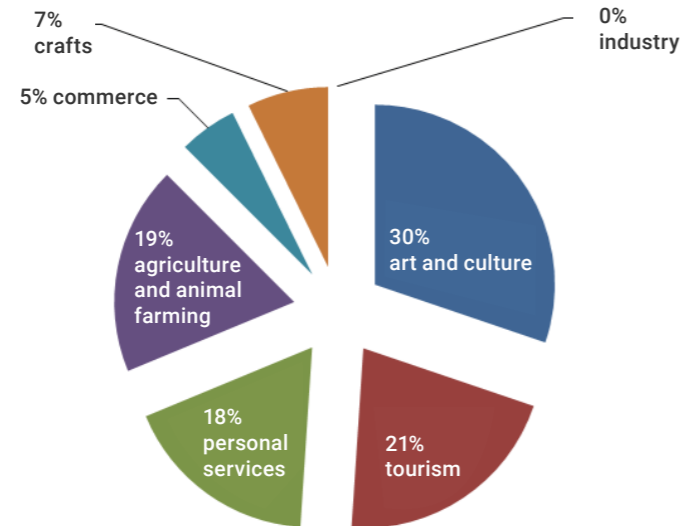
However, to facilitate interpretation, we have divided fields of occupation into: “art and culture”, which includes 30% of respondents, comprising performers, directors, managers, third sector operators and teachers; “tourism”, mainly comprising environmental and hiking guides and hospitality managers (21% of respondents); “agriculture and animal farming” (19%), which comprises small enterprises and self-production; “personal services”, comprising kindergarten teachers, nurses, psychologists and doctors (18%); “crafts”, which borders on art and includes 7% of respondents, comprising small business owners as well as self-producers.

The “commerce” (comprising shop owners, secretaries, managers) and “industry” (factory workers, clerks, secretaries) categories are residual. Other women, whom could not be placed in any of these categories, specified they work at home as “housewives” or are retired.

The following table shows the percentages for each sector:

Table n.3: Fields of occupation of the women who took part in the research

*Source: Own elaboration



Adding on to the subject of aspirations, we encountered very few responses where women wished to “change direction” compared to their current occupation. Perhaps this stems from the fact that most interviewees are already mature and in a more stable phase of their life, as we mentioned. The data on tourism is interesting because it brings us back to concrete aspirations and projects connected to this sector. Ten people would like to open a mountain retreat or B&B.

A good share of respondents aspire to enhance the cultural and natural heritage of their territory, to tell and disseminate stories, perpetuate ancient crafts and the experiences of people who live in the mountains, but without a clear and specific idea for a project built around these suggestions. Perhaps part of these aspirations pertain to the artistic and tourism field, but we cannot go so far as to hypothesize which concrete tools and specific projects could be underlying in these women's ideas.

3.5 Why did they choose to live in the mountains?

“ *Why not? Why not try to create **SOMETHING BIGGER**, with a lot of small actions?*
Why settle for the stereotype of life in the mountains as a heroic endeavor, marked by difficulties and limitations?

*A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE might actually be beneficial both for mountain and city territories, to create better **INTEGRATION, COHESION** and strengthen **RELATIONSHIPS OF MUTUAL INTERDEPENDENCE*** ”

(Serena, from Valdieri, CN)

We chose this quotation because it gives us a glimpse into an important element that frames this entire section. It mentions wanting to break free from a certain definition of life in the mountains: the more this stereotype is stigmatized and the harder it will be to repopulate these areas. The interviewee seems to call for a change in perspective, while not elevating the mountains to an idyllic place disconnected from the city.

The first thing we want to note is that not all respondents live in the mountains, yet they all report reasons why it is the best life choice for them. The theme of choice emerges clearly: these women have chosen and are choosing to live in the mountains, they have struggled to stay, return, or experiment. Only one of them would like to move to the mountains, and respects those who make this choice, but claims her age would make it difficult to change, and leaves this adventure to younger generations.

All the reasons reported by interviewees intertwine and intersect, as this quote points out:

“ *Because to me the **MOUNTAIN** represents a synthesis that is not only **POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL**, but also **SPIRITUAL*** ”

(Simona, from Turin)

The political, spiritual and professional levels, as well as many others, interpenetrate in a framework we would be foolish to think can be simply divided into categories. Furthermore, the connection between this choice and individual identity is huge. Personal narratives are clearly permeated by this choice, which often crowns and reflects a certain vision of self and of one's characteristics, in a circular and complex relationship.

