

Women's entrepreneurship and local sustainability: The case of tourism in a Portuguese rural area

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The key to the sustainable development of rural areas lies in the development and discovery of indigenous and traditional potential and the promotion of this potential (EC, 1999). This idea reflects quite well the potential of endogenous development through local entrepreneurial actions. In this sense, nowadays an increasing number of rural areas in Europe are seeking extra sources of income by diversifying their activities and emphasising tourism and related activities, such as heritage, food processing and handicrafts. Indeed, in the last years, a lot of literature underlines tourism and related activities as a means to achieve rural development goals. Rural women often prove to be pioneers in entrepreneurial initiatives in these sectors, which are often observed as gendered because the nature of such activities have traditionally been performed by women in rural areas (McGehee, Kim & Jennings, 2007). The launching of local-scale entrepreneurial actions by women aims at the empowerment of their position from an invisible subordinate labour force (Brandth, 2002) to entrepreneurs and active members of the local rural community (Iakovidou, Koutsou, Partalidou & Emmanouilidou, 2012). Independently of the urban or rural context, to be an entrepreneur, innovation is essential. Indeed, innovation as a factor of differentiation or exclusivity, will put something different in the market, real important for rural areas, which normally have limited human and financial resources (Dinis, 2006).

A successful example of women entrepreneurship in rural areas is located in one of the peripheral areas of Portugal – Serra de Montemuro (municipality of Castro Verde), where subsistence agriculture and cattle raising continue to be the main economic activities. The constitution of a craftsman's cooperative in 1985, in the village of Campo Benfeito, was a result of the effort of the Institute for Cultural Affairs, which, through a series of training courses, was able to organize some women to work together in the production of fashion and home textile products as a way to promote local crafts and to fight desertification and unemployment in the mountain area. They learnt the art from their elders, attended vocational training courses, agreed with the local entities to use the old elementary school and created contemporary pieces made of flax and wool, using the loom. This local craftsman's cooperative was one of 14 winners of the WWSF Prize for Women's

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Creativity in Rural Life 2007, an international award granted for the first time in Portugal.

This work aims to assess the impact of this project in the village of Campo Benfeito, including the creation and establishment of other projects, such as the Regional Theatre of *Serra de Montemuro*, an internationally well-known company responsible for the *Altitudes* annual cultural festival; the village revitalisation through residential tourism; the leverage for population settling; the creation of new tourism businesses; and the preservation of the architectural and cultural heritage of the village.

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