

## Article

# Rural Depopulation in Spain from a Gender Perspective: Analysis and Strategies for Sustainability and Territorial Revitalization

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**Abstract:** This study analyzes gender dynamics in rural communities affected by depopulation in Castilla y León (Spain), focusing on identity, belonging, and territorial transformation. Through a qualitative research design based on Grounded Theory and social and participatory mapping, this study examines differences in identity construction between men and women within a context of demographic decline. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 88 participants from 48 villages selected via purposive sampling. The results indicate that men construct their identities around economic and traditional roles, whereas women prioritize emotional support networks and family narratives. Additionally, men perceive depopulation as a structural and economic threat, while women interpret it as a disruption of social and community cohesion. This study highlights the utility of social mapping as a methodological tool for visualizing and analyzing participants' perceptions of territorial changes and their implications for sustainability. From a gender perspective, the findings underscore the need to address rural depopulation by considering differences in environmental perception and adaptation strategies between men and women. This study concludes that territorial revitalization policies should incorporate a gender-sensitive approach that fosters both economic development and social sustainability, promoting resilient and cohesive communities within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**Keywords:** education; sustainable development; visual arts; depopulation; gender



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Rural Depopulation: Global and National Context

Rural depopulation is a phenomenon that affects multiple regions worldwide and is characterized by the migration of young populations to urban areas in search of better economic, educational, and employment opportunities. This process has led to significant transformations in the socio-economic structures of rural communities, reducing their sustainability and affecting the preservation of cultural and natural heritage (Alamá-Sabater et al. [1]; Banco de España [2]).

In Spain, depopulation has been particularly severe in regions such as Castilla y León, Aragón, and Galicia, where a combination of low demographic growth and a high aging

rate has accelerated population decline (Del Barrio [3]). The reduction in public services, the decrease in employment opportunities, and the deterioration of infrastructure have contributed to the progressive abandonment of these areas (Camarero and Oliva [4]).

From a historical perspective, industrialization and urbanization have been key factors in rural-to-urban migration, significantly impacting social cohesion in rural territories. Population loss not only affects the economic viability of these areas but also influences the identity and sense of belonging of their inhabitants (Lasanta et al. [5]). In fact, while infrastructure modernization is necessary, it has also generated a sense of cultural loss and uprooting in some rural communities (Del Molino [6]).

At the national level, various initiatives have been implemented to counteract this phenomenon, including tax incentives, repopulation programs, and the promotion of rural tourism. However, the results have been limited, largely due to the lack of a comprehensive approach that considers the social and economic dynamics of each territory (Rodríguez-Soler et al. [7]).

In this context, addressing depopulation from a multidimensional perspective is essential to understanding the implications of this phenomenon and designing effective strategies for the revitalization of rural territories. The following section explores gender-based approaches to this process, considering their impact on identity construction and community relationships.

### *1.2. Gender, Identity, and Sense of Belonging in Rural Contexts*

The construction of identity and sense of belonging in rural environments has been widely explored in the literature, with gender emerging as a key factor in the configuration of these processes (Angeles and Hill [8]). Previous studies indicate that men tend to associate their identity with traditional roles related to production and economic sustainability, while women tend to prioritize affective networks and emotional ties, which support community cohesion (Camarero and Oliva [4]; Belanche et al. [9]). Understanding these gender differences allows us to analyze the social transformations linked to rural depopulation.

Research also highlights that rural depopulation affects men and women differently. Studies suggest that men perceive depopulation as a threat to economic continuity and social structure, interpreting it as a loss of collective power (Alamá-Sabater et al. [1]). Conversely, women are more likely to experience the erosion of support networks and community interaction spaces, which are fundamental in the construction of relational identities (Pretty et al. [10]). These competing perspectives illustrate the complexity of social and cultural dynamics in communities facing migration and demographic decline (Angeles and Hill [8]; Abrams [11]).

The territorial dimension is also influenced by gender perceptions. Studies show that men tend to interpret the rural environment from a utilitarian perspective, valuing it for its economic productivity, while women connect with the landscape through conservation and care, emphasizing emotional ties with their environment (Hinds and Sparks [12]). These different approaches reflect the diverse strategies employed to cope with the depopulation and modernization of rural spaces (Llorent-Bedmar et al. [13]; Esparcia [14]).

In addition, collective memory has been identified as a central element in the construction of identity and narratives of belonging (Brown and Verschuuren [15]). Research suggests that community events and collective ceremonies reinforce men's roles within the social structure, while women's sense of identity and rootedness is often linked to family narratives and affective relationships (Kissinger et al. [16]). These distinctions provide insights into how rural actors perceive and respond to challenges such as migration, depopulation, and socio-economic transformations in an evolving rural landscape (Abrams [11]).

Based on these theoretical reflections, this study aims to examine whether these gender dynamics are reflected in the specific case of rural communities in Palencia, exploring how men and women construct their identities and sense of belonging in the context of depopulation. Understanding these processes allows us to identify the specific challenges faced by men and women in rural areas, providing valuable insights for designing policies that promote social cohesion, gender equity, and the sustainable revitalization of these communities.

### *1.3. Research Questions and Operationalization of the Object of Study*

With these issues in mind, this research aims to understand how men and women experience and conceptualize key aspects of rural depopulation, taking into account their roles, relationships and perspectives on rural life.

To achieve the research objective, the following research questions are formulated:

1. To what extent is the perception of identity and belonging in rural “depopulated Spain” related to gender?
2. How does gender influence the perception, use, and management of the natural environment in rural communities?
3. What are the gender differences in the perception of risks and challenges facing rural areas and their possible solutions?

Following Vallés [17] and Ruiz-Olabuénaga [18], these questions guide the analysis of gender dynamics in rural communities.

This study follows a qualitative and inductive approach, based on the principles of Grounded Theory (Vallés [17]; Ruiz-Olabuénaga [18]), with the aim of exploring how men and women experience and conceptualize key aspects of rural depopulation. This research does not aim to confirm predefined hypotheses but to identify and analyze emerging themes derived from participants’ narratives.

