

AN UNBEARABLE STRAIN

Hidden distress: the right to pleasure, traditional expectations, and suppressed needs

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Women are essential for the existence of alpine communities. Decisions on whether to have children and raise a family, and therefore to settle in a place, all depend on women's willingness to do so. It is mostly women who devise new ways to do things, seek better standards of living, and strive to revive older traditions. Without them, no development would be possible. This is why they are at the heart of an ongoing research project that has been undertaken by a team of anthropologists at the Centro di Ecologia Alpina (Centre for Alpine Ecology) and that has already produced six international congresses and five major publications.¹

When women say no: traditional women's roles and their rejection

What is the social status of women in the Alps and why is it that people are loath to talk about it and do something about it?²

For centuries, women have managed to survive in limit-situations by keeping in touch with nature, using natural resources without depleting them, while protecting the environment, and cultivating a magic and poetic quality to life, while carrying out the task of recording the memory of past event. The Alps, that for centuries have been removed from the main communication routes and development processes, have witnessed the emergence of a feminine culture and society, most of all owing to men's absence.

It is becoming increasingly evident that when women leave, because for instance they refuse to marry a farmer, mountains die. When men cannot find a spouse from Latin America or Eastern Europe, they have to resign themselves to celibacy or resettle, as they grow old.

Women have been the first to leave, carrying through a feminist protest that, even though it has not reached international recognition, has not been less effective. It was a spontaneous reaction against a culture that regarded them as little more than servants and procreating machines, unworthy of any kind of personal gratification. Their diaspora started in the Fifties and has since reached alarming proportions. Today it is a fact of life.

This migration has ancient roots and it is to these roots that we should go back to if we want to figure out how to reduce the likelihood that this phenomenon will persist or, at least, if we are determined to contain it and reduce its severity. In peasant societies, women were the first to wake and the last to go to sleep. Girls, like boys, would start working at an early age, for there was always something to do. Childhood in general would end very quickly, carefully overseen by parents and priests, who acted as the custodians of morality.

Even though, compared to bourgeois women, peasant women enjoyed a certain measure of latitude, and could be promiscuous, conventional morality denied them the right to enjoy life's pleasures. From an early age, they were constrained by religious prescription. Sexophobic priests inculcated into their minds and souls the concept of sinful behaviour and a sense of unbending duty. Nearly everything was reprehensible: as late as thirty to forty years ago, girls would be publicly reproached for wearing stockings or for dancing on Sunday afternoon, when youngsters used to meet to play, sing and dance.

¹ Zucca, Michela, (ed.), *Matriarcato e montagna I, II, III, IV, V, VI* - Centro di ecologia alpina, Trento, 1995, 1998 e 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007

² Zucca, Michela, *Antropologia pratica e applicata*, Esselibri, Napoli, 2001, p.359

Transgressions existed, of course, but every action that broke the prescribed rules caused a deep feeling of guilt and resentment: social control was especially strong. Awareness and fear of sin were deep-seated and sexual transgressions were vigorously chastised. Similarly, talking about sex was regarded as most inappropriate.

Predictably, women's clothes would be chaste and austere, in both shape and colours, mostly dark, and fashion would not change appreciably.³

Once married, women's private feelings and aspirations were crushed. Their very existence was devoted to taking care of their husbands, relatives, children and of the household, till they died. They never really celebrated festivities. On Easter or Christmas, on Sunday, or on family celebrations, they were expected to work hard during the night to prepare special meals, and to clean, wash, mend, iron, etc. Everything would look impeccable. They were forbidden from entering taverns, unless they were forced to take home their drunken husbands. In wintertime, when their husbands rested, they kept working and giving birth to babies. Virtually no money was left for anything other than the essentials, and there was no real source of entertainment: women aged without having the opportunity to do something only for themselves, and they seldom experienced love or sexual bliss.

Still, for all their socially disadvantaged status, the economy of the family and of the community revolved around them. Women kept the accounts of the family-farm but, because incomes were small, they were forced to do odd jobs in order to deal with unforeseen expenditures. For instance, drawing on the knowledge and skills of previous generations, which could be traced back to the societies of hunters and gatherers, they would look for berries, medical herbs, and mushrooms that they could sell at the market. They would also use the hand loom to make clothes, linen and other textiles with which they would decorate the household. Some rooms could be rented to tourists and, in summertime, if they lived near a tourist resort, many women would also work as chambermaids.

After all, because agriculture alone cannot support a family, one of the typical attributes of alpine people is versatility. In the Alps, perhaps more than in the plains and in the cities, there seem to have existed two distinct, discrete societies, with little intercommunication: a male and a female society. This separation became dramatic during the nineteenth century, when men began to spend several months elsewhere, to earn more money, and their spouses stayed at home, alone, running the farm and handling the side jobs by themselves, with no prospect of seeing their dreams come true.

The problem with all that was that, traditionally, before getting married, girls would work as housemaids in the cities and would get to know a different world and develop different needs, and perspectives on life and what to expect from it. When they went back to their villages they would unfailingly realize that they would have to relinquish the dreams they had previously cherished and the pleasures they had enjoyed. Yet these aspirations could not possibly disappear into thin air, and were often transmitted to their daughters. This caused women to metaphorically leave the mountains well ahead of their actual diaspora, which began about forty years ago.

The crisis of the extended family, that has dramatically improved the life of women living in the cities, has worsened the life of women living in the countryside and in the mountains. Now that longevity is increasing and solidarity networks are breaking down, women are supposed to nurse elderly parents, parents-in-law, and relatives as well. Public services are often insufficient and, on top of that, women feel a sense of moral obligation to do what others expect them to, and sometimes they conceal their hiring of foreign carers to dodge the neighbours' judgment. Seeing all this, it is perfectly understandable that daughters will do anything they can to avoid that kind of existence.

These days, they have moved out or have decided not to get married or not to have children. As a result, valleys are far less populated than they used to and the local economy drags along, while the social and cultural life is waning.

³ In Campo, Val Tartano (Sondrio), in 1948, the priest refused to administer Holy Communion to a young woman who wore a black veil of the neighbouring villages instead of the local, traditional square scarf. See: Donata Bellotti, *Religiosità popolare in Val Tartano*, Quaderni valtelinesi n°7, Sondrio, p. 45 e 46.

The condition of women in Italy: archaic holdovers, need for a change, men's fears, and gendercide

Women's condition in Italy has been traditionally affected by the dominant culture of honour. In Italy, honour crimes were under-reported and were finally outlawed only as late as thirty years ago.

Cultural change can be slow and frustrating, especially when it comes to men, who tend to guard their traditional privileges. Since feminism declined, certain questions have remained unanswered, while hard-won civil liberties for women are under constant threat. So much so that, lately, there has been a rise in family crimes and, needless to say, women are usually the victims.⁴ For all the talk about the backwardness of the Italian South, most of these murders took place in Northern Italy, where women are more financially and socially independent and are not disposed to endure the abuses of men. Even in Trentino, for far too long regarded as some sort of paradise on earth where certain crimes were not usually committed, family murders have made up half of the total number, from 1990 onwards.⁵ Obviously, gendercide is only the tip of an iceberg made of violence and abuse. The startling conclusion at which we arrive is that all too many families are actually unsafe for women, that this phenomenon is becoming more conspicuous by the year, while media coverage has quieted down. Most importantly, gendercide goes unpunished in far too many cases.

Indeed, there is nothing sensational about this whole thing: women who are not economically independent will not report abuses, and a male-oriented job market based on displacement is bound to make their lives even more vulnerable, and at the mercy of their male partners. The ever-prevalent machismo of Italian society also tends to predispose the public to accept that, in certain social circumstances, violence against women is, to some extent, inevitable and that violence against children generally follows the break-down of families, something that can be imputed to women, even though statistics do not support the received wisdom.⁶ On the contrary, the best prevention of violence is when women decide to leave a violent spouse, and if they do so, it is by speaking out against a culture and a society in which the dice are loaded against them, starting from their childhood, when they are taught to be submissive and obliging, no matter what. This is fertile ground for the practice of silencing protests and rebellions, epitomized by the Italian term for having a sexual intercourse with a woman, namely "possedere", meaning "to possess."