Having said this, we nevertheless attempted to organize the answers after reading the material. We hypothesized the following reasons for choosing the mountain, in order of frequency. Firstly, the psychological and physical well-being that life in the mountains entails was noted by 37% of women: the amazing or peaceful beauty of nature, silence and other aspects of environmental quality are inspirational elements that recur in respondents' motivations. Secondly, a sense of connection with one's roots was mentioned by a quarter of the respondents, if we sum together all the answers that refer to a strong emotional bond and sense of belonging to the mountains, justified by a more or less direct connection in one's family of origin: for example if the grandparents were originally from a certain town, the parents were born there, the women themselves were born in the mountains, or visited often while on holiday as children. In many of these cases, the respondents mentioned that there is no other place where they feel so at home and like themselves.

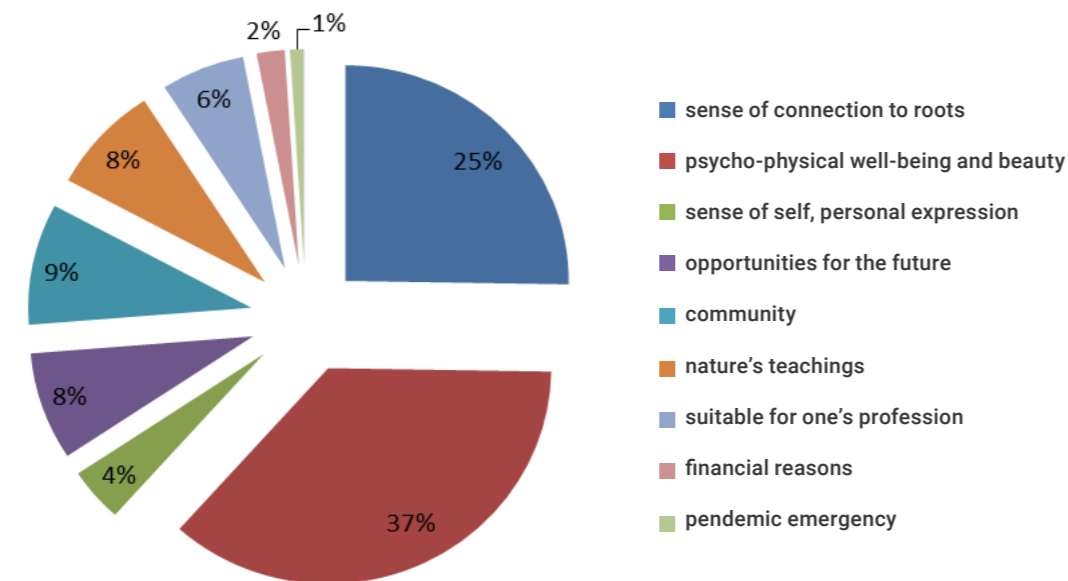
We do not know how many of the respondents were born in the mountains, because we do not have information regarding this detail from those who did not mention their roots. Thirdly, 9% of the respondents underlined how the community and collaborative relationships motivated their choice: in the mountains, they are connected to authentic experiences and proximity. The importance of the community as a driving force for choosing a life in the mountains is therefore deeply felt: there is no trace of the rhetoric of the solitary heroine, who re-inhabits an impervious environment in the midst of a thousand difficulties. Instead, there is a narrative that recalls the themes of interdependence, collaboration, strength in numbers for a common purpose. Almost 1 woman out of 10 refers to this semantic area. With respect to this figure, one third of respondents refer to this topic because they feel a need for it, as a factor that would facilitate living in the mountains. And one third hopes for greater collaboration and common actions for the future, seeing them as opportunities to collaborate and work together towards shared goals. For this reason, we can think that it is women who do not yet live in the mountains who consider the community as a strong motivation to settle their homes and lives there, because there are about three times as many women who instead identify it as a need to be satisfied or as a wish. On the other hand, we do not know anything about the experience lived by the women who did not mention community.

The polarization between the quality of relations in the city and in the mountains is not particularly strong. It was underlined in two cases, while many others suggested the relationship with the city should be cultivated, not opposed.

Another reason, given by 8% of respondents as an engine for their choice to live in the mountains, is the belief that the mountain environment constitutes an opportunity for the future: a motivation that correlates the territorial qualities of life in the mountains (interpreted both as anthropic and natural environment) to ideals of ecology and connection with nature, seen as a value. Mountain nature is also viewed as a teacher of life lessons: the difficulties it presents and landscape metaphors it offers recur in a good percentage of respondents (8% of cases). Furthermore, for some women, the mountains are a pragmatically suitable place for their profession. There are also residual financial reasons (living in the mountains costs less) and the effects of the pandemic emergency. The latter are mentioned only in two cases, as a force drawing people away from the city: this suggests that the stories of the women who have settled in the mountains have much older and more rooted origins and motivations, and are not simple experiments (as other data also confirm). Indeed, the mountain environment seems to have been identified for some time as a space to imagine the future, a place offering the environmental and human characteristics required to build a new life according to logics and styles that are different from urban-centric development.

Table 4: Motivations of the women who took part in the research

*Source: Own elaboration



3.8 What are interviewees' aspirations?

“

WHAT I'M ALREADY DOING: *teaching.*
Teaching kids to dream big, even living small.
To discover the greatness of the world,
starting from everything around us

”

(Sara, from Vinadio - Cuneo)

The quotation we reported is emblematic of the answers' general trend. Indeed, aspirations reflect continuity with the lifestyle respondents are already experiencing. In many cases (30% of the total) they “simply” wish to continue what they are doing, while starting or continuing to live in the mountains. This seems to be remarkable data, pointing to the fact the choice is not obvious: perhaps it highlights how much determination is needed to play it out, how much courage, as emerges also in the appeals made by women at the end of the questionnaire. It is worth noting how moving one's professional skills to the mountains is not always easy or possible. Indeed, one third of the respondents are looking for a possible life, a non-problematic existence in the mountains: they aspire to live there year-round, they ask to continue doing so, to be able to exercise this right, to be able to choose, to do their job. We can interpret this data also from a different perspective: living in the mountains comes with so many meanings and sources of satisfaction, that one simply wants to continue to claim and reaffirm happiness, at last and after having conquered all difficulties.

As we have mentioned, we recorded very few cases in which women wished for a completely different life: only 3, to be exact. To make an example, one of these cases is a woman who works as an HR manager and would like to farm animals instead. The other women who participated in the research wish to implement their activities to bring more value to their territory or have more people appreciate it (tying in with the desire to communicate mountains' beauty, expressed by almost one third of the women). Indeed, it is interesting to note how the answer to “*What would you like to do?*” was not limited to self-realization as an individual theme: the sense of community and enhancement of the social-political value of the territory – also by opening new shared spaces and offering services to other mountain men and women – are recurrent themes.

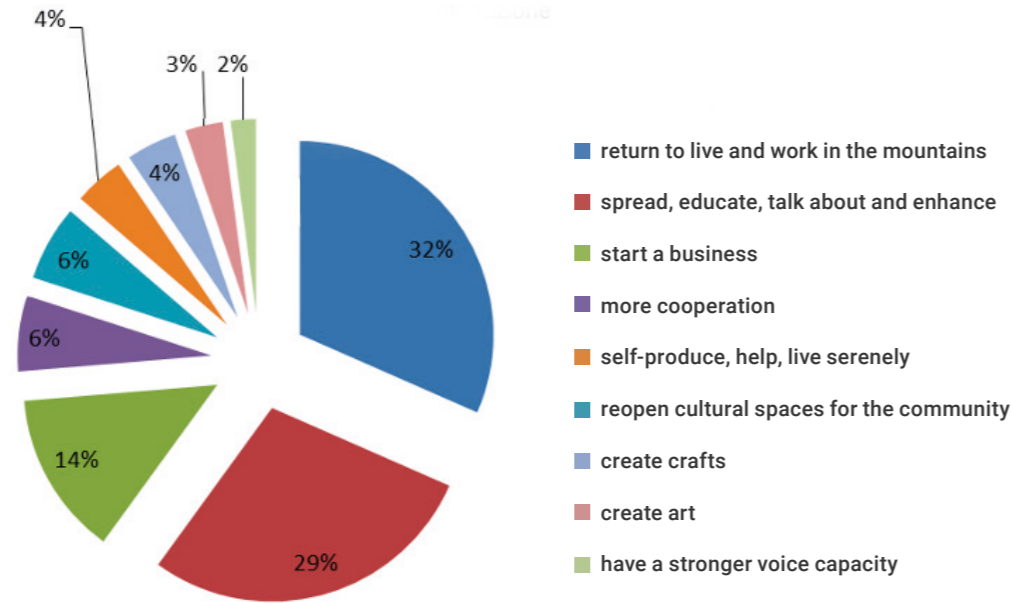
This element is closely connected to the sense of identity tied to the local territory, to the “awareness of place” that transpires and manifests from the answers we analyzed, which speak of a sense of belonging built on environment, community, locations. Our research shows a widespread and strong demand (9% of interviewees) for trust in rebuilding local communities, which can favor the territory's creative development.