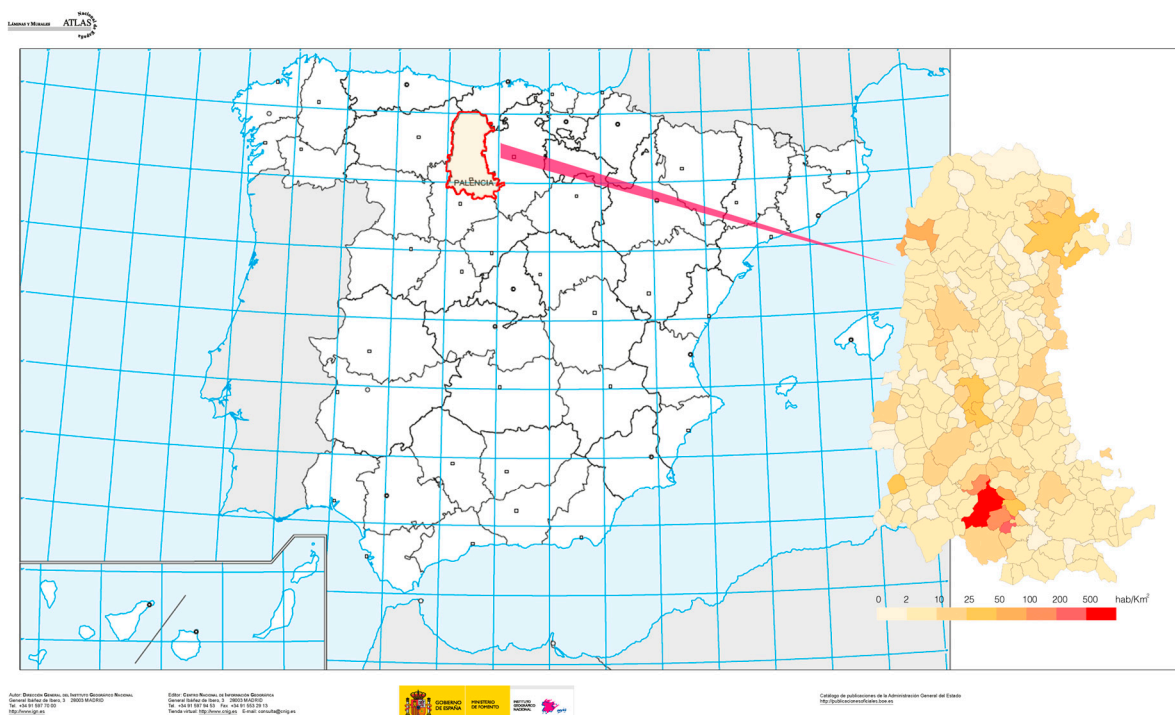
### *1.4. Demographic and Geographic Context*

The province of Palencia is located in the northwestern region of Spain (Figure 1). It is characterized by a low population density and a strong demographic imbalance between urban and rural areas. According to the latest demographic data, the rural areas of Palencia are experiencing a progressive loss of population, mainly due to aging and emigration to urban centers.

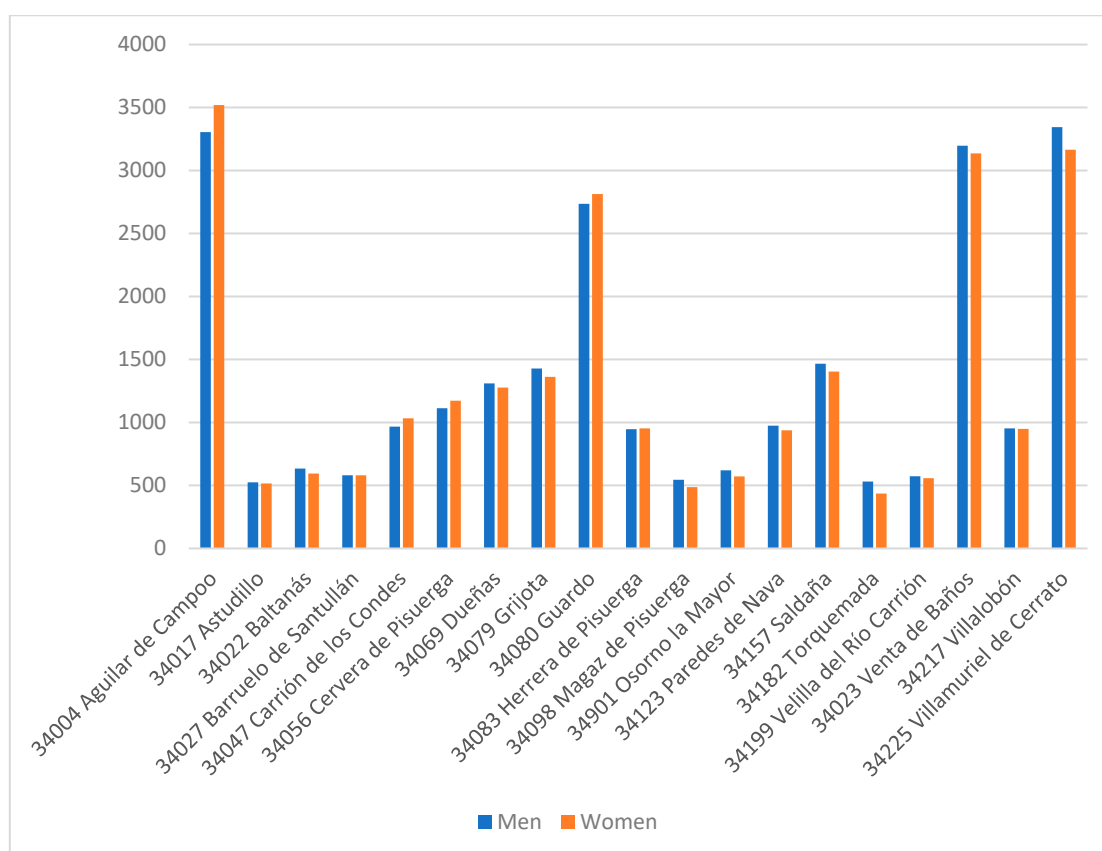
According to the Strategic Plan 2020 of the Province of Palencia (Diputación de Palencia [19]), the distribution of the population by gender presents notable differences between urban and rural areas. Thus, the male ratio in the province is balanced in general terms, with 98 men for every 100 women. However, there is a marked feminization in the larger urban centers, while rural municipalities experience an evident masculinization. This phenomenon is largely explained by the migration of young women to the cities in search of greater educational and employment opportunities. In addition, the aging population and low birth rate aggravate the problem of depopulation in rural areas, hindering generational renewal and demographic sustainability in these environments (Figure 2).

### *1.5. Educational Applications of the Research*

As an extension of this research, the results of this study contributed to the development of a didactic project within the subject “Artistic Expression Resources” of the Faculty of Education of the University of Valladolid. This project applied the methodology of social and participatory mapping to address rural depopulation and its socio-cultural impact, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), which promotes inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable settlements (UN [20]).



**Figure 1.** Location of the province of Palencia on the map of Spain. The enlarged view of the province of Palencia shows the population density per square kilometer. Source: Ministerio de Fomento e Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2025.



**Figure 2.** Population by gender in the twenty rural municipalities with a population density equal to or greater than 500 inhabitants in the province of Palencia.

Although the main objective of this study is to explore how adults experience and conceptualize depopulation in rural communities, the inclusion of an educational perspective highlights the intergenerational transmission of rural identity and belonging. As part of this initiative, the results of this study were adapted into a teaching tool entitled “Memory Pebbles: Voices of Forgotten Castile”, designed for primary school students (ages 6–12). This tool helps students engage with the social, economic, cultural, environmental, and demographic dynamics affecting rural communities, reinforcing the role of gender, memory and local narratives in maintaining rural identity.

In addition, the project culminated with an exhibition held at the Fundación Díaz Caneja—Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (February–June 2024). The exhibition integrates:

1. Social mapping works created during the study, reflecting participants’ narratives on identity, depopulation, and the transformation of rural spaces;
2. Didactic material from “Pebbles of Memory”, which demonstrates how these topics were adapted to young students;
3. Artistic expressions related to rural memory and sustainability, further connecting research results with public engagement.

