

## **Conference “The role of women in mountain regions”**

### **Input presentation – Marianna Elmi, Deputy Secretary General of the Alpine Convention**

Dear participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is for me an honour and a pleasure to be here today for this conference on the role of women in mountain areas.

My aim today is to give inputs to the discussion on the contribution of women to sustainable development in mountain areas more with some food for thought than with pre-packed certainties. So, please bear with me, if in the upcoming minutes you will hear many more questions and significantly fewer answers than you expected.

Let me start with a first question: what do we mean, when we talk about “women in mountain areas” in general? In fact, the role of women depends on social, cultural and economic factors; these factors vary substantially among different contexts and mountain ranges. We could well say that there are as many different experiences and perspectives on women in mountain areas as there are mountains, cultures, villages, communities, families and individuals. Nevertheless, as poet Virginia Woolf said: “As a woman, I have no country [...] As a woman my country is the whole world.” I feel Woolf is telling us that there are issues that are transversal to all women and transcend borders and local conditions. This is why we are here today! Yet, before we start going deeper in the discussion, I would invite us not to forget that we speak from different contexts, and that these contexts can bias us. For example, I am here today as a woman speaking from a relatively privileged mountain area: the Alps, with their high GDP, excellent infrastructure, stable political and governance systems, and access to wealth and education. What I say today will be of course embedded in this. So I will try to remember the context I come from, and I also invite you to do so.

The background for this conference is that women play an essential role in sustainable development. The United Nations set a specific Sustainable Development Goal towards gender equality, which tells us: no sustainable development is possible without achieving a substantial equality between genders. It is more than that: everyone and all aspects of sustainability – economy, ecology and society – profit from gender equality.

When I need to reach a goal, usually the first step I take is to see where I stand. I would like to use this approach now and take a look at where women stand with some examples that come from my reality - the Alps.

In order to do so, I would like to discuss four main issues, which take inspiration from the programme of the conference. These issues are:

- women, culture and knowledge;
- women and education;
- women and employment;
- women and demographic change.

Starting with the first point, on women, culture and knowledge, already in the flyer for this conference we find the statement that women’s “specific knowledge and expertise” are

“hugely important”. Often, this discussion points to the fact that women are the keepers and continuators of traditional knowledge, which is a knowledge that mediates between nature and society. This interaction between nature and society is very specific in mountain areas, with their limited resources, specific topographic conditions and difficult accessibility. The task of mediating between these nature and society has often been traditionally assigned to women who have, thus, contributed and are contributing to the creation of a whole body of knowledge that needs to be maintained. This knowledge expands from cultivation to the making of apparel, medicine, history and poetry, handicraft as well as the knowledge of social rules and is, as the sociologist Karl Polanyi would have put it, “tacit”: it cannot be communicated through words and manuals, although it reaches often incredible levels of complexity. I think that all of us, from the inhabitant to the tourist visiting our mountain area, can agree on the fact that this knowledge is a key resource. If it’s lost, everybody loses – right?

Yet, there is a risk attached to this idea. The identification of women as main keepers of traditional knowledge could also easily turn into a limitation of their potential. We should not confine women solely to this type of knowledge as opposed to other kinds of knowledge, such as - for example – scientific knowledge. We have to consider the role of both men and women in keeping together traditional knowledge alive and in advancing together in scientific or more institutionalized knowledge.

This leads me to the second aspect I would like to discuss. Education. As I said, emphasizing the role of women in maintaining traditional knowledge should not be a way to underestimate their role in institutional education. I would like to support this point of view with some data that show that, when favourable conditions are set, women achieve equal or higher education objectives than their male counterpart.

Here you can see some data on secondary and tertiary education in the Alps, taken from our Fifth Report on the State of the Alps on demography. They show (figure 1) us how men in some countries in the Alpine area achieve higher levels of secondary education compared with national averages and women.