As a result, in 7 out of 10 homicides the victim is a woman and 80 per cent of murders are perpetrated by men, often a male partner or relative. In 2001, mothers-in-law, compared to fathers-in-law, were killed at a 3 to 1 ratio, the ratio for mothers to fathers was 23 to 9, and that for daughters to sons was 15 to 12. When one parent is killed by a child, 58 per cent of the times it is the mother, and only 25 percent of the times it is the father.⁷

If we now shift the focus from victims to perpetrators, we see that kids reared in a family environment where their fathers are used to beating them and their mothers, are far more likely to perpetuate this despicable custom, even if we consider that "only" 20 to 30 percent of male sexual abusers admit that they have been abused as children.⁸

Another frightful aspect of the question is that a large number of murders of women are committed by men whose social role is protecting the citizens and enforcing the law: policemen, soldiers, security guards and surveillance officers. They possess guns and they are more likely to use them (43 percent of

⁴ This type of crime increased from 396 between 1996 and 2001 to 492 between 2003 and 2005 (Ernesto U. Savona, Stefano Caneppele (eds.), *Violenza e maltrattamenti in famiglia*, Provincia autonoma di Trento – Transcrime, p.57. Even if we concede that many more homicides are reported now than before, we still talking about a crime that can hardly be concealed. Therefore, unreported homicides in the past may have not be as common as other types of crime.

⁵ Ernesto U. Savona, Stefano Caneppele, (eds.) *Violenza e maltrattamenti in famiglia*, Provincia autonoma di Trento – Transcrime, p. 184

⁶ A forthcoming paper concerned with violence against children in Alta Valsugana, shows that 14% of abuses occur in families where parents are separated.

⁷ Source: Società italiana formazione psichiatria forense e penitenziaria, abstract of a meeting held at the penal psychiatric hospital of Aversa in October 2006

⁸ Ernesto U. Savona, Stefano Caneppele, (eds.) *Violenza e maltrattamenti in famiglia*, Provincia autonoma di Trento – Transcrime, p. 98

wife-killings involve firearms) if their partners threaten to leave them. They are also more likely to kill their children and the parents-in-law if they support their daughter's choice. This is because they are reportedly subjected to greater stress and their work environment is on the average more traditionalist and exerts pressures that make it harder for men to accept this kind of experience.⁹

This may partly account for the repeated complaints on the part of abused wives that the police have not intervened with the required determination. At the same time people do not seem too interested in inquiring about the continuum of violence that led to the fatal decision to kill. If the murderer is a wealthy professional, the public will appreciate his hard-working spirit, even though at least 25 percent of killings is usually the outcome a long history of criminal charges for violent behaviour. Even when there is a track record of mental strain, alcohol and drug abuse, it turns out that the future victims have not been sheltered from aggression, because the gravity of the situation has been underplayed. This especially applies to victims and perpetrators from the lower ranks of society and to families of immigrants, where the dominant culture leads men to treat women as objects or property and murders are irresponsibly re-classified as ritualistic or religiously motivated, as though this could somehow diminish the seriousness of the offence. Now, because as a rule Europeans do not believe that the correct answer is a more repressive and incarcerating society, the only way to break this vicious circle is on the one hand through public disapproval and opprobrium, and on the other hand through the teaching of equal opportunities and sex education. One instructive model could be Colombia, where sex education is compulsory from primary to graduate levels of education and the rate of unplanned births has declined to European levels.

What people say: social control

A retarding factor in the social and economic development of alpine communities is social control, comprising all the measures necessary to keep the social order intact. If so many communities crumble down, that's because they have not been able to respond and adjust to changed circumstances and are still dominated by a mechanism of mutual surveillance, monitoring and evaluating the actions of all their members. This mechanism originally derived from the need to maintain internal cohesion and to neutralize most sources of conflict, but it gradually crystallised those codes of conduct and the underlying system of values that are hardly consistent with current expectations concerning personal freedom and self-determination, which are the result of the emancipation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.

Even today the set of rules that parents and acquaintances instil in children is meant to provide a safe pathway, from schooling to work, to marriage, and to parenthood. The infringement of rules is punished by merciless gossip but is almost inevitable, insofar as advertising agencies convey specific portrayals of how life should look like, ones that, especially for women, may be markedly at variance with traditional values and habits of the mind. Those who are not ready to bow must leave, for young women are not presumed to live by themselves in an alpine village; the others will have to reside in their parents' home and conceal their true feelings and frustration as much as they can.

Fear of judgment stifles frank interaction between individuals and clans. Behind the façade of a dense social life, one can discern the unpleasant reality of people who keep other people at a distance, for those who are not clan-members are apt to misjudge or misrepresent a family's lifestyle, and thus destroy their respectability: "the less we see each other, the less we can complain about each other", as one informant remarked, roughly corresponding to the English rural saying "good fences make good neighbours."

Inevitably, then, children do not really know each other, because their parents are not accustomed to hang out together and because, when they go to school, they are assigned to different classes, in the expectation that, in this way, they will be able to familiarize with children from other villages. However, when they go back home from school, they spend the rest of the time with their families, not with their new acquaintances.

⁹ Source: Electronic Data Archives and Repositories "Eures" on homicides in Italy, for the year 2004, cited in Savona & Caneppele, *ibid.* p. 64

A great deal of relationships are shallow, with little emotional engagement, and go on like this, on and off, for years, seriously restricted by the need not to arouse suspicion, not to look too different from others, not to express too straightforwardly one's own views, for fear of being branded as too extroverted, and therefore unreliable.

Lest festivities should lead to feuds between clans and families, people meet and celebrate on neutral grounds: the garden, the log-house on the mountain, or the tavern. The household is forbidden territory for outsiders, even for the children's and husband's friends. They are only allowed in the "stube", that is, a separate room, often behind, underneath or adjoining the kitchen fireplace.

Not surprisingly, most informants pointed out that nearly all of their friends do not live in the village and tend to be co-workers, who mind their own businesses. But still, relationships outside the family circle are thin and a generalized distrust may prevail. Disclosure of intimate, personal information is carefully avoided and this may cause people to feel lonely, alienated and depressed.

Young people and the fear of change

Social control is more oppressive when it comes to more vulnerable citizens, such as the younger generations and women, because older people hold the reins of power and establish what is culturally and socially viable and acceptable, and what is not. Those who do not abide by the rules are progressively excluded from participation in the social life of the community.

Since childhood, they are taught not to pursue self-determination and, because most of rural schools have been closed down to balance the budget, children do not get exposed to socialization with their peers as often as it used to be. Most of the time, they stay home and watch TV or play videogames. When they meet at the local pub, they do not really talk about themselves, for fear of being misjudged. Cars is where youth discuss issues of intimacy and have their first sexual experiences. This is because in the countryside and in the valleys young people leave their parents' home at an older age than those living in the cities. Instead, festivals and events are organized and run by adults who also take care of the surveillance of teenagers, who are openly suspected to be prone to misconduct.

There are notable exceptions to this "iron cages" model, however. In Terragnolo, the parish priest and the local authorities gave permission to the local teenagers to set up their own association, called "el bùm", i.e. "the hole" where they would throw parties, keep the place clean and tidy and prevent unruly behaviour and discuss the very meaning of "unruly" and "acceptable" behaviour. Most significantly, many of the voluntary participants in our project in Terragnolo had cut their teeth in "el bùm." Something similar took place in Cimego, where the pub has been reopened with a view to supplying youth with a place where they could meet. Unsurprisingly, both municipalities are governed by young men AND women.

Elsewhere, drug and alcohol abuse or car races are a common "break" from boredom. When crimes are committed by young people, failure to raise respectable villagers is sometimes imputed to the malign influence of satanic sects, instead of seeking the root-causes in the malaise of the community itself. It is as though adults could not quite bring themselves to trust the young generations: So, for instance, I was once refused the authorization to host a festival of Celtic music because adults were afraid that teens would get stoned. One transgression, or the mere suspicion of it, is enough to take back what had been granted earlier. Instead, alcohol abuse is accepted as a socially inclusive activity, despite the inherent risks; and when car accidents happen, with young victims, it is fate or the winding roads that are blamed, not the circumstances that made them possible. Paradoxically, many sincerely believe that drinking and driving is a problem mainly affecting people living in the cities, when the opposite seems to be far more likely. By the same token, understanding the causes of teenage suicides does not lead to some form of self-examination: collective responsibility for an event of such gravity is out of the question.

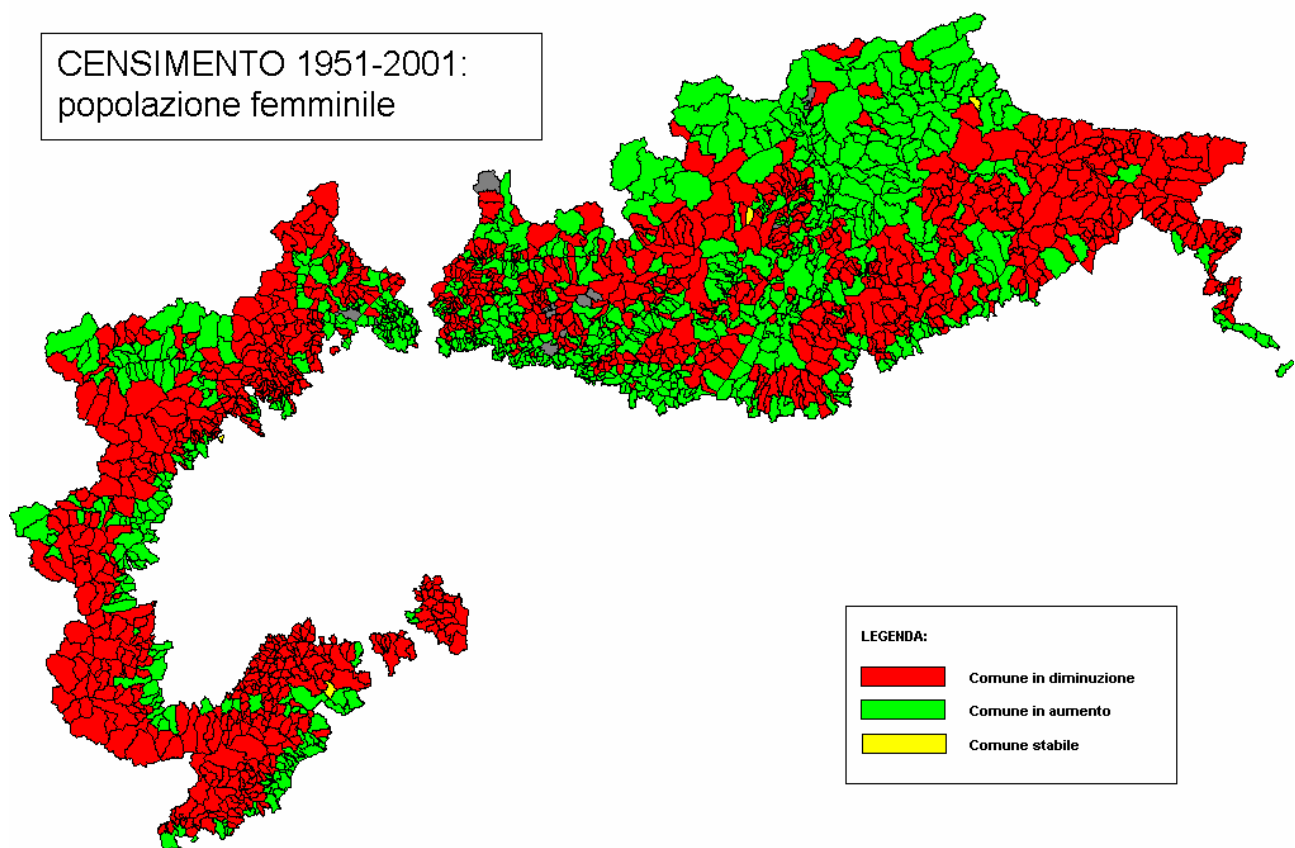
Social pressure to conform exerts a different influence depending on whether the target is a boy or a girl. Boys, because of their dominant role, are the most likely to cave in and trade in their future happiness for some freedom; they are then instructed on the kind of partner they should look for, while many girls are prepared to leave as soon as they can. Consequences can be serious. The gender gap

causes many men to remain bachelors, while women, who really have few alternatives, escape from their native village, and from priests, parents, brothers and husbands. So many of them have moved out or have decided not to get married or not to have children that today valleys are far less populated than they used to and the local economy drags along, while the social and cultural life has waned.

Data about the diaspora

When we processed the results of the inquiry and drew the depopulation maps accordingly, we have realised that we should take a different line of argument, by analysing data in gender-based sorted lists to detect possible discrepancies in male and female depopulation patterns between 1950 and 2001, decade by decade.

1951-2001 : Variation of female resident population



Source: Italian National Census 1951-2001

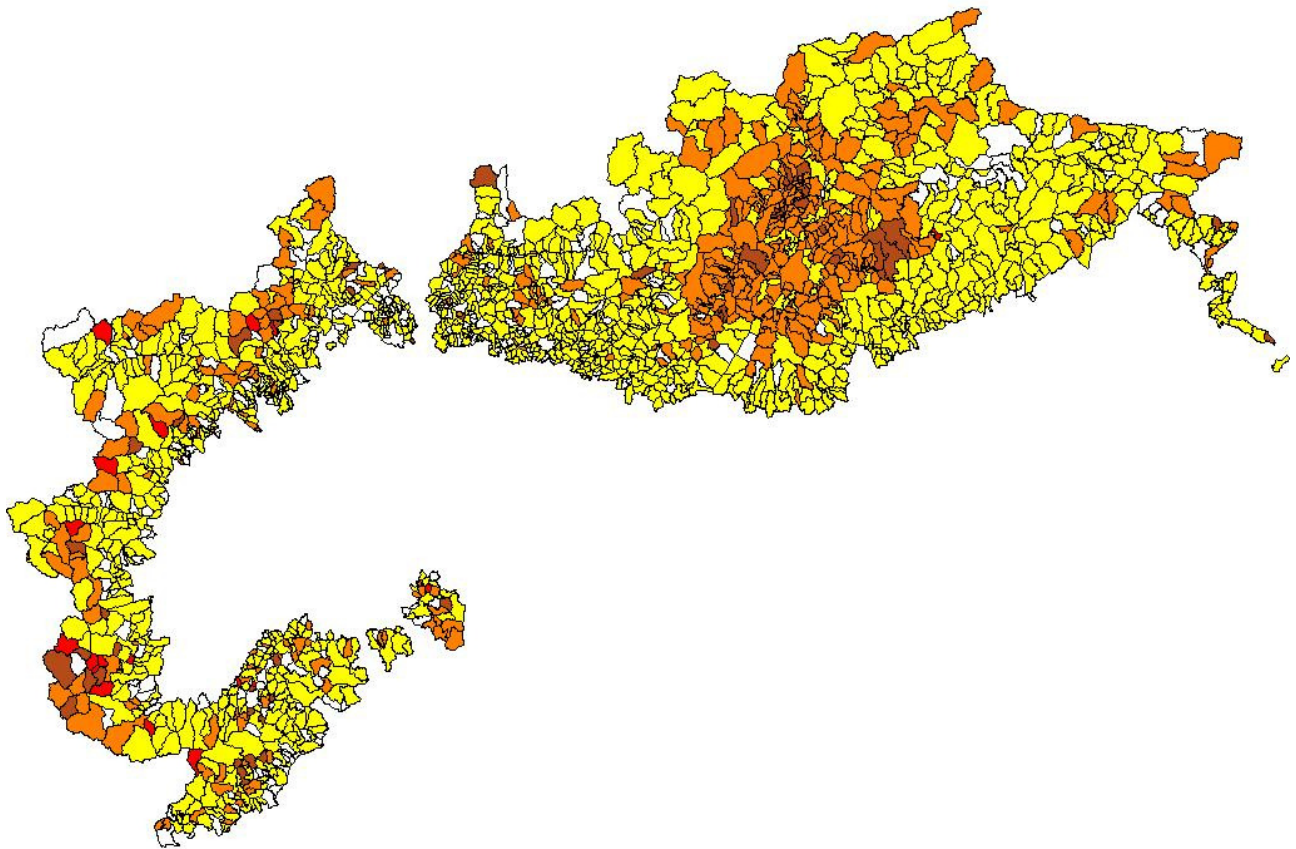
While it is true that the two trends seem to run parallel to one another, we ought not to discount other factors:

- Women live longer than men, and therefore one would expect them to be more numerous, in the long term;
- Studies of demographic changes must take into account the 20 to 45 age-set, that is to say, the age at which women can still procreate and are more likely to, and the 20 to 49 age-set, namely the age at which women are more likely to marry in mountain communities.

When these variables are factored in together, we can fully realise the seriousness of women's plight. Maps show that clearly. Pink-coloured areas are those where women aged 20 to 49 are in equal number

or more than men: they are a tiny minority of municipalities. Across the Italian Alps, women in that age-set are almost invariably fewer than men. Some cases are more alarming than others, but the overall picture is by no means encouraging. Nationwide, women exceed men by 1.60%, but those between 20 and 49 years of age are about 49.88% of the age-set, and 49.07% in Trentino. In more than 80% of alpine municipalities, for every hundred residents there are between 51 and 55 men and, in Trentino, various districts have ratios of 60 to 40, or even to 65 to 35. Lower percentages in the Western Alps valleys are confined to few municipalities surrounded by others that are more “demographically balanced.”

Percentage of women respect men in the age 20-49



- Red: < 35% women*
- Brown: 35 < 40% women*
- Orange: 40 < 45 % women*
- Yellow: 45 < 50% women*
- White: > = 50 %*

Source: Italian National Census 2001

Paradoxically, Trentino, which is one of the most stable alpine regions with respect to depopulation, is where the ratio is most lop-sided. Indeed, the part of the map occupied by Trentino is almost uniformly dark.

In 80 percent of the municipalities of Trentino - 178 in 223 - male population exceeds female population. In nearly 8 percent of municipalities women in this age-set are less than 45 percent. Only in larger towns like Trento, Rovereto, Arco, and Borgo Valsugana is the ratio more favourable to women.

Hidden discomfort: the right to a denied pleasure, traditional expectations and current needs

The great escape of women from their native villages originates from the rejection of traditional roles that are still imposed upon them and from the unwillingness to go against the dominant male-oriented power-relations, and therefore to face the inevitable criticisms that this decision entails. In other words, a woman who is determined to live free has not other choice but to leave. Those who remain have to grit their teeth and adapt, seeking outlets for their repressed feelings, constantly on the brink of a major existential crisis.

We have detected a patent discrepancy between social expectations and women's claims and demands. Married or aged women are still required to be the primary caregivers, even though they may have their own job, and an exacting one at that. People believe that their incomes should be devoted to family and homecare; their patience is drained by sometimes abusive if not violent relatives. In a word: they constantly sacrifice themselves.

Here is an example of what could happen anywhere in the Alps. In Switzerland, a 40-year-old single woman, the director of an institute employing 70 researchers, decides to move back to the village where she grew up, to live with her brother, who is alone. Because she retains her job as head of the research centre, she hires a maid to help her with the domestic chores while she is at work. Unfortunately, the traditional view of things goes like this: a middle-aged woman with an unmarried brother should behave like someone who is half a wife and half a mother, that is, like some sort of a servant. She should stay at home and pamper him. Because she is not like that, gossiping becomes unbearable: why does she pay a housemaid? Can't she do those things by herself? Why does she spend so much time away? What does she do while she is not here? Does not she feel guilty and embarrassed when she leaves her brother alone? Eventually, her brother could not withstand such an enormous pressure: every time he walked into the pub he felt like everyone was gossiping about them. She eventually had to leave and go back to the city.

Rumours sometimes turn into outright harassment. In one of the villages where we did fieldwork, one of the few young mothers with a university degree turned down an offer to work as a high-rank civil servant, which would have allowed her to combine a professional career with motherhood, because of her fear of what her neighbours would have thought of her daily commuting.

As a consequence, girls are most eager to look for friendly relationships outside of their close circles, which can be used as a pretext for spending as much time as possible away from their constraining daily routine. Problems worsen when girls get married, that is to say, marry into the husband's family and move in with her parents-in-law, that she is expected to care for, especially when they are no longer self-sufficient, given that paying a professional carer is regarded as socially and morally unjustifiable. While money spent on luxurious cars is an investment, money spent for carers, nursing homes, and baby-sitters is wasted. Women must see about that by themselves.

Men are usually free to pursue their passions and hobbies (playing cards, fishing, hunting, going to pubs, etc.), do sport and volunteering activities, see their buddies (but not at home, which is unsuitable for this kind of get-together). When a young mother died in a car accident she was blamed for taking a day off to go skiing. Married women who dared to go to the local tavern would be labelled as irresponsible, if not worse. The kind of behaviour that must be tolerated with men (e.g. coming home drunk at night) is not forgiven when it comes to women. Even today, women cannot dawdle: they are not supposed to have spare time and when they spend time together, they must account for the time they have been away from housework.

When pressure reaches the point of no return

A suffocating social climate, if unacknowledged, may provoke major discomfort and harsh confrontations: over the past years several cases of "murderous mothers" have been reported, motivated by seemingly inexplicable depression syndromes. I have analysed the socio-economic and cultural context of these tragic events, and the results are quite startling. More specifically, I have examined infanticides perpetrated by young mothers with no economic or family problems in Cogne

and Montjovet, both in the Aosta Valley, Valmanera in Piedmont, Santa Caterina Valfurva and Casatenovo, in Lombardy, Torrebelvicino in Venetia, and Meran and Val Sarentino in South Tyrol. In Val Sarentino the husband was the victim, but the context and motives shed light on this phenomenon. Statistics about child murders suffer from a structural limitation: since the promulgation of the abortion law, this crime has decreased to one percent of the former levels, the clearest indication that such crimes were committed because of destitution and for a matter of respectability (honour child murder has been scraped from the Penal Code only in 1981: up to then it was not uncommon). These days immigration brings with it an upsurge of this kind of crimes precisely because the social circumstances of the immigrants are very much akin to those of the Italian rural population only a few decades ago.

Here we only examine cases where the mother is Italian and mental illness is not involved.

These are “normal” couples, at their first marriage, financially well-equipped, with no sign of an imminent separation. They live in beautiful houses with garden, all in splendid surroundings. Mothers were young and reportedly still in love with their spouses. By and large, their husbands are described as “nice blokes, working hard, family men”. In a nutshell, they are models of bourgeois respectability.

Most of them are housewives, and even those who had a paid job at the time of the murder were presumed to stay at home, on maternity leave. None of them has a full-time job and one, a model and would-be TV starlet, said that for her what she does was a past-time, not a real job. Received wisdom has it, that they have the time and the opportunity to fully devote themselves to the care of their children, with the only help of their mothers, if these are still alive; if they are not or if they live too far away, these young mothers are left to their own devices, no matter the number of children.

The attempted murder in Val Sarentino, a fairly conservative rural valley in South Tyrol follows the same pattern: young housewife and mother, comfortable lifestyle. She complains that her husband works too much and has no time for her. She poisons him by giving him a sleeping pill before he drives to work. The common denominator of these dramas is the loneliness of women and the inability of men to detect signs of the impending tragedy, even though they are aware that their wives have not been able to sleep for months.

Half of these women have been under psychiatric care (Merano, Casatenovo, Santa Caterina, Valmanera), and all were depressed when they committed murder. Their husbands did not think that they needed help at home, even though they could afford to hire a helper. They simply relied on the traditional presumption that their wives would know what to do and would toe the line. These women lived secluded and felt terribly lonely, but their husbands and the whole community made light of the women’s psychological and physical predicament. One, who used to spend her holidays in the valley where her husband was born, remained a virtual stranger to the inhabitants of the village where she stayed.

There is an evident discrepancy between the wives’ demands – a request for help, support, understanding and nurturance, and to take some measure of parental responsibility – and those of the husbands, usually relying on the traditional model of parenting, which allows men to enjoy considerable latitude and confines women to domesticity and to a subservient role. Depression may be positively related to a sense of inadequacy and frustration, when these women feel that they cannot live up to the expectations of their husbands and of their social milieu and feel neglected as well.

In Torrebelvicino, the husband went out for a dinner with his friends even though his wife was several months into pregnancy, with a nine-month-old boy to nurse. She begged him not to leave her alone and they had a quarrel; but he went out all the same. When he went home, late at night, in winter, she was not there; he reached her on the cell-phone, and she said she would come back soon. So he went to see his son before going to bed: little did he realise that the child was already dead. He went to sleep and awoke a few hours later. One is left to wonder how much he really cared about his family...and here we are talking about an allegedly “normal” family!

Needless to say, these are rather extreme examples; but we should also mention the high consumption of psychotropic drugs among women in the rural Alps. This appears to indicate that there is a larger problem that people have hitherto chosen to ignore. Nuclear families in rural villages, altogether detached from traditional values and practices that served to mitigate distress and conflict – “there was always someone to speak to: my neighbour, my sister, my sister-in-law, my mother-in-law...even if you

were not on good terms, it was still someone you could talk with...I was not on my own!!” –, exposed to the intrusion of novel cultural models, increasingly respond by sealing themselves off from the outside world and by insisting on the sacredness of the private sphere, with the result that women are left on their own,¹⁰ sometimes with tragic consequences.

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