By incorporating this perspective, this study recognizes that rural depopulation is not only experienced by current adult residents but also shapes the perceptions, aspirations, and identity construction processes of younger generations. Understanding how these dynamics are transmitted between generations provides a more complete picture of how gender, belonging, and rurality are constructed and maintained over time.

Thus, although this study focuses on adults, the educational component reinforces its broader impact by fostering awareness and engagement across different age groups.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Design

The design of this study is based on a qualitative approach based on Grounded Theory, which allows for an inductive content analysis in which categories emerge not from preconceived hypotheses but directly from the data (Jayalath [21]). This approach is particularly suited to understanding how individuals’ gender influences the construction and attribution of meaning to their environment, exploring processes and experiences. It identifies patterns and relationships within the data, generating a deep understanding of the influences of gender in rural contexts (Charmaz and Belgrave [22]).

### 2.2. Participants

A total of 88 people from 48 villages in the province of Palencia participated in this study. Participants were selected by purposive sampling, ensuring that they met specific criteria relevant to the study objectives.

#### Justification of sample size

The decision to include 88 participants was based on the saturation principle of qualitative research, according to which new data no longer provide additional information on the gendered experiences of rural depopulation. A larger sample could have increased the representativeness of the results but was not necessary to reach theoretical saturation. Conversely, a smaller sample might have limited the depth of analysis and the diversity of perspectives.

#### Selection criteria by age

The participants were classified into three age groups:

- Under 35 years old ( $n = 28$ )
- Median age (35–59 years) ( $n = 31$ )
- 60 and older ( $n = 31$ )



These age groups were chosen to reflect intergenerational differences in perceptions of rural identity, belonging, and transformation. Categorization allows us to analyze how experiences and perspectives on depopulation vary across life stages.

#### Representativeness and other eligible participants

Although others in the region might have met the inclusion criteria, the selection process focused on gender, age, and locality diversity to ensure a broad range of perspectives. Priority in this study was given to participants who were actively involved in their communities and could provide rich data on experiences of rural life. Although the sample was not statistically representative, it was qualitatively robust and captured key variations in gendered experiences of depopulation.

#### Inclusion criteria

Participants had to meet the following conditions:

- a. Be 18 years of age or older;
- b. Have resided for at least 10 years in towns in Palencia affected by depopulation;
- c. Have permanent residence or close family ties to the town;
- d. Demonstrate willingness to participate voluntarily and provide detailed information about their experiences in the rural context.

Table 1 presents a summary of the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample. The data are available in ZENODO (Martínez-Vérez et al. [23]).

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

Men	N	Average Age	DT
Men	39	53.7	21.96
Women	49	52.8	20.52
Total	88		

### 2.3. Instruments

#### 2.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (Kvale [24]) were used to collect data. This type of interview, characterized by open-ended and flexible questions, allowed participants to freely express their experiences and perceptions, providing detailed insight into their relationship with rural depopulation and their sense of identity and belonging (Hammersley and Atkinson [25]). The interview guide used by the interviewers addressed issues related to the categories and subcategories of analysis identified in Section 2.1.

#### 2.3.2. Social and Participatory Mapping

Social and participatory mapping was used as a methodological tool to visualize and analyze the experiences, perceptions, and relationships of the participants with their rural environment. This technique facilitates the co-creation of maps that integrate subjective, cultural, and spatial elements, allowing participants to express their sense of identity, belonging, and territorial transformation through visual representations. Social and participatory mapping is particularly useful for documenting identities, territories, and socio-environmental conflicts through the narratives and perspectives of the participants themselves, highlighting the intrinsic relationship between social dynamics and the natural environment (Silva et al. [26]).

The categories analyzed in this study emerged inductively through an iterative coding process based on Grounded Theory. Although some thematic categories were initially based on the literature, they were refined and expanded as data were collected and analyzed.

During the interviews, open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their experiences in their own terms, but interviewers also introduced specific terms related to rural depopulation, identity, and gender when necessary. Definitions were only provided when explicitly requested by participants, which ensured that the study did not impose predefined concepts but captured participants' own perceptions and meanings.

To structure the participatory mapping, participants were asked guiding questions such as the following:

- Can you describe places in your town that have significance and why?
- How do you think your relationship with these spaces has changed over time?
- Do you perceive differences in the way men and women interact or value certain places in the community?
- Are there particular areas that you associate with traditions, community events or collective memory?
- How has rural depopulation affected these areas?

These questions helped facilitate a natural, participant-driven discussion, while allowing individual responses to be compared with broader spatial patterns. The integration of qualitative accounts with spatial mapping provided a multifaceted understanding of gendered experiences of rural depopulation.

### 2.3.3. Mapping and Data Collection Process

During the interviews, participants were asked to identify and describe key places in their villages that they associated with community life, memory, and socio-environmental changes. These spaces included public squares, abandoned houses, farm fields, and places of cultural or historical significance. Through this process, participants not only narrated their experiences but also placed them in a spatial context, reinforcing the link between gender identities and the rural landscape.

The data collected through participatory mapping were digitally systematized, generating thematic maps that represented them visually:

1. Places of collective memory and social interaction (e.g., community events, traditional meeting points);
2. Areas of environmental concern or transformation (e.g., degraded lands, conservation areas or sites affected by depopulation);
3. Gendered spaces (e.g., places perceived as central to male or female social roles).

These maps were analyzed alongside interview data, allowing for a spatial and thematic comparison of gender perspectives on identity, the natural environment, and depopulation. The integration of qualitative accounts with spatial data provided a holistic understanding of how men and women interact with their environment and perceive rural change.

### 2.3.4. Interview Context and Ethical Considerations

The interviews were conducted by a team of researchers with experience in qualitative methodologies and rural studies (Kvale [24]). This team consisted of male and female interviewers, which allowed for a balanced and reflective approach to addressing gender-sensitive topics. Prior to data collection, interviewers participated in training sessions to ensure consistency in the application of the interview guide, while maintaining an open and flexible dialogue with participants.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' hometowns, in familiar and comfortable settings, such as community centers, local cafés, and private homes, depending on the preferences of each participant. This was intended to create an atmosphere of trust that would encourage frankness in the responses. In addition, this study was supported by the

mayors of the towns, who facilitated contact with the participants and helped coordinate the interviews, ensuring that participation remained voluntary, confidential, and free of any coercion.

Since gender is a key aspect of this study, special attention was paid to the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Whenever possible, interviews were conducted by an interviewer of the same gender as the participant to increase trust and minimize response bias. In addition, the interview process was designed to be participatory and non-hierarchical, allowing participants to direct the conversation and highlight the aspects they considered most relevant.

To avoid gender-related power imbalances, the researchers adopted a self-reflective approach throughout the data collection process, ensuring that the lived experiences of the participants took precedence over any predefined analytical frameworks. This approach allowed the study to capture a wide range of gendered experiences in relation to rural depopulation, identity, and territorial belonging.