Only one fourth of the ideas presented and shared through the questionnaires and interviews can be described as detailed and tangible, meaning they specify tools for actions connected to the dream. This could be due to the brevity of the answers, and does not mean the ideas are not supported by better-defined projects. However, the data on the need for support (as we will see more in depth in the next section) leads us to think there is a felt need for a more detailed definition of these women's projects. For example, 14% of the respondents present very concrete ideas to start a small enterprise in the field of tourism, farming or crafts. Re-opening spaces for the community and creating professional-level crafts are also interesting categories for a large share of women.

Finally, 6% of the respondents wish to be surrounded by more cooperation, as emerges with strength from the question on needs. Apparently, the appeal of a community is not tied to rhetoric or to increased well-being alone: it is a matter of necessity.

Table 5: Aspirations of the women who took part in the research

*Source: Own elaboration



3.9 What needs were expressed?

“ *To be listened to, so those who govern the mountains might understand **THESE PLACES ARE DIFFERENT:** they cannot be compared to the city or the plains, they cannot have the same laws or limitations.*

*The mountains should have **THEIR OWN LAWS,** because the people who live in these territories cannot ‘live’ under the same production or work standards as those who live in easier contexts*

(Barbara, from Gaiola - CN)

This quotation refers to the need to be listened to, the need to have one’s voice heard. We can imagine the women who replied to our questionnaires or interviews had this same motivation, as also emerges from the tone they used in expressing their points of view or launching their calls.

We also want to highlight an outlier answer, which is even more noteworthy because it stands apart from the others: one interviewee ironically claimed a miracle would have to happen to bring her town back to life. We collected extremely few answers with a sarcastic, cynical or catastrophic tone, yet this kind of voice emerged too.

We decided to divide the most reported needs according to the following categories, which emerged while reading the data as respondents used terms and expressed meanings that could be associated with them. The most recurrent need is one for community, cooperation and sharing, which was expressed by one third of respondents. It comes to little surprise, thinking of the depopulation phenomena that have impacted mountain areas, that the need to rebuild a community would rank first – and also that meeting this need is closely interconnected to others that follow.

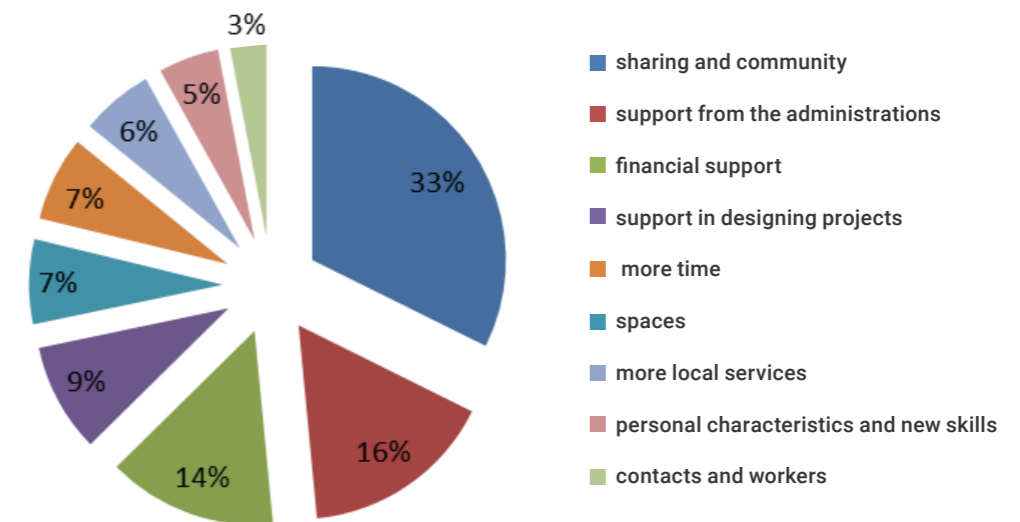
For example, 16% of the women mention a need for support from the administration, demanding first and foremost that their political voice be heard: they ask for tax breaks for small enterprises, and for the recognition of the specific challenges posed by starting a small business in the mountains. To facilitate their development, they need less bureaucracy, an integrated promotion of the territory, an investment for the creation of professional roles that can take care of the territory, and a better dissemination of regulations regarding common goods. The women who ask that the local administration listen to them and bring along changes – just shy of 14% of the total – report a need for financial support to develop their projects. In the next category, we grouped 9% of the cases where – as we have already stressed – respondents express a need for support in designing and defining their projects: this means help to develop their ideas, opportunities for exchanges with others who have already carried out similar projects, training, testing the functionality of their ideas, support in searching for public funding and in administrative activities.

In 7% of cases respondents reported the need to have places and spaces for work and culture, often shared (such as co-working spaces, workshops, farmland and farmhouses). Another 7% expressed the need for time: just like space, it is crucial to have time to invest in one’s passions, to nurture them, scale them up and prioritize them in one’s life. The need to implement services such as culture, schooling, childcare and public transportation is not last in our ranking, but far from the most felt needs.

Finally, growth in one’s personal characteristics (for example, a lack of courage) was mentioned as a possible source for improvement, and therefore as a need: this certainly implies a sense of personal awareness and responsibility. While we did not notice feelings of individual self-blame due to a perceived lack of personal or entrepreneurial skills, we believe it is useful to make the connection between these manifestations and the structural need for tangible help so that projects might actually take off.

Table 6: Needs felt by the women who took part in the research

*Source: Own elaboration



3.10 What does “mountain” mean?

On 24 April, during the “Giornate per le Resistenze” (Days of Resistance) organized by Fondazione Nuto Revelli, the data we just presented were showcased leading to some collective reflections that we can explore more in depth in this document. In particular, one of the issues that were brought to our attention is tied to the framework of the survey itself: the concept of mountain women. We think it is interesting to report this reflection to add depth to the contributions that came up during the collective debate.

First of all, we asked ourselves: **what does “mountain” mean?** And how did interviewees interpret the term?

In short, we could say the word “mountain” carries a denotative-morphological meaning connected to altitude, which sets it apart from hills. However, a woman can be considered a “mountain woman” even if she does not live all the time above the standard 600 meters above sea level. Why? The answer has to do with the connotative, symbolic and cultural meaning that the word evokes, imbued with shared narratives. The word “mountain” recalls images of beautiful landscapes, nature, the heritage of traditions, healthy life and relationships that are inherently different from those in the cities, amid great challenges and even greater joys. Some of the stories seem easier than others to connect to the recent narrative about the mountains and “new mountain people”.

Furthermore, there are different types of mountain: the more vulnerable one, far from services, relegated to the country’s inland, and the one that is a tourist hub and destination. These meanings, and perhaps others as well, intertwine to define a rich and complex scenario in the collective imagination.

Chapter 4

POLICY PROPOSAL

Finally we can formulate some hypotheses for the transformation of the needs we listened to, so our listening can turn into a political act. This implies that emerging needs become clues of change, and that they help tools emerge to give back dignity, quality and equal rights to the people who live in mountain territories.

The needs that emerged from our research, cross-referenced with the aspirations our interviewees generously shared, signal that women who live in the mountains need the following forms of support:

1 / Housing

- In many cases, young couples need incentives to move back: helping them renovate houses that otherwise lie unused, without renters and unsold, can favor their return.

2 / Social fabric

- A community manager figure, watching over the territory, could help spark new collaborations that help restore the social fabric and develop ideas for the territory, for example by favoring the match between work opportunities and job seekers.
- Fostering a cohesive society requires meeting places for the community and cultural hubs.
- By sharing regulations on common goods, underutilized spaces and places for social and cultural aggregation can be brought back to life. Mapping and reassigning disused land can also favor the occupation and redevelopment of the mountains.

