

COMMONLANDS, GOVERNANCE AND GENDER

Conclusions from the Erasmus+ Project



1. PREAMBLE

This document synthesizes the key findings, learnings, and recommendations from a series of events conducted throughout 2025 as part of an Erasmus+ project focused on commonlands, governance, and gender. The initiative brought together practitioners, academics, activists, and community leaders from across Europe to explore the critical yet often marginalized role of women in ecosystem management, conservation, and community-based governance of common lands.

The project comprised four main events:

- An opening seminar that established the theoretical and practical foundations of the project, examining economic structures, biodiversity conservation, and the role of commons in sustainable development
- A webinar on the right to participate, focusing on inclusive governance mechanisms and the barriers faced by women in accessing decision-making spaces
- A webinar on economic structures and biodiversity conservation, analyzing how commons-based governance models can balance productive activities with ecological sustainability
- A three-day webinar on feminist perspectives, which explored Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), care-based approaches to land management, and practical experiences from women leaders managing common lands
- An in-person meeting in Abruzzo, including in-field visits and common reflection sessions hosted by the University of Teramo

Throughout these events, participants from Portugal, Norway, Italy, France, Bulgaria, Greece and Spain, and other European regions shared case studies, methodologies, and practical tools for integrating gender perspectives into commons governance. The project was designed not only to document women's contributions but to actively create spaces for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and the co-creation of solutions that address the intersectional challenges faced by rural women and common land communities.

The following sections present the methodology employed, the key learnings identified across all sessions, the challenges and barriers that emerged, and a collection of good

practices and proposals for moving forward toward more inclusive, sustainable, and gender-responsive commons governance.



2. METHODOLOGY

The project employed a participatory and multi-method approach designed to facilitate knowledge exchange, critical reflection, and practical learning across diverse contexts. The methodology was grounded in principles of inclusivity, transparency, and feminist research practices that prioritize lived experience and situated knowledge.

2.1 Event Formats and Participation

The project combined in-person and online formats to maximize accessibility and participation:

- **Opening Seminar:** A face-to-face gathering that established personal connections among consortium members and set the conceptual framework for subsequent activities. This format facilitated in-depth discussion and relationship-building essential for long-term collaboration.
- **Webinars:** Three thematic webinars conducted online, featuring presentations from experts, case study analyses, and structured discussion sessions. Where possible, hybrid formats were used with local partners facilitating in-person participation to overcome digital barriers.
- **Roundtable:** The final webinar included a roundtable with Portuguese women leaders currently managing common lands (baldios), providing direct testimony from practitioners and enabling peer-to-peer learning.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple sources of evidence informed the conclusions presented in this document:

- **Presentations:** Expert presentations covering theoretical frameworks (ecofeminism, care-centered approaches), empirical research findings (Giesta Project survey data, Bem Comum network evaluation), and practical case studies (Norwegian budeie tradition, Welsh community forestry, Spanish livestock networks).
- **Group Discussions:** Facilitated breakout sessions where participants reflected on how learnings could be applied in their own contexts, identifying transferable tools and contextual adaptations.
- **Direct Testimonies:** First-person accounts from women managing common lands in Portugal, covering their experiences with governance challenges, community mobilization, legal conflicts, and innovative management practices.
- **Participant Feedback:** Structured feedback collected from attendees to assess relevance, identify gaps, and refine future activities.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The synthesis of learnings and recommendations drew on intersectional feminist analysis that attends to how gender, class, rurality, and spatial location shape experiences of commons governance. The analysis identified:

- Recurrent themes across different contexts and scales
- Structural barriers preventing women's full participation
- Innovative practices and strategies developed by women and communities
- Gaps in knowledge, policy, and practice requiring further attention



This methodology ensured that conclusions are grounded in empirical evidence, lived experience, and collaborative knowledge construction, rather than imposed from external frameworks disconnected from local realities.