### 2.3.5. Key Interview Topics

The questions were designed to explore key thematic dimensions related to identity, rural belonging, environmental perceptions, and the impact of depopulation. The questionnaire contains the following key areas (Kvale [24]):

1. Personal and geographic background: Participants were asked about their age, place of origin and current residence, as well as their perception of rural life, including sensory descriptions of their village (landscape, sounds, traditions) and significant personal anecdotes.
2. Identity and sense of belonging: Participants reflected on how they perceive their connection to their community, what aspects define their sense of rootedness, and whether they have experienced changes in their sense of belonging over time.
3. Perception of the natural environment: Interviews explored how men and women value and interact with nature, whether their relationship with the land is emotional or utilitarian, and how gender perspectives shape environmental conservation and land use.
4. Depopulation and migration experiences: In the case of participants who had migrated to urban areas, questions asked about their motivations for leaving, their expectations of the reality of the city, and whether they would have stayed if local employment and services had been available.
5. Challenges and rural revitalization: This study investigated participants' perspectives on the risks and challenges facing rural communities, their views on possible solutions, and how gender influences responses to depopulation.

To maintain flexibility and capture emerging themes, open-ended follow-up questions encouraged participants to expand their narratives, providing insights into gendered experiences, emotional connections, and social transformations. The qualitative nature of this study allowed for the in-depth exploration of these issues, ensuring that the results were rooted in the lived experiences of the participants.

## 2.4. Procedure

### 2.4.1. Data Collection

Between September 2023 and February 2024, a total of 89 interviews were conducted in 49 villages in the province of Palencia. Participants were selected by theoretical sampling, with the aim of including a variety of perspectives related to gender, age, and occupation to enrich the analysis and capture the diversity of rural experiences (Draucker et al. [27]).



#### 2.4.2. Open Coding

In the first phase of the analysis, open coding was carried out, in which the data were reviewed line by line to identify emerging themes. Concepts and categories were generated directly from the data, which allowed the identification of relevant aspects related to gender, belonging, environment, and challenges.

#### 2.4.3. Axial Coding

Axial coding facilitated the reorganization and interrelation of the categories generated during open coding, establishing connections between the main categories and their subcategories. During this phase, the central node, “Identity and belonging”, was identified and the main categories were explored while examining the relationships between the emerging themes and gender differences.

#### 2.4.4. Selective Coding

In this phase, the central category, “Identity and belonging”, was selected as the theoretical axis for developing Grounded Theory. This central category unified the subcategories and allowed the development of a conceptual framework that explains how gender influences perceptions and experiences in the rural context. Table 2 presents a summary of the codes generated and their rationale in the dimensions of both genders.

**Table 2.** Results of the analysis categories.

Level I Code	Level II Code	Frequencies Men/Women	Rooting Men/Women
Identity and belonging	Sense of belonging	Men: [‘p9’, ‘p15’, ‘p26’, ‘p28’, ‘p29’, ‘p31’, ‘p32’, ‘p36’, ‘p39’, ‘p40’, ‘p53’, ‘p64’, ‘p70’, ‘p72’, ‘p75’, ‘p88’, ‘p89’]. Women: [‘p6’, ‘p7’, ‘p9’, ‘p11’, ‘p15’, ‘p26’, ‘p29’, ‘p32’, ‘p40’, ‘p41’, ‘p72’, ‘p75’, ‘p79’, ‘p88’].	25/14
	Rooting	Men: [‘p3’, ‘p4’, ‘p10’, ‘p16’, ‘p18’, ‘p24’, ‘p33’, ‘p43’, ‘p44’, ‘p54’, ‘p55’, ‘p62’]. Women: [‘p8’, ‘p12’, ‘p13’, ‘p15’, ‘p26’, ‘p27’, ‘p29’, ‘p32’, ‘p39’, ‘p47’, ‘p49’, ‘p72’, ‘p88’].	30/13
	Urban–rural contrast	Men: [‘p19’, ‘p20’, ‘p25’, ‘p31’, ‘p45’, ‘p46’, ‘p50’, ‘p53’, ‘p69’, ‘p70’, ‘p73’]. Women: [‘p8’, ‘p11’, ‘p21’, ‘p26’, ‘p34’, ‘p40’, ‘p47’, ‘p65’, ‘p68’, ‘p71’, ‘p79’].	20/11
	Memory	Men: [‘p3’, ‘p14’, ‘p19’, ‘p36’, ‘p43’, ‘p62’, ‘p64’, ‘p70’, ‘p74’, ‘p87’]. Women: [‘p6’, ‘p8’, ‘p11’, ‘p13’, ‘p21’, ‘p32’, ‘p37’, ‘p41’, ‘p47’, ‘p86’].	25/10
Relationship with the natural environment	Valuation of the environment	Men: [‘p10’, ‘p18’, ‘p19’, ‘p24’, ‘p25’, ‘p44’, ‘p54’, ‘p60’, ‘p66’]. Women: [‘p7’, ‘p9’, ‘p12’, ‘p15’, ‘p29’, ‘p40’, ‘p58’, ‘p68’, ‘p72’].	22/9
	Natural environment and daily life	Men: [‘p10’, ‘p20’, ‘p24’, ‘p33’, ‘p44’, ‘p55’, ‘p64’, ‘p70’]. Women: [‘p6’, ‘p9’, ‘p15’, ‘p29’, ‘p41’, ‘p68’, ‘p72’, ‘p75’, ‘p79’].	28/9
	Environmental conservation	Men: [‘p18’, ‘p25’, ‘p33’, ‘p54’, ‘p60’, ‘p62’, ‘p66’, ‘p73’, ‘p87’]. Women: [‘p18’, ‘p25’, ‘p33’, ‘p54’, ‘p60’, ‘p62’, ‘p66’, ‘p73’, ‘p87’].	18/9
Perception of risks and challenges	Perceived risks	Men: [‘p19’, ‘p25’, ‘p43’, ‘p55’, ‘p64’, ‘p77’, ‘p87’]. Women: [‘p19’, ‘p25’, ‘p43’, ‘p55’, ‘p64’, ‘p77’, ‘p87’].	32/9
	Approaches to the challenges	Men: [‘p19’, ‘p24’, ‘p44’, ‘p62’, ‘p64’, ‘p73’, ‘p75’]. Women: [‘p19’, ‘p24’, ‘p44’, ‘p62’, ‘p64’, ‘p73’, ‘p75’].	15/7
	Adaptation to change	Men: [‘p10’, ‘p25’, ‘p33’, ‘p43’, ‘p55’, ‘p62’, ‘p73’]. Women: [‘p10’, ‘p25’, ‘p33’, ‘p43’, ‘p55’, ‘p62’, ‘p73’].	18/7

Table 2 presents the structure of the emerging analytical categories identified through open, axial, and selective coding based on Grounded Theory. It enhances transparency by showing how the data were categorized rather than presenting the final results. The framework developed dynamically as themes emerged from participants' accounts.

Each code (P1, P2, etc.) represents an anonymous respondent. The frequency column (e.g., 25/14) indicates the number of times a category was mentioned by male and female participants, respectively, reflecting thematic recurrence rather than statistical significance.

Questions were open-ended and exploratory, allowing participants to define their own experiences. Researchers occasionally introduced key concepts, but definitions were only provided at the request of participants.

Thus, Table 2 is a methodological tool that provides a structured view of the analytical process and demonstrates the inductive approach of this study.

## 2.5. Validity and Reliability Strategies

### 2.5.1. Source Triangulation

Triangulation of sources was carried out by including a wide range of participants reflecting different perspectives of gender, age, and occupation. This approach validated the results and ensured that the interpretations reflected a comprehensive and varied representation of rural experiences. The importance of source triangulation is supported by studies such as Rubio-Aguilar et al. [28], which examine how generational differences and multiculturalism facilitated a more inclusive understanding of diverse identities in educational communities, highlighting the relevance of integrating multiple viewpoints for more comprehensive interpretations and inclusive social transformations.

### 2.5.2. Validation with Participants

Once the preliminary analysis was completed, the results were shared with a selected group of participants to ensure that the interpretations were consistent with their experiences. This direct validation reinforced the credibility of the results and allowed the analysis to be adjusted based on the participants' opinions.

The selection of participants for validation was based on the following criteria:

1. Diversity of perspectives: Participants were chosen to represent different age groups, genders, and geographic locations within rural Palencia to ensure a validation process.
2. Participation in the study: Priority was given to people who demonstrated a higher level of reflection and commitment during the interviews, as they were able to provide more detailed comments on the interpretations.
3. Availability and willingness to participate: Only those who were willing and available at the time of validation were included.

In fact, as mentioned in the introduction, the photographs and videos of the interviews were exhibited at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Fundación Díaz Caneja, forming an audiovisual cartography within the exhibition space. The interviewees were invited to the opening, where they had the opportunity to see the performance of their narratives and contribute additional ideas. This participatory approach ensured that the results of this research coincided exactly with the lived experiences of the community.

### 2.5.3. External Audit

This study was externally audited by an expert in qualitative methodology from a university other than that of the authors. The expert reviewed the coding and analysis processes, ensuring that the procedure was consistent and rigorous, thus increasing the reliability of this study. This process, following Marques and Júnior [29], allows the external

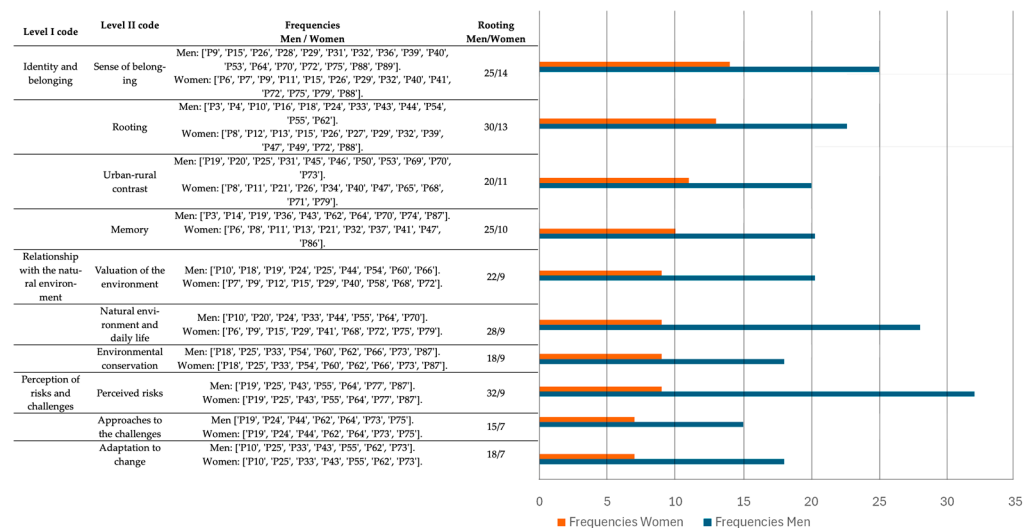
review to reinforce quality standards and ensure the consistency of the results, contributing to the independence and accuracy of the findings.

### 2.5.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through an iterative coding process, reviewing and adjusting categories and subcategories at each stage. In this way, Grounded Theory was developed from an in-depth analysis of gender differences, organizing the data into a network of interrelated categories that highlight the differentiated experiences of men and women in the rural context. As Estrada-Acuña et al. [30] point out, the flexibility of the iterative process is recommended to organize the data through constant comparison and to generate interrelated categories, particularly in aspects such as gender differences.

## 3. Results

In an initial comparison between the categories of both sexes, we can observe that women have lower frequencies in almost all categories, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Frequencies (men/women) with which a category appears in participants' responses.

Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the emergence of themes depended on participant engagement and the natural flow of conversations. The interviewers followed a flexible guide, but the conversations remained open-ended, allowing participants to highlight what they felt was relevant. Differences in the frequencies of mention between genders do not indicate importance, but rather the frequency with which topics were spontaneously expressed. Some themes were explicitly introduced by the interviewers, while others emerged organically. Therefore, these frequencies should be contextualized qualitatively and not treated as strict quantitative indicators. We can observe that men tend to have higher frequencies in categories such as "Rootedness" and "Environmental Conservation", while women show lower representation across all categories. However, in "Sense of Belonging" and "Memory", the differences are less pronounced.

To deepen the analysis of the results, we will explore how each category reflects distinctive gender-based identity constructions that influence the social context of rural depopulation. This analysis is based on Grounded Theory, which allows for the emergence of theoretical insights through the constant comparison of data in relation to the nuances derived from the gender variable.

### 3.1. Identity and Belonging

In terms of gender, it is observed that men's sense of belonging is associated with the continuity of traditional activities, such as agriculture or participation in community festivities. For them, belonging implies preserving or maintaining the vitality of the village through the stability and survival of customs. As one participant (male, 65 years old) put it

*“My role here is to follow in my father's footsteps, to take care of the land he left us and to make sure there is no shortage of anything at the village festivals”.*

For women, however, the sense of belonging is oriented towards the maintenance of support networks as the cornerstone of community cohesion. In their comments, they tend to associate identity with the affective ties they maintain with people in the village, and even with places or moments, placing the social, economic or traditional functions of the community in second place. In this sense, one interviewee (female, 42 years old) shared:

*“For me, the village is the place where I grew up surrounded by people who know me, who have watched my children grow up, and where I know I will never be alone”.*

When talking about family roots, men and women offer different perspectives. For men, rootedness is strongly associated with the continuity of property and lineage. Inheritance of land and the need to preserve the family name are key aspects. Thus, it can be said that for men, rootedness has a symbolic dimension in terms of patriarchal identity. As stated by one participant (male, 58 years old)

*“Here you have to keep the family name and the place that the family holds in the community; that's what we were always taught, and that's what I want to leave to my children”.*

On the other hand, women interpret rootedness from a different perspective. They focus on the network of stories and experiences received and/or shared—specifically, on lived experience and the transmission of family values and relationships—emphasizing the importance of cultural and emotional legacy over the material. For them, roots are a narrative link that connects the past with the future through the present. In this sense, one interviewee (female, 60 years old) shared:

*“My grandmother's and mother's stories are part of who I am; they taught me what it means to belong here, and I like to think it continues inside me”.*

The concepts of urban and rural also offer different nuances depending on the sex of the interviewee. For men, the urban environment questions the authenticity of village life, and there is even a perception that the city and its lifestyle can be a threat to established customs and roles. As one participant (male, 50 years old) stated:

*“In the city, people forget where they come from; here, we always know who we are and where we come from”.*

Women, however, offer a more practical view of the rural–urban contrast and value the positive aspects of the city, perceiving the opportunities it offers without abandoning their connection to the village. For women, identity can be hybrid, integrating the urban as a complement to the rural.

The meaning and importance of memories vary significantly between men and women. Men tend to associate their memories with community events or important village milestones, such as festivals or productive activities, where their participation reinforces a sense of belonging through collective actions and established roles. As one participant (male, 70 years old) said:

*“The memories I have are of when we all worked together during the harvest; those days were the best because the village was united”.*

For women, memory is an emotional space where family interactions and shared stories prevail, reaffirming belonging through an intimate and emotional network. As one interviewee (female, 45 years old) said:

*“My memories are filled with afternoons spent with my mother and aunts, sewing and telling stories; those things are the heart of this place for me”.*

### 3.2. Relation to the Natural Environment

Women and men describe and connect with the landscape differently. Women tend to describe the landscape by highlighting elements that convey tranquility and harmony, linking what they observe to their memories and emotional experiences. As one participant (female, 48 years old) stated:

*“The village is, for me, a haven of peace, an oasis to stop and breathe”.*

Men, on the other hand, describe the landscape from a more practical perspective, focusing on tangible elements more concisely and emphasizing their usefulness. As one participant (male, 62 years old) mentioned:

*“It is a good town, welcoming and well cared for; it has fed several generations”.*

For women, the relationship with nature is expressed in terms of admiration and care, reflecting an emotional perspective of protection and connection. As one participant (female, 55 years old) said:

*“I remember the walks and excursions I took with my children, teaching them the value of taking care of the river and the trees. They talk to you, they are part of us, they have a language that is also ours”.*

Men, on the other hand, perceive nature as a resource that can be worked or transformed. As one participant (male, 60 years old) explained:

*“In 1981 I got married and bought my in-laws’ land to work it again. I would like to create new crops and move into the production of processed products, but it’s not easy”.*

The impact of the natural environment on daily life manifests itself differently for men and women. While women consider the natural environment as an extension of the domestic space, which contributes to family balance and harmony. As one participant (female, 50 years old) described:

*“The smell of the wet earth gives me peace and joy; when the rain returns, everything germinates again”.*

Men, on the other hand, are more interested in how the environment can make productive tasks easier or more difficult, as one participant (male, 57 years old) explained:

*“The climate and the quality of the soil determine what can be produced each year and what the harvest will be like. I like rain, cold and dry heat, but each thing in its own time”.*

In this sense, while women tend to express greater concern for the conservation of the natural environment. As stated by one participant (female, 53 years old):

*“I don’t like that the river is not as clean as it used to be. It’s something I want to preserve for my children and grandchildren. Water is life”.*

Men, on the other hand, tend to approach conservation from a resource management perspective. As one participant (male, 59 years old) noted:

*“If the land wears out, it won’t produce like it used to; we have to find a way to make it yield more”.*

### 3.3. Perceived Risks and Challenges of Depopulation

The perception of threats to the future of the community is perceived differently by men and women, who identify different risk factors.

The new economic opportunities offered by postmodern life and its technological advances are viewed with skepticism by men, as they are opposed to traditional ways. They prefer to remain in activities that are familiar to them and feel aligned with their rural identity. In this regard, one interviewee (male, 64 years old) stated:

*"I do not see myself doing anything but cultivate; I do not know how to do anything but plant and harvest; I live on it and I will die on it. What can exist for me beyond my land?"*

On the other hand, women tend to show greater openness to new economic opportunities, as they consider that these improve the quality of life, allow for better integration into the modern economy, revitalize the community, and increase family well-being. As one interviewee (female, 47 years old) explained:

*"It is good that there are different jobs in town, we need more variety for families to stay. Today you can't live off the land alone; there are better communications, more possibilities. We have to open ourselves to the future. I'm not saying it's easy, nothing is, but either we do it or we die. That's the way things are"*

Proposals for dealing with the risks and challenges of the rural environment also vary between men and women, as the trends that emerge from the data show that there are two perspectives or ways of approaching the revitalization of rural areas based on gender, reflecting different expectations and values with respect to the future of the community.

For men, the approach is more pragmatic, linked to economic sustainability as a basis for revitalizing the village. They frequently mention the need to attract outside investment, develop agriculture or create incentives for young people to return and settle in the village, while maintaining a more economic focus and placing less emphasis on the social aspect. For them, as one participant (male, 58 years old) stated:

*"The important thing is to have work so that young people don't leave, because 'before there was work in the countryside for everyone, now almost no one stays, and the young people leave"*

However, when they talk about work, they do not refer to just any type of employment; they reject novelty and persist in the need to maintain what they have inherited: the land, the cattle, and the way of working it. It is not that they do not accept other types of employment, but they see them from the outside, "with skepticism", and for outsiders, "here we have a tradition".

In contrast, women value the possibility of initiating projects that revitalize the community from an inclusive, community-based approach, and often emphasize the importance of collaboration to bring about positive change. As one interviewee (Female, 45 years old) explained:

*"If we all work together, we can create spaces for our children and for those who come after us"*

In this sense, it is observed that women tend to propose initiatives that promote both social cohesion and community strengthening, such as the creation of meeting spaces and projects focused on education and social development that promote the integral development of the community. One interviewee (female, 50 years old) shared:

*"It would be good to have workshops for families and spaces where people can come together, talk, learn from the past, understand the present and imagine other possible futures, beyond loss and defeat"*



The contrast between urban and rural environments, seen as two different worlds that can clash or complement each other, implies a set of resistances and adaptations for people who live in the countryside or who have migrated to the city, and these are also affected by gender.

For the men interviewed, urban life challenges the authenticity of village life, and there is even a perception that the city and its lifestyle can pose a threat to established customs and roles. As one participant (male, 55 years old) explained:

*“In the city, people forget where they come from; here, we always know who we are and where we come from. In the countryside there is something—I wouldn’t know how to define it—that is authentic, and that something, honestly, I don’t find in city people”.*

Women, however, offer a more practical view of the rural–urban contrast and value the positive aspects of the city, perceiving the opportunities it offers, without abandoning their connection to the village. For rural women, identity can be hybrid, integrating the urban as a complement to the rural. As one interviewee (female, 38 years old) stated:

*“I don’t see anything wrong with learning things from the city; I think we can be from here and there. You don’t have to leave town to be a well-rounded person”.*

However, when talking about adaptation to urban life, i.e., what happens after rural migration, it is observed that women experience a more difficult emotional transition. For women, finding a support network in the city to replace community and family connections in the village is both important and difficult. The lack of interaction with neighbors and friends increases the sense of isolation. One interviewee (female, 41 years old) expressed:

*“I like my children to have Palencia friends; all my friends are from the village. Here, I am the outsider. I don’t want the same thing to happen to my children, that they grow up without roots. They should strive to belong here, and that means creating ties in the city”.*

For men, however, despite their initial resistance to the urban environment and its lack of authenticity, social integration and bonding through professional networks or shared interests are much easier. For example, one interviewee (male, 52 years old) shared:

*“Playing soccer with my coworkers helped me adjust. I did it every Friday afternoon and Saturday mornings. Playing soccer, having a drink, watching games... it’s something we all enjoy”.*

Finally, after considering the analysis of the interviews, it is clear that, in the three emerging categories, gender, understood as a set of beliefs, values, and roles derived from culture, determines the way of being, living, and feeling the key issues of rural depopulation.

### 3.4. Representativeness of the Perception of the City

Analysis of the responses revealed differences in perception of the city between men and women. Approximately 41% of men (16 out of 39) described the city with negative connotations, compared to 51% of women (25 out of 49), suggesting a slightly greater tendency among women to emphasize negative aspects of the urban environment.

These responses emerged from the same open-ended question about perceptions of urban life. Thus, in response to the territorial transformation driven by rural exodus, men focused on the loss of rural identity and the decline of community, while women emphasized the precariousness of support networks and the sense of urban isolation compared to rural environments. This reflects a gender-based difference in how urban life is experienced.

Although these patterns indicate distinct trends, it is important to recognize that not all participants strictly aligned with these dominant perspectives. Some men expressed

a more neutral or even positive view of the city, appreciating its economic opportunities, while a few women reported feeling a sense of empowerment and personal growth in urban settings. These exceptions highlight the diversity of experiences within each gender group, reinforcing the need for a nuanced interpretation of the results.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this study provide new perspectives on the theoretical debate surrounding rural depopulation and gender, highlighting how identity and belonging dynamics are shaped by rural exodus. Previous research (Ángeles and Hill [8]; Camarero and Oliva [4]; Sampedro and Camarero [31]) has indicated that depopulation not only entails demographic loss but also brings about socio-cultural transformations that differentially affect men and women.

From a territorial perspective, this study reinforces the notion that rural depopulation cannot be understood exclusively in economic terms; rather, it also involves the reconfiguration of community ties and local identity structures (Belanche et al. [9]). In this regard, men tend to associate their sense of rootedness with productive continuity and land inheritance, while women construct their identities through community support networks and the transmission of family narratives. These differences underscore the need for specific intervention approaches that consider the symbolic and social dimensions of territory (Camarero and Oliva [4]; Gashi Nulleshi and Kalonaity [32]).

Additionally, this study emphasizes the need to integrate an intersectional approach to understanding rural–urban migration, addressing the interrelationship between gender, territory, and sustainability. Notably, this study shows that migration has differentiated effects on men and women: while men primarily express concern over the loss of economic opportunities, women focus on the erosion of community support networks (Alamá-Sabater et al. [1]; Fan [33]).

In this context, the importance of adopting theoretical strategies that integrate community resilience and sustainability with a gender perspective is highlighted, recognizing that revitalizing rural spaces requires not only economic investment but also strengthening social cohesion and participatory governance (Llorent-Bedmar et al. [13]; Kaplan et al. [34]). These approaches allow for a more holistic understanding of depopulation processes and foster the development of more inclusive policies adapted to local realities.

### 4.2. Methodological Contributions

From a methodological standpoint, this study offers an innovative perspective by employing participatory social mapping as an analytical tool to understand perceptions of depopulation and territorial transformation processes. Through this technique, it has been possible to capture the complexity of both individual and collective experiences, providing a visual representation that helps identify gender differences in the construction of identity and sense of belonging (Ángeles and Hill [8]; Esparcia [14]; Manolache [35]). The incorporation of this methodology not only expands the ways in which rural depopulation can be studied but also offers an effective alternative for community participation in identifying and redefining local issues.

Furthermore, the application of Grounded Theory has been essential for ensuring an inductive analysis, allowing categories to emerge from the data rather than imposing predefined structures (Denzin [17]). This approach has facilitated the development of a dynamic conceptual framework, aligned with the diversity of participants' perceptions and the fluid nature of depopulation processes. The ability of this method to capture local

narratives and the meanings attributed to territory reinforces its relevance in the field of rural studies.

Finally, the combination of social mapping and Grounded Theory represents a significant methodological contribution, as it enables the triangulation of qualitative data from a visual and narrative perspective. This methodological integration provides a more holistic analysis of rural depopulation and its gender implications, offering replicable tools for future research on territorial transformation and sustainability.

#### *4.3. Implications for Addressing Rural Depopulation*

The findings of this study provide insights into the challenges of rural depopulation and highlight how both male and female perspectives contribute to potential solutions. Previous research (Alamá-Sabater et al. [1]; Esparcia [14]) has emphasized that depopulation is not solely an economic issue but also a social and cultural transformation process that requires inclusive, community-based responses (Kaplan et al. [34]; Lasanta et al. [5]).

Men's perspectives, which focus on economic sustainability and the preservation of traditional rural livelihoods, align with strategies aimed at fostering local investment, improving agricultural productivity, and maintaining economic viability (Belanche et al. [9]). These aspects are particularly relevant to making rural communities attractive to younger generations, especially for men, who perceive rural life primarily as an economic structure rather than a social environment (Llorent-Bedmar et al. [13]; Litina et al. [36]).

In contrast, women tend to emphasize community cohesion, social infrastructure, and the importance of fostering networks of care and belonging (Ángeles and Hill, 2009 [8]). Their perspectives highlight the need for investment in education, healthcare services, and social initiatives that improve quality of life, making rural areas more livable and appealing to families and diverse social groups (Camarero and Oliva [4]).

Integrating both approaches is essential for sustainable rural revitalization. Strategies that combine economic development with social well-being (Pretty et al. [10]) can provide more effective and holistic solutions.

Participatory social mapping also plays a crucial role in making community needs and aspirations visible, facilitating inclusive decision-making processes (Acselrad and Núñez Viégas [37]).

Furthermore, this study stands out for innovatively integrating research findings with educational tools and public exhibitions. Social mapping has not only been used as an analytical technique but also as a means of dissemination and awareness-raising. The visual representation of data has facilitated dialogue between rural inhabitants and policymakers, enabling the identification of joint solutions and raising awareness of the problems associated with depopulation.

Additionally, the combination of participatory tools with educational approaches has allowed the community to recognize its role in territorial regeneration, promoting spatial ownership and the revalorization of collective memory (Brown and Verschuuren [15]). In this sense, the presentation of findings in public spaces, creating a museum-oriented discourse, has strengthened local identity narratives and reinforced community commitment to the future of the territory.

Considering these issues, it is crucial to emphasize that, according to this study's findings, addressing depopulation requires a gender-sensitive approach that values the contributions of both men and women in shaping resilient and thriving rural communities. Therefore, future policies should promote participatory governance, balanced leadership between men and women, and investment in both economic and social dimensions to create sustainable and cohesive rural spaces.

## 5. Conclusions

This study, conducted using a qualitative approach based on Grounded Theory, provides an analysis that identifies gender patterns influencing how men and women in the province of Palencia experience and value their environment, relationships, and aspirations for the future of the rural community. In this regard, the findings support previous literature suggesting that there are differences in the construction of rural identity and the perception of depopulation processes based on gender. However, these differences are not absolute, nor are they applicable to all individuals within each group.

Thus, it can be stated that:

For the women participants, rural identity is intrinsically linked to social cohesion and a sense of community, emphasizing neighborly relations and mutual support.

In contrast, the men interviewed construct their rural identity based on the continuity of productive activities and the preservation of traditions, highlighting a sense of belonging tied to duty and economic responsibility.

Regarding territorial transformation, women from Palencia generally emphasize the need to preserve the environment and natural resources, advocating for a balance between modernization and conservation. Meanwhile, the men interviewed in this study tend to place greater value on the economic development opportunities that arise from rural modernization.

Perceptions of the local economy reflect gender differences in terms of priorities and economic needs. While women express concerns about the sustainability of community resources and the creation of opportunities that promote social cohesion and family stability, men tend to focus on ensuring the economic viability of the village through job creation, reflecting their traditional role as providers.

Regarding migration, women tend to experience uprooting in a more emotional way, striving to maintain emotional ties with their hometown and considering the possibility of returning in the future. Conversely, men generally adapt to urban environments more pragmatically, gradually distancing themselves from their place of origin. This difference suggests that migration and adaptation experiences vary by gender, potentially influencing return dynamics and ties to their hometown.

In terms of perceptions of the natural environment, women tend to view the village from a conservationist perspective, considering it a space for emotional well-being and a legacy for future generations. In contrast, men generally focus on efficient landscape management to maximize its use for productive purposes.

Concerns about the future reveal a complementary approach between men and women. In this study, women express interest in community revitalization and strengthening social relationships as key elements for the village's future, while men focus on economic opportunities and ensuring productive sustainability as the primary means of guaranteeing the community's survival. Combining these approaches is essential for comprehensively addressing the risks and challenges facing rural communities.

In this regard, the findings of this study suggest that sustainable territorial development is not merely a theoretical concept but a necessity perceived by the participants, who express their desire to address the challenges facing the future of their communities. However, this study also recognizes the diversity of experiences and individual perspectives, reinforcing the importance of designing strategies adapted to the specificities of each rural context. As noted in the literature, knowledge of a territory is accessible to anyone, but only those who inhabit it can develop a deep emotional connection to it.

### *5.1. Implications for Research and Practice in Rural Contexts*

The findings of this study suggest that rural development policies and programs could benefit from an approach that integrates social cohesion and economic sustainability, generating strategies that respond to the needs of rural communities. In addition, this study invites further exploration of how gender influences rural dynamics, with the goal of building more resilient and cohesive communities that value both cultural heritage and economic development opportunities.

This study not only confirms existing findings in the literature on the gendered experiences of rural depopulation but also brings new perspectives by applying a qualitative, participatory approach focused on the voices of rural dwellers. Unlike previous studies, which focus on economic or demographic analyses, this research highlights how subjective experiences, emotional attachments, and everyday narratives shape the ways in which men and women relate to their environment and community.

One of the main contributions of this study is its emphasis on the interaction between gender and place attachment, demonstrating that while broader gender patterns persist, local factors such as community structures, intergenerational ties, and the evolution of rural economies also play a role in shaping identities. This suggests that rural gender dynamics should not be considered static but evolve within specific socio-spatial contexts.

In addition, this study brings new empirical evidence to the debate on rural sustainability and revitalization, demonstrating that the integration of male and female perspectives could lead to more comprehensive rural development strategies. While men prioritize economic and structural sustainability, women focus on strengthening social networks and quality of life, reinforcing the idea that an effective approach to rural depopulation must bridge the two dimensions.

By incorporating social and participatory mapping into rural gender studies, this research also underscores the value of visual methodologies to make invisible community narratives more tangible. Future research should continue to explore how participatory methods can facilitate policy design, ensuring that rural development strategies are based on lived experiences rather than top-down planning approaches.

Thus, while this study aligns with existing research, it advances the conversation by offering an integrated, narrative-based perspective on gender and rurality, advocating for policies and practices that embrace both economic renewal and social sustainability.

### *5.2. Limitations of the Study*

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, this research is based on a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews, which limits the generalizability of the results to other rural communities.

In addition, this study was conducted with 88 participants (39 men and 49 women), which, while sufficient to reach theoretical saturation, does not seek statistical representativeness. Furthermore, this research was limited to the period between December 2023 and February 2024, which means that seasonal variations and long-term trends in the perception of rural depopulation were not taken into account.

Furthermore, although this study delves into gender differences, interpretations may be influenced by the researchers' own cultural and social assumptions about gender and the rural context. This limitation is common in research of this nature, as gender is first and foremost a social construct.

Finally, this study focuses on a specific cultural context, which may limit the applicability of the results in other settings. Perceptions and meanings of rural identity, belonging, and challenges may vary significantly depending on the socio-cultural and geographic context. Therefore, caution is advised when applying these results to other realities.

### 5.3. Future Lines of Research

Considering the limitations and conclusions of the present study, several lines of research for the future are suggested:

1. It would be beneficial to repeat this study in other rural communities with different cultural, geographic, and economic characteristics, as the comparison of the results in different rural contexts could help to identify common patterns and significant differences.
2. In addition, longitudinal studies exploring how perceptions of gender, identity, belonging, and relationships with the environment evolve over time would provide valuable insights.
3. A subsequent quantitative approach could enrich the analysis and offer a complementary perspective to this qualitative study.
4. In addition, an interesting line of research would be to examine how age influences perceptions of identity and belonging, as it could help identify generational changes in gender perceptions.
5. Finally, it would be valuable to investigate how rural development policies influence identity in order to design and implement gender-sensitive policies that support economic development, social cohesion, and emotional well-being in rural communities.

**Author Contributions:** The conceptualization of the study was carried out by V.M.-V. and P.G.-R. The methodology was developed by V.M.-V., while P.G.-R. was responsible for the software used. Validation was conducted by V.M.-V., P.G.-R. and A.M.-S. Formal analysis and investigation were performed by V.M.-V. and P.G.-R. Resources were managed by V.M.-V., who was also responsible for data curation. The original draft was written by the V.M.-V., while writing—review and editing were conducted by the V.M.-V. and P.G.-R. Visualization was performed by the A.M.-S. and F.C.-S., and supervision was undertaken by P.G.-R. Project administration was managed by the V.M.-V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

MDPI	Multidisciplinary Institute of Digital Publishing
DOAJ	Directory of open access journals
TLA	Three-letter acronym
LD	Linear dichroism

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