3 / Work

- To assist the projects currently blossoming in the local territories, a hub where people can find advice and resources to help them define and manage their business would help dreams come true, and turn ideas into concrete endeavors.
- Launching a small business or enterprise in the mountains requires incentives and tax breaks, because "opening a small business in Rome or 1,000 meters above sea level is not the same" (quoting one of our interviews).
- Incentivizing local "green jobs" helps both create employment and take care of the environment; searching for funding that could support environmental protection is part of this point as well.
- To favor companies in the tourism sector, the administrations need to promote the territory with integrated activities.

4 / Services

- More childcare services are needed, to lighten caregivers' load: schools and community babysitters. Specific services must be offered to support caregiving and family work, which often falls on women
- To favor mobility and make territories feel less marginalized, sustainable and capillary transportation services are needed.

The needs our research reports align with and complement those pinpointed by *Officina Giovani Aree Interne* and the *Giovani Dentro* project coordinated by *Riabitare l'Italia*.

For example, the policy proposals that emerge from *Wecho* are coherent with the 15 that emerged in September from *Officina Giovani Aree Interne's* process: among them, we consider building hubs that can support project ideas one of the most relevant.

This leads us to think there are gender specificities in the field of services. Women past their early youth more often take on the role of caregivers, with more determination and strength compared to the mixed and under-40 population that took part in *Officina Giovani*.

Furthermore, the Turin-based experimental Help Desk “Vivere e lavorare in montagna “ (Live and work in the mountains) noted, during its activities, that 50% of the people served where women with more or less defined projects. Participants in Wecho and users of the Help Desk share some similar traits, such as a strong base of ethics and values in their motivation to move back to the mountains, and the need for business guidance. In addition, both groups identified the need for specific financial aid to start small ventures in the mountains, and the need for local social networks.

¹ Officina Giovani Aree Interne is an initiative that supports the Comitato Tecnico Aree Interne (CTAI), within Officine Coesione, a PON Governance e Capacità Istituzionale 2014-2020 project. In 2021, it engaged over 400 youths from Italy’s inland areas to define 15 policy proposals regarding 4 issues participants themselves considered a priority. Officina strives to strengthen the voice of youths from inland areas, with the goal of implementing the proposals in the different territories.

² The Giovani Dentro survey, promoted in 2021 by Riabitare L’Italia and other partners, engaged over 3,000 youths to provide an analysis of the motivations, interests, educational and professional needs of the younger generations that stay in or return to marginal, inland areas. Its goal was to spur public decision makers to launch development strategies that invest on human capital in these territories.

³ The free “Vivere e lavorare in montagna” Help Desk – established by Città metropolitana di Torino in collaboration with the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society of Università degli Studi di Torino and the social innovation center SocialFare – was born for people who imagine a life of work in the mountains, for themselves and their families. It offers users a program that includes mentorship, networking and matching, designed to build paths for social integration and job placement and / or entrepreneurship, for new residents who decide to stay permanently in the municipalities of the mountain valleys.

Chapter 5

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In closing, the women in the group we interviewed stand by their choice of living in the mountains with awareness and determination, fueled by a mix of deeply felt sense of community, territorial identity and “awareness of place”. Therefore, the participants who took part in the research were not forced to be mountain women or led to be mountain women out of necessity: they are or aspire to be mountain women by choice, or to return to being mountain women – two well established sociological categories, for which however no official statistics exist (Barbera, De Rossi, 2021).

Hence, the awareness of belonging to these categories fuels their identity affirmation, which intersects with an equally strong gender identity, as an added value in their feminine style and in the potential of collaboration and interdependence as a key to success. We also note that the sense of responsibility and the will to benefit their territory are prominent elements that characterize the women who took part in the research, in terms of both motivation and aspiration to live in the mountains.

On the other hand, greater caregiving work is the most prominent argument against women’s life in the mountains, because the latter requires more demanding commutes to reach services and be able to act as a caregiver.

In conclusion, just as Nuto Revelli had identified women as the “strong link” in the chain of memory and the engine in the social innovation of his time, we intend to highlight how even today, in the context of a return to the mountains, women continue to be “resilient pioneers”, determined to focus on the balance between the quality of human relationships and landscape protection and enhancement: two crucial elements that can help mitigate “communities of resentment”, as Aldo Bonomi would say, by activating “caring” and “industrious” communities instead.

Let us continue to listen to mountain women, so that this project may be only the beginning.

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