Training for Rural Women in Portugal. Can it promote equal opportunities and development?

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Abstract

The paper result from a study conducted by the authors in 2001-2002 on “Women, Training and Development in Rural Areas”, funded by the Commission for Equity and Women’s Rights (CIDM), and analyzes the issue of training for women in rural areas, particularly looking at the appropriateness of current courses and initiatives aimed at this group. A second stage of the work looks at training as an instrument for change and local rural development. The study was built on the basis of: document analysis, particularly statistics and data bases on training; interviews with 18 directors and managers in 14 different adult education and training institutions; interviews with 27 rural women involved in a variety of training activities in different parts of central and northern Portugal. The results show that a large variety of actors are today involved in the adult education and training area, though with different motivations and objectives: some see it mainly as a business opportunity, others as a way to promote change and development. Women, particularly those of 35 or more years of age, are the main clients of adult education and training in rural areas. They tend to prefer practical courses, in subject areas in which they already have some experience and that contribute to their personal growth. The linkages between training and employment are not straightforward, and often the creation of viable self-employment seems more of an unattainable mirage than a practical reality. In many instances, it might be more appropriate to consider alternative training strategies, linked less to employment as such, and more related to human development, rural multi-functionality, diversification of income sources and community-based economic development. Achieving the aims of training through this approach will requires strong and effective articulation with local institutions and businesses, in order to expand opportunities for rural women.
1. Introduction

This paper looks at the importance of education and training as an instrument of rural development. It analyses a broad variety of training initiatives directed at rural women, and tries to understand the appropriateness of the training opportunities offered in relation to the roles women can play in promoting the development of their families and communities.

As we will see, the weak impact of training in terms of access to the job market and self-employment is due, in particular, to the lack of opportunities in rural areas and the profile of the participants, who tend to be middle-aged persons with a low level of formal schooling and less than fully occupied in economic terms. Most training initiatives, however, undermine the importance of professional integration and job creation. This orientation can be questioned: are the training needs of women essentially linked to the performance of a profession? In fact, many women are not looking for a job, but feel the need to learn about health issues, food preparation, environment protection, local heritage, and other matters related to their participation at the family and community levels.

Women tend to play critical roles in the local communities and rural development processes. We can underline, for instance, the growing importance of women in agriculture and the many projects initiated and conducted by them. But is the dominant model of training able to help women to face new challenges? Is this training sufficiently well adapted to the heterogeneity of this particular group? If not, what are the critical changes that need to be made?

The objectives of the paper are: (1) to characterize the participants of training initiatives undertaken in rural areas, in terms of sex, age, level of schooling, and marital status; (2) to identify their training needs and the motivations that may be associated with their satisfaction; (3) to reflect on the results of initiatives in which women were the main participants; (4) to identify implications for the programming of training in rural settings; and (5) to define recommendations for future training actions aimed at promoting rural development and directed primarily towards rural women.

The study was built on the following elements: (1) a literature review, focusing on training and adult education in rural areas; (2) documental analysis, particularly population and agricultural statistics and training databases; (3) identification and compiling of information on training programs undertaken in the North and Center of Portugal (amounting to 19 courses); (4) interviews with 18 directors and managers of 14 different adult education and training institutions in 12 counties; and (5) interviews with 27 rural women involved in a variety of training activities in 5 different counties in the area identified above. The selection of people to interview was made on the basis of the results of the exploratory phase of the study, in which, through contacts with key informants in the regions under scrutiny, a number of potentially interesting and valuable training situations were identified. These situations were necessarily linked to rural areas and to different training themes (from agriculture and cookery to gardening and crafts), and spread through the territory in question.

The rest of the paper is structured in three sections in addition to this introduction. The next section provides a concise theoretical background. After, the main results of the study are presented. Finally, the last section contains conclusions, with particular emphasis on some of the practical implications for future work in the training and adult education field.
2. Background to the study

In this study we defined “rural women” as all those adult women living in rural areas, independently of their type or level of economic activity. These women constitute a social category that tends to be quite heterogeneous in relation to the roles performed on the farm, or in the family or community. Their interests and motivations also vary according to their age, family size and structure, their children’s ages, as well as the husband’s activity and place of work. In many respects, the profile of women and the issues they face may be quite distinct in the “deepest” rural areas compared to the situation in areas closer to major urban centers.

The concept of training employed in the analysis is a relatively open one, and includes all initiatives and projects which aim to “qualify” people, i.e. to provide them with capacities comprising an articulated ensemble of different types of knowledge, skills and behavioral traits, conducive to the development of organizations, businesses, projects, policies and interventions (DGDR, nd). That is, the training in question should serve the objectives of personal, organizational, sectoral and/or territorial development.

In the European Union (EU) there are about 190 million women citizens, and women make up more than 50% of the active population. However, many inequities persist between men and women, relating to levels of training, rate of activity and participation in decision making. To some degree these inequities are the result of national traditions in the different educational and training systems, as well as the nature and dynamic of social and family organization and production systems. To a considerable extent such inequalities have been reproduced and exacerbated by the lack of equipment, infrastructures and services necessary for women to successfully combine and reconcile their family and professional lives (CE, 2000: 4).

In Portugal, as elsewhere, women make up the majority of the population; however, they also constitute a majority among the illiterate (68% in 1997), the unemployed, as well as those with incomes below the national average. Moreover, they tend to be underrepresented in national and local politics (CIDM, 1998).

As stressed by Boeraeve-Derijcke (1994, 18), “There have been many changes within EU countries in recent years and it is difficult to give an adequate picture of the present situation of European women on family farms”. However, it is known that, in the EU, the inequities that rural women face (as well as women from other “difficult” categories) are even more deeply entrenched than is generally the case. The isolation, under-qualification, and accumulation of economic and social difficulties tend to reinforce their marginalization. In rural areas, this situation has fuelled the migration of the youngest and more qualified women to the urban areas (CE/DRA, 2000: 7).

Research undertaken in Barroso, Northern Portugal (Ribeiro, 1997: 477-478) has shown that women have increasingly taken on roles of critical importance in rural families, not only in terms of their productive activity and decision-making in the agricultural sector, but also in socio-economic and cultural life in general.

The migration processes experienced by rural areas, and the progressive involvement of men in the non-agricultural labour market, have brought about drastic changes in women’s roles. Agriculture has become a much more feminized activity, with women assuming many of the tasks traditionally performed by men, such as driving tractors and other farm machines, as well as management responsibilities. A study done in the early 1990s (Monteiro, 1993) showed that women constituted the majority of the active agricultural
population, with 67% working as self-employed, 21% providing unpaid labour and 12% employed by others as wage workers.

Today, the context in which rural women live and work is quite distinct, due to the considerable transformation of the rural areas that has been brought about by the decline of agriculture, continued migration to the urban areas, population aging and the emergence of new activities, particularly in the secondary and tertiary sectors. In many places in rural Portugal, new initiatives have been launched (such as arts and crafts cooperatives and micro-enterprises, tourism businesses, small and medium agri-food processing units, and small commercial and service operations), many led or managed by women. In many areas, occupational pluriactivity, in different forms, was the survival strategy followed, with women or men often combining a job in the nearest town or city with part-time agricultural work.

EU initiatives such as LEADER (Links Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy), NOW (New Opportunities for Women) or LEI (Local Employment Initiatives) have had been important in encouraging women’s involvement in new activities (O’Hara, 1994: 61-61). Cavaco (2000) analysis of LEADER program support for women’s initiatives, showed that, either alone or in combination with other programs, it had promoted the acquisition and development of new capacities, as well as investment in rural diversification projects.

For instance, Valente e Pérez (2000, 207-209) note that, in rural tourism in Northern Portugal, the presence of women is overwhelming both as owners of accommodation units or as workers in this sector. Many cases of success can be identified in the arts and crafts field, most of them initiated and managed by women. They have helped to maintain local traditions and have promoted innovation in many respects – for instance in production technology, design and commercialization (Roca, nd: 51).

Nevertheless, the challenge of women’s participation in rural development persists, as “women are unequally placed to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by rural development policies and programs” (O’Hara, 1994: 59). The EU Agricultural Commissioner has stressed that equal opportunities for men and women is a key condition of making rural development viable, and has underlined the need for a full and complete participation of women in order to preserve the social fabric and revitalize local communities (CE/DRA, 2000: 10-15). This type of vision implies specific measures, among which training is clearly of the utmost importance. The conclusions of the present study, presented in the next section of the paper, illustrate and further elaborate this vision and show that training can, indeed, contribute to women’s integration as ever more active players in rural development.

3. Major Findings

3.1. There are many education and training programs and the training initiatives involve various actors

The training initiatives that were studied in the present research tend to involve a variety of actors – public, private, third sector – each with distinct interests and motivations. Clearly, an understanding of training projects and their results and impacts must take these interests and motivations into consideration.

Many local development associations and training businesses depend financially upon training activities that are externally defined. In other words, their efforts are typically supply-led, i.e. the design and implementation of training opportunities does not necessarily
respond to personal or professional qualification needs in the locality and/or socio-economic category in question, but reflects the priorities, perspectives and even the fashions that dominate higher levels of national or Community policy-making.

The relevance of training may also be limited by the fact that the choice of the type and quantity of training supply to provide may also be made in response to an organization’s own needs, such as paying salaries and keeping the business running. In the case of local government, the motivations, very often, have a political nature. Since participation in a training course frequently implies the receipt of a small monthly stipend, it is clear that trainee motivations are strongly influenced by directly economic factors other than the intrinsic value, relevance and future applicability of the training itself.

In Portugal, as elsewhere in EU, the supply of training has been supported and stimulated by a variety of adult education and training programs, promoted by different ministries. These programs are quite diverse, in terms of objectives, target participants, types of promoters, content and duration. As examples, we can cite the cases of the EU Program “NOW-Employment”, and Portugal’s “School-Workshop” Program, the “Training and Adult Education Courses” created by the former National Agency for Training and Adult Education, the “Project Workshops” launched by the National Association of Training Workshops, and the “Agricultural Training Courses” and “Training and Information Initiatives for Rural Women” of the Ministry of Agriculture (ANEFA, nd; Baptista et al., 2001; Cristóvão and Poeta, 2000; IEFP, 2002; Marques, 2000). The first five aim at the promotion of professional qualification and integration into the job market. The latter is clearly more flexible and open, and is essentially concerned with personal development and information exchange (Baptista et al., 2001). In the case of agricultural training, only 4% of the courses were explicitly linked to rural development, and the majority had a strictly technical character.

3.2. Women with 35 or more years of age constitute the main clientele for training courses in rural areas

Training courses in rural areas, especially in regions with low population density, have women as major “clients”. The data from the 19 courses studied shows that 86% of the participants were women. The data from other training data bases that were consulted confirms the very same trend for the country as a whole. Typically these women are 35 years or more years of age, with a low educational level, married, with children of varying ages. Objectively, various reasons explained this pronounced feminization of training.

In the rural areas the number of women classified in the official statistics as “without activity” is quite high (69%) compared to urban areas (46%) (INE, 2002). These people “without activity”, in rural communities, are non-employed women who, in addition to their domestic chores, undertake agricultural activities, often complemented by other types of seasonal and/or casual work.

At the household level, women, particularly those of 35 or more years of age, manage the house and take care of the family. Younger women tend to actively seek work opportunities, and for that reason are much less available to participate in training courses. As is well documented, rural areas have long been in demographic decline: in the area under analysis, those with 15 years of age or less make up only 15% of the population, while the population of 60+ constitute about 34% of the total.
The seasonal distribution of agricultural work provides another explanation of women’s participation in training programs. Indeed, they frequently use the periods of less intense farm activity, such as the winter months, to follow a training course. The fact that many courses are now held in local facilities, in the villages, also facilitates women’s involvement. There are no transportation obstacles, less loss of time, easier reconciliation of family duties and training, and readier availability of family support (e.g. child-minding).

In general, men have more mobility to look for work outside the village and, in many cases, husbands work outside the farm, in different types of activities, such as construction, factory work and the service sector. This situation is not favorable to their participation in training courses, especially ones of longer duration. When they do enroll, they frequently drop out as soon as a job opportunity arises.

In the case of Agricultural Training, in recent years the number of women participants has increased sharply, in all types of courses (DGDR, nd). As husbands, sons or daughters get off-farm jobs either locally, elsewhere in Portugal, or in other countries, women feel an increased necessity to undertake training, not least of all because it may be a prerequisite for accessing different kinds of publicly funded investment schemes and other types of support.

Though, as has been emphasized above, women constitute the main clientele for training courses in rural areas, female participation could rise even further. In fact, the low level of education of most rural women is still a factor that excludes many of them from training. In the rural areas of Portugal, 25% of the female population is illiterate, and 44% have only 6 years of schooling. Thus we tend to agree with Imaginário (1998), who has argued that professional training remains poorly adapted to the needs and initial capacities of many of those it seeks to serve: firstly, those with low levels of schooling tend to be underrepresented in the population receiving training, since they are often formally ineligible; secondly, they understandably often either do not see training as valuable and/or have a low or no motivation to enroll.

3.3. The training stipend has a critical importance in the trainees’ motivation to participate

In essence, there are four major motivations for rural women to participate in training courses: (1) personal growth, via learning and skills development; (2) short term income improvements, through the small training stipend; (3) longer term income improvements, due to better employment opportunities that training ostensibly confers; and (4) greater inclusion and enhanced social capital through meeting and socializing with other people. It is not easy to establish a hierarchy of motivations, as these can vary not only from course to course, but also according to the local context and the trainees’ characteristics. Mostly these motivations are closely interrelated, constituting a complex and articulated rationale, which explains the interest in a given course.

In the rural areas studied, it is frequently the case that women have a low self-esteem: they feel they “don’t count”, and that their work is not valued, inside or outside the family (Baptista et al., 2001). As stressed by several of the women interviewed, the training courses are important to reverse this state of mind.

The stipend is an important factor of motivation. This is understandable, as family income is usually low and job offers quite scarce. It is important to note that the main justification for the payment of a stipend is that many courses are of long duration (about 1500 hours) and involve 6 hours training per day. However, this motivation is not the only
one considered by women, and there are courses without payment of a stipend that were quite successful in terms of enrollment, motivation, and active participation of women. To achieve such success four conditions would seem to be indispensable: a course content that is attractive; good location, close to the family home; appropriate timetabling; and highly motivated and experienced trainers.

Another motivation is a desire to improve access to future job offers. In fact, a higher and/or better level of overall education facilitates integration into the job market, particularly in the case of younger trainees. The importance of this factor varies with the characteristics of the participants and the places of residence.

The fourth and last major motivation identified was the opportunity to meet and socialize with other people. Training is a way of changing the daily routine and helps to mitigate the social isolation that rural women undoubtedly suffer. If they work exclusively at home and on the farm, this may be particularly important, as few opportunities for socialization outside the family circle may exist. The same question is raised by Imaginário (1998: 127), when he suggests that adult education activities function, above all, as spaces for conviviality, exchange of experiences, and sharing of knowledge (food and hygiene habits, household management, etc.). Furthermore, socialization in a training context may help to generate and sustain the type of “social capital” that may be useful in putting into practice the skills and capacities trainees have developed.

3.4. Training needs and trainees’ training preferences tend to be informally assessed

The identification of training needs is usually done in a very informal way, by talking with participants at the end of a course, using the trainers’ experience and insights or through contacts with institutional actors and private businesses. In some cases, the courses are organized to answer specific needs expressed by institutions which work in the social services area. In other instances, courses are initiated by the Adult Education Agency, in line with its own priorities and plans.

In many development associations, the priority seems to be to focus training on activities with the potential to simultaneously promote local resources and resuscitate local traditions by introducing elements of modernity in the production process or in design. Examples of such courses include “jam and liquor making”, “traditional cooking” or “organic farming”.

The themes most demanded by women are connected to textile-related skills (including traditional linen production), agri-food products, various arts and crafts, jam and liquor making, and cookery. In general, these constitute extensions of areas in which women have already some knowledge and expertise, and necessarily have a pronounced practical character. With such training they feel more self-confident and able to participate.

3.5. Training – employment links are difficult to establish in rural settings

One of the major objectives of most training programs is to establish a strong link with employment, that is, to use training as an instrument for improved absorption into the job market or easier and more successful self-employment. The issue is: can this be easily accomplished in rural areas? As we will see, in this type of setting this aim is difficult to attain, due to various obstacles of different sorts.

Employment can be obtained in two major ways: working in the public or private sector; or creating one’s own employment, through individual or collective initiatives. Most
trainees prefer the first way. However, in most rural areas there are problems in both situations, as the supply of jobs is extremely limited, and newly-created self-employment is either poorly remunerated, and/or restricted to already saturated niches, and/or requires a level of start-up capital few rural residents may be prepared to risk, even with program support and subsidies of various types. Thus women often cannot find paid employment close to home and have insufficient potential clients to sustain a small or micro business initiative. Taken together, these constraining factors have further exacerbated population loss in rural areas.

The creation of micro-enterprises raises many difficulties, for instance: availability of capital to invest; product definition and label creation; financial capacity to face current management expenses; marketing and commercialization. In general, experience shows that training is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the creation of sustainable micro or small businesses. All the other requirements constitute significant obstacles that potential entrepreneurs have to face. Besides, training courses inevitably come to an end, and after completing them women have to face reality alone, since programs typically do not include post-training support structures that could provide counseling on project formulation, alternative sources of investment and initial management issues.

The participants’ age, family situation, and low level of schooling do not facilitate access to the job market or self-employment, and women frequently become frustrated. At the same time, the dominant mentality does not favor entrepreneurship. In such situation, it is understandable that women should so often see training as means of finding wage work, rather than the basis on which to create their own employment. The very conclusion was reached by other studies in the EU, as stressed by O’Hara (1994, 60-61) when mentioning that farm-based enterprises tend to be associated with well established farms and prosperous areas and that “Most far women …, particularly in the more marginalized rural regions, will have to rely on off-farm employment if they wish to have paid work off farm”.

Thus the notion of giving priority to training courses linked to the creation of self-employment can be questioned, because of the many factors mentioned above, but particularly due to the fact that, in general, women participating in training courses do not pursue such an objective.

4. Conclusions, implications and recommendations

The participants of training courses held in rural areas are mostly middle aged women. The feminization of training is the result of several factors. Firstly, many women have no economic activity outside the home and farm, and yet have some free time available to participate. Furthermore, the training stipend is in itself attractive. Finally, more women register and fewer drop out because courses are typically offered in periods of lower agricultural activity and frequently take place in the village in which trainees reside, or at least in the same parish.

Women interviewed in the study mentioned four main motivations for their participation in training programs: (1) personal growth through skills development; (2) the short term income supplement that the small training stipend provides; (3) longer term income improvements resulting from better employment opportunities; and (4) greater social inclusion and enhanced social capital via contact with others in a training context. Where courses offer a stipend, it constitutes one of the principal if not the major motivation; while this is understandable as it constitutes a source of additional family income, it does not mean
that the stipend is the only motivation attracting women to training in rural areas. Indeed, there are successful initiatives, with many assiduous participants, which do not offer a stipend. Such cases tend to be explained not only by the strong desire on the part of trainees to take up opportunities to socialize outside the family context, but also the recognition that the training in question is provided by a team of competent and effective training facilitators.

The main thematic areas preferred by women trainees include the following: the agri-food sector and arts and crafts (i.e. areas in which women already have some knowledge and expertise), with a strong practical character, and that stress active involvement and a workshop type of learning environment. In some situations, at the end of these courses, the public is given the opportunity to view the results of the training exercise and to buy the different products that women have made, thereby stimulating trainees’ self-confidence and increasing their self-esteem.

While training is seen as an instrument of integration into the job market and employment creation (namely via self-employment), particularly for the long term unemployed and young people in search of their first employment, these laudable aims are far from being achieved in rural settings. For a number of reasons, the context does not favor the emergence of initiatives: there is a lack of an entrepreneurial culture, and the economic conditions do not favor the sustainability of small and micro businesses.

In these circumstances, the training model proposed for and used in rural areas seems inappropriate to the conditions typically found there. The trainees’ age, family structure and low schooling level are additional factors that make it even more difficult to find a job or to create one’s own employment. The result is a lack of fit between the stated aims of training programs, the design of training activities and women’s relatively high level of motivation. It is not surprising that the latter is constantly undermined by a growing sense of frustration among past, present and potential women trainees.

The dominance of middle aged women as participants in rural training programs lead us to question the current policies in this domain, essentially directed to younger people, male or female, for whom training is often a means of fleeing rather than fixing themselves in the countryside. The results observed imply the need to provide closer attention to rural middle aged women, and to develop specific training policies and measures directed to them. The needs of these women are different and mostly relate to educational improvement, personal development, promotion of self-confidence and self-esteem, socialization outside the family circle, breaking with the routine of daily chores, learning new skills in areas like agri-food production or arts and crafts. These needs, if appropriately met, can develop women’s potential to become more active contributors to local development.

The results of this research point towards the importance of redefining training strategies related to rural areas. Employment creation, although being important, should not be the single or major focus. Other objectives should be considered, including social and cultural promotion in local communities, the encouragement of economic diversification, and the creation of conditions to improve family incomes. One path worth exploring could be that of training women to develop part-time activities at home or in small collective village workshops, working according to their own time schedules, producing and selling different types of goods or supplying a variety of services to the community.

In this regard, training and adult education directed to rural women should be part of a global and integrated development strategy, based on active community participation and
aiming at improvements in human development, economic diversification and rural wellbeing.

5. Educational and practical importance of the study

Finally, let us look at the contributions of this study to the formulation and implementation of training, adult education and extension programs. In our view, there are six practical implications that should be taken into consideration:

- To redefine the “target-public” of training in rural areas. It is clear that middle age women should be considered as the major focus of attention, with all characteristics already stressed;

- To adapt the objectives to the participants’ needs, as well as to their lower levels of schooling. This would imply a diversification of training objectives and approaches. For many women, training is an answer to specific learning and socialization necessities. The development of personal autonomy, self-confidence and self-esteem should be considered as important objectives. The development of communication skills, basic education, and acquisition of practical professional competencies should not be ignored.

- To work with flexible programs and more open content. The nature of the predominant type of clientele demands that a good deal of flexibility be incorporated into training, in particular in the implementation process, for example by adapting the course content to diverse settings and objectives. The course themes should be of interest to the participants, and this requires a previous assessment of interests. At the same time, it is essential to recognize and provide appropriate value to the work experience they have accumulated on the farm, at home, and in other settings, as a way of improving motivation and self-esteem.

- To adjust the course organization and functioning to participants’ conditions. To hold the course in the vicinity of the residence is crucial to achieving greater levels of women’s involvement, as has already been stressed. Timetabling is another matter requiring attention, particularly in non-subsidized training courses and/or when women have to reconcile the course with family duties. This may imply few hours of course work per week (for instance one afternoon), and using the winter months (when there is less farm work to do). Furthermore, training with this type of clientele should be conducted over longer periods of time – over a period of 2 or 3 years –, so as to build in greater sustainability.

- To have a highly motivated and well-prepared leadership. The kind of training program envisaged demands a special type of leadership, people with substantial preparation in adult and extension education, with the ability to work with the community at large, establishing links and partnerships with all the relevant actors.

- To integrate the training courses into broader rural development efforts. Very often these women have no access to other types of support when the training program finishes. It seems critical to integrate the courses with other extension, animation and organizational initiatives, as a way to create conditions for a continued involvement of the former trainees in community projects. In terms of extension, different types of contact could be continued even after the formal training has been complete in order to monitor and
support the real-world application of the training, thereby ensuring more sustainable results in terms of, empowerment, employment and income effects.

In conclusion, we feel that the research reported on here and the training experiences analyzed point clearly to a number of conditions necessary for the transformation of conventional training programs in rural areas into real instruments capable for delivering more equal opportunity and more tangible and sustainable local development.

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