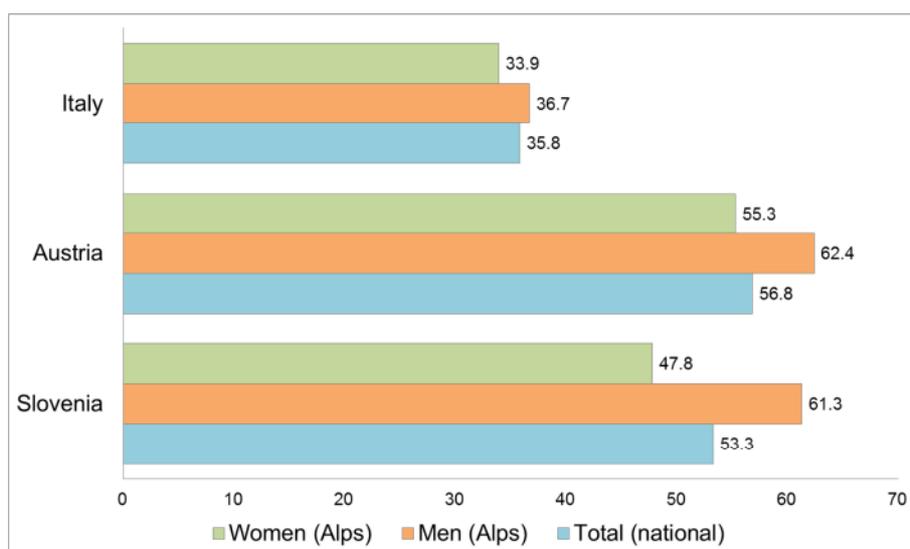


Figure 1: Level of secondary education attained in some Alpine countries. Source: Alpine Convention, 5<sup>th</sup> report on the State of the Alps. Data for Italy (Western Alps): 2013; Austria and Slovenia (only municipalities entirely in the Alpine Convention area): 2011. Data for Austria refer to the entire population; data for Italy and Slovenia to the population older than 15.

This may not seem to support much what I was saying, until we compare it with data on tertiary education, namely higher level education including bachelors, masters and PhD (figure 2). Here the picture is different: for example, in Italy and Slovenia, women living in the Alpine area have higher levels of tertiary education compared with men.

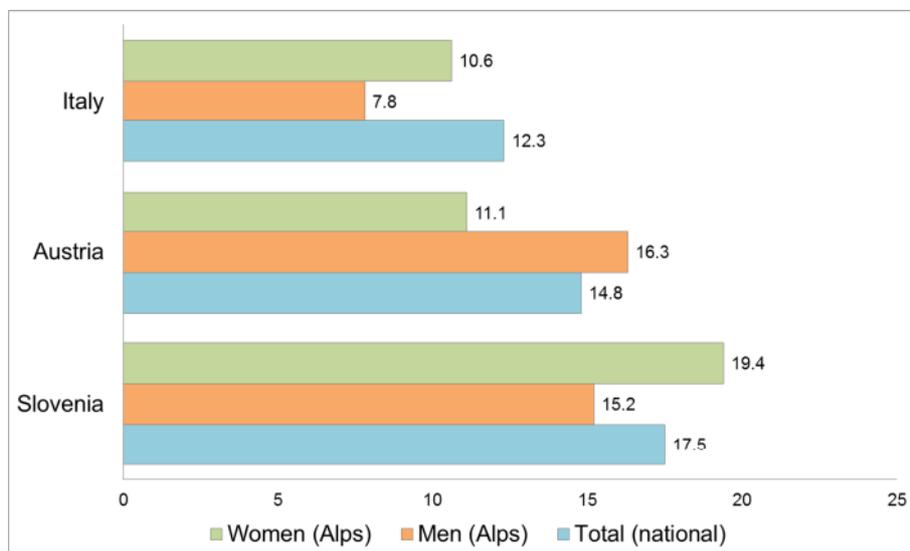


Figure 2: Level of tertiary education attained in some Alpine countries. Source: Alpine Convention, 5<sup>th</sup> report on the State of the Alps. Data for Italy (Western Alps): 2013; Austria and Slovenia (municipalities in the Alpine Convention area): 2011. Data for Austria refer to the entire population; data for Italy and Slovenia to the population older than 15.

This means: women in mountains can – and in many cases already do - achieve higher levels of education than men and their education can often compare to the one of individuals living in non–mountainous areas. So, there is a big potential to be further tapped here. Nevertheless, this statement holds true for some Alpine countries, but not for the entire Alps – for example, there is still a tertiary education gap to cover, for example in Austria. Furthermore, we cannot say that this is true in other mountain regions; due to causes such as limited financial and physical accessibility or cultural obstacles, the access of women to education in many mountain areas is still limited and has to be improved. Let’s keep in mind that the United Nations Population Fund tells us that about two thirds of the world’s illiterate adults are women.

The development of a professional career is often seen as a natural follow-up to education. This is why the third topic I would like to address is female employment. The question here is clear: is the female potential generated through education used fully in mountain areas? For the Alps, at least, I have to say no – not to its full extent. The graph in figure 3 clearly shows this situation. If we look at Austria, we see that the general employment rate is almost 70%; the Austrian Alps show a higher male employment rate than the national one – almost 76% - while the female employment rate is approximately 11% lower.



Figure 3: Employment rate. Source: Alpine Convention, 5<sup>th</sup> report on the State of the Alps. Data for Italy (Western Alps): 2013; Austria and Slovenia (municipalities in the Alpine Convention area): 2011. All data refer to the population aged 15-64.

Look at the data for Italy, too: female employment in the Western Alpine part of the country is substantially lower than male employment (15.9 % less) and almost equals the national average. It seems that being a woman has neutralized the competitive advantage that living in the Alps give. The gender gap is evident: even in positive conditions, women find less employment opportunities or do participate less in the active workforce. We cannot unfortunately tackle the causes here; nevertheless, it is with probability both a matter of framework conditions and choices, a discourse that deserves more time.

Let's take a look not only at the quantity but also the quality of employment. A certain pattern of imbalance is particularly evident, for example when speaking about part-time employment. This (figure 4) is an example of the rate of part-time employment in the Western Italian Alps: while the overall part-time employment rate at national level is 17.9%, men in the Alpine area of Italy tend to use this instrument much less: only 6.1% of employed men have a part-time employment. On the other hand, women in the Western Italian Alps recur more often to this practice, with a rate of 28.7%.

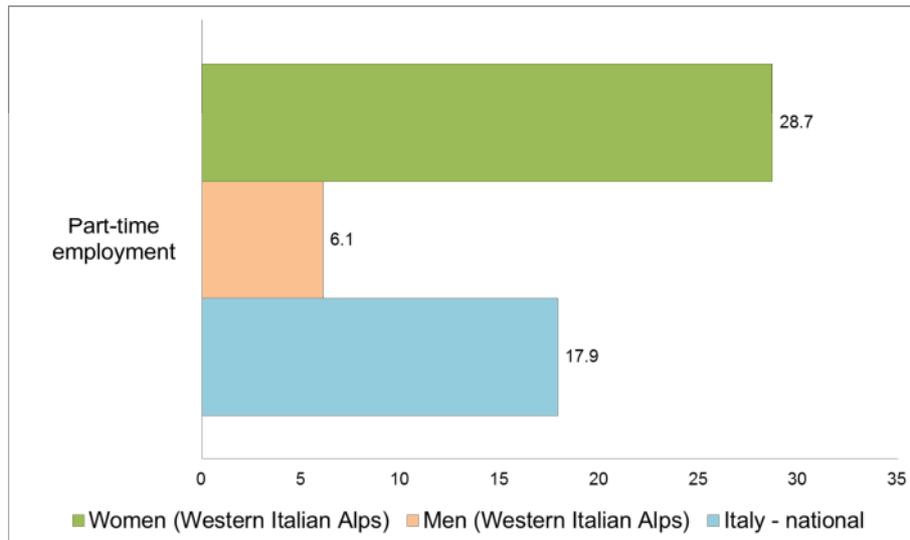


Figure 4: percentage of part-time employment in the Western Italian Alps. Source: Alpine Convention, 5<sup>th</sup> report on the State of the Alps. Data for Italy (Western Alps): 2013.

What do these figures mean in terms of daily life? If we attempt a generalization beyond the specific cases, we can say that this is a symptom that the broad shoulder of women still bear the most relevant part of the work related to family and care. On the other hand of the spectrum, as Markus Reiterer already addressed in his speech, the work related to politics and representation – for example in local associations - is mostly predominantly male. We do not have only statistics to support us here: I think it happened to all women here to be the only female discussant in a conference or to have difficulties in identifying a female face in boards of associations, in debates on television, in the public arena. And we cannot say that it's the time missing – after all many of these representation positions are covered in free time after work – it is a framework issue.

The last aspect I would like to discuss with you today somehow sums up what we have discussed until now: I am speaking about women and demographic changes.

Mountain areas are not immune from global processes such as urbanization and we observe it in the Alps, too (figure 5).

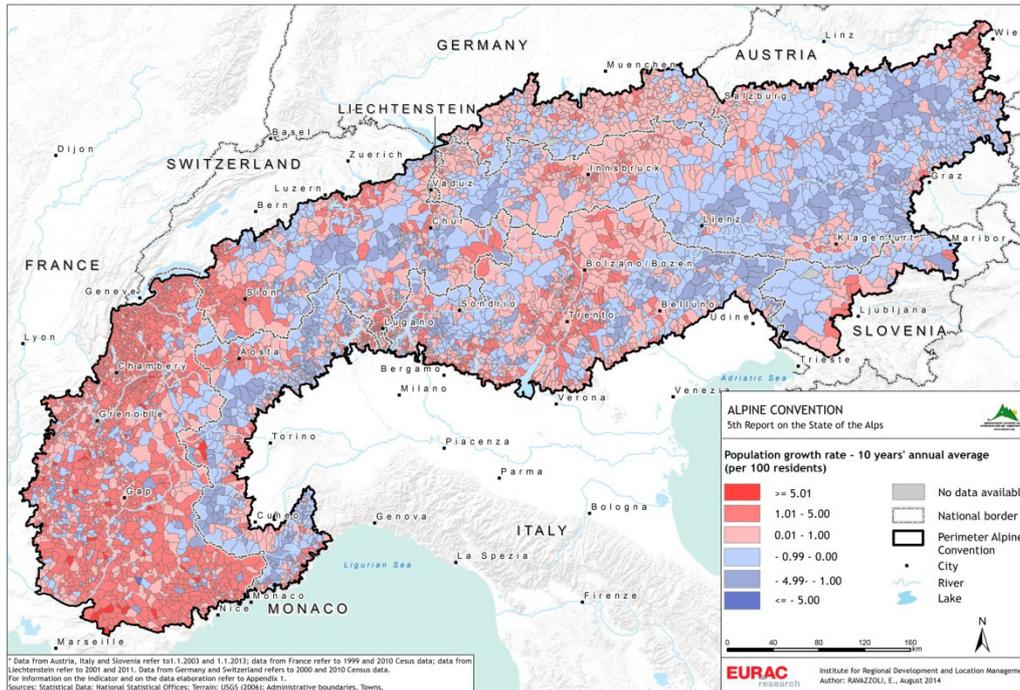


Figure 5: population growth rate in the Alps (10 years annual average). Source: Alpine Convention, 5<sup>th</sup> report on the State of the Alps.

When we look at the development of population, we see how remote and least-accessible rural areas have lost inhabitants, while central and urban areas in the valleys have gained population. Even in the Alps, where accessibility is fairly good, we observe this phenomenon – when this concerns highly educated people, the term “brain drain” is often correctly used. I think that brain drain can be interpreted also as a gender issue: research shows us that women are more ready to move for seeking jobs and education opportunities and also show a preference for urban lifestyles. This is a serious issue we have to address, for which I would quote the two female Austrian researchers Weber and Fischer: “when women leave, the rural areas die”. I invite you to look at this powerful statement not only thinking that that if women leave, there will be fewer children in the mountains. When women leave, the rural areas die because women’s potentials and their contribution go lost; we all lose their perspective which is a perspective equipped for the challenges of the future, we lose the real advocates for change and for sustainable development.

I warned I would not give any solutions, but questions. So, in conclusion, I can say that the experience in the Alps shows us the potential of women not only looking at tradition but also looking forward to the future challenges. These potentials are already developed in some cases, but in other cases it still needs further steps. I would just like to mention two main points of intervention: the need to increase women’s participation and representation and the need to provide the ideal framework conditions for developing the female professional potential in mountain areas. In conclusion, I wish us all interesting debates and discussions in the upcoming days, in the hope we will be able to give some answers, too: after all, behind every successful woman is not only herself, it is indeed also a bit all of us!