3. KEY LEARNINGS

3.1 Women as Holders of Traditional Ecological Knowledge

One of the most significant findings across all sessions was the recognition that women possess invaluable Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) transmitted intergenerationally. This knowledge encompasses:

- **Sustainable resource management:** Women have historically managed common lands for subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, and gathering of wild resources. Their practices are often adapted to marginal conditions and demonstrate deep understanding of seasonal cycles, plant-animal relationships, and ecosystem dynamics.
- **Animal welfare and care:** As demonstrated by the Norwegian buddy tradition, women's intimate relationships with livestock and their care-centered approach to animal management contributes to both productivity and animal well-being. This knowledge includes identifying pasture quality, managing herd health, and traditional dairy processing techniques.
- **Biodiversity conservation:** Women's knowledge extends to medicinal plants, traditional crafts using wild resources (such as juniper for multiple purposes), and understanding of habitat requirements for various species. This knowledge is often informal and undervalued despite its conservation importance.

However, this TEK is systematically marginalized in formal decision-making processes, technocratic conservation approaches, and agricultural modernization policies. The project highlighted that recognizing and valuing women's knowledge is not simply a matter of justice, but essential for effective ecosystem management and climate adaptation.

3.2 Structural Barriers to Women's Participation

Multiple intersecting barriers limit women's participation in commons governance and leadership:

- **Time poverty and triple burden:** Rural women face disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work (children, elderly, household), productive work (farming, crafts), and community labor (festivities, mutual aid). As documented in the Giesta Project, this leaves minimal time for participation in governance meetings or public activities. The 81% of women who do not participate in community activities cited lack of time as a primary reason.
- **Gendered public spaces:** Public spaces such as cafés and community centers remain male-dominated. Women often feel uncomfortable in these spaces or are explicitly excluded. Even when women are entitled to participate in assemblies, social norms and family expectations push them to defer to male relatives.
- **Economic dependence and property rights:** Financial dependence on male partners and male hegemony over property ownership create obstacles to women's autonomy. In common lands governance, women's access to benefits and decision-making often depends on male representation of household interests rather than direct participation as rights-holders.
- **Geographic isolation and mobility constraints:** Rural women, particularly those in mountain areas, experience physical isolation compounded by lack of public transport. Many have limited geographic mobility and rarely travel beyond their villages. This isolation extends to digital exclusion, as demonstrated by the challenges of engaging women in online networks.
- **Self-censorship and internalized limitations:** Women often internalize their exclusion, suggesting that fathers or sons attend meetings in their place. This self-censorship is rooted in habit, social expectation, and lack of confidence in public speaking or formal roles. Breaking these patterns requires safe spaces specifically for women.
- **Legal knowledge gaps:** As evidenced in the Portuguese roundtable, many commoners—including women leaders—lack understanding of legal frameworks governing common lands. This knowledge gap leaves communities vulnerable to exploitation, internal conflicts, and inability to defend their rights effectively.



3.3 The Power of Feminist and Care-Centered Approaches

Ecofeminism and care ethics emerged as powerful frameworks for reimagining human-nature relationships and commons governance:

- **Challenging binary thinking:** Feminist perspectives dismantle false dichotomies between nature/culture, male/female, and production/reproduction. This opens space for understanding ecosystems and communities as interdependent systems requiring holistic management.

- **Centering care and reciprocity:** The buche tradition exemplifies how care-centered relationships with land and animals create sustainable outcomes. Rather than prioritizing efficiency and mechanization, these approaches emphasize attention, responsiveness, and reciprocal responsibility.
- **Recognizing interdependence:** Care-based approaches acknowledge that humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems are fundamentally interconnected. This contrasts with extractive models that treat nature as resource and labor as commodity.
- **Justice as transformative goal:** Ecofeminism links environmental sustainability to social justice, showing how oppression of women and destruction of nature are interconnected through patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. Addressing either requires confronting all three systems.



These frameworks provide both critique of dominant technocratic approaches and vision for alternatives rooted in care, cooperation, and collective liberation.

3.4 Culture-Based Solutions as Alternatives to Technocratic Models

The concept of culture-based solutions offers a promising alternative to nature-based solutions that often prioritize technical interventions with limited community involvement:

- **Grounded in local knowledge:** Culture-based solutions draw on traditional and contemporary land-care practices that communities have developed over generations. This includes seasonal grazing patterns, fire management, water harvesting, and agro-silvo-pastoral systems.
- **Holistic climate adaptation:** Rather than isolated technical fixes, culture-based solutions address climate risks through integrated social-ecological strategies. *The Pitões das Júnias case demonstrated how improving forage areas simultaneously reduces fire risk, maintains biodiversity, and supports livelihoods.*
- **Community ownership and agency:** These approaches center communities as knowledge-holders and decision-makers rather than passive recipients of external interventions. *The Welsh Skyline project exemplified this through co-production processes that put community values at the heart of forest management.*
- **Addressing depopulation:** Culture-based solutions can revitalize depopulated rural areas by creating meaningful livelihoods, strengthening social networks, and rebuilding connection between people and place. This contrasts with extractive industries that promise jobs but undermine long-term sustainability.

3.5 Women's Networks as Spaces for Empowerment

The creation of women-specific networks emerged as a critical strategy for overcoming isolation and building collective power:

- **Breaking isolation:** Networks connect women across geographic distances, creating sense of solidarity and shared purpose.

The Portuguese women shepherds' network demonstrated how even a WhatsApp group can transform daily experience by providing constant access to support and information.

- **Safe spaces for learning:** Women-only spaces allow participants to raise issues they would not feel comfortable discussing in mixed settings, practice new skills without judgment, and build confidence in their own expertise.
- **Knowledge exchange:** Networks facilitate peer-to-peer learning, sharing of traditional knowledge, and mutual problem-solving. Farm visits, hybrid workshops, and documentary videos amplify women's voices and make their work visible to wider audiences.
- **Digital inclusion:** Networks can support digital literacy development, as evidenced by women acquiring their first smartphones to participate. However, this requires patient support and hybrid formats that don't assume existing digital skills.
- **Political mobilization:** From individual participation to collective action, networks build critical mass needed for political influence. The motto 'Alone, invisible; together, invincible' captures this transformative potential.



3.6 Legal Frameworks and Governance Models Matter

The sessions revealed critical importance of legal frameworks and governance structures in either enabling or constraining women's participation:

- **Legal literacy as empowerment:** Several Portuguese women leaders emphasized studying common lands legislation as first step in effective governance. Legal knowledge enabled them to defend community rights, challenge usurpation, and counter assumptions that men knew better.
- **Property rights and access:** Historical exclusion of women from common lands governance (requiring male representation or widowhood for participation) continues to shape current participation patterns. While formal rules have changed, informal barriers persist.
- **Co-management models:** While full community ownership remained politically impossible, long-term management agreements embedded community values into forest certification and planning processes.
The Welsh Skyline project demonstrated the possibility of working on state and community agreement when community property does not exist. Co-production processes is key for developing trust relationships between communities and state agencies.
- **Economic rights:** Securing economic benefits from common lands—whether through timber, wind energy, grazing fees, or other sources—provides material basis for community investment and creates incentive for participation. Women's control over these resources remains contested.

4. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS IDENTIFIED



4.1 Governance and Power Dynamics

- **Male resistance to women's leadership:** Multiple testimonies described direct opposition from men when women assumed governance roles. This ranged from questioning women's competence to legal challenges and attempts to undermine decisions.
- **Legacy of corruption and mistrust:** Previous mismanagement by male-dominated boards created suspicion when women took charge. Accusations that women would misuse funds reflected both gender bias and community trauma from past governance failures.
- **Legal battles consuming resources:** Communities spent years and scarce financial resources fighting internal legal disputes rather than advancing management goals. This exhausts leaders and diverts attention from substantive work.
- **Low participation in assemblies:** Mobilizing community participation in governance remains difficult. Many commoners—especially women—do not attend assemblies, limiting democratic legitimacy and concentrating decision-making.
- **Generational disconnect:** Young people often have limited interest in common lands governance, creating succession challenges. However, some communities successfully engage youth through education and meaningful roles.

4.2 Economic and Material Constraints connected to European Commonlands

- **Limited income from commons:** Many common lands generate minimal revenue (e.g., 3,500 euros annually from telecommunications antennas). This constrains investment in management, infrastructure, and community programs.
- **Fire vulnerability:** Repeated wildfires destroy forests and infrastructure, requiring constant investment in recovery with limited resources. Fire risk particularly affects steep, rocky terrain where reforestation is difficult.
- **Soil degradation:** Years of poor management, overgrazing, and fire have left many common lands with thin soils, limited productivity, and reduced carrying capacity. Restoration requires long-term investment.
- **Lack of public services:** Rural areas lack adequate transport, healthcare, and social services. This affects women disproportionately and makes rural life unsustainable for families.
- **Funding sustainability:** Maintaining networks, technical support, and programming requires ongoing resources beyond project timelines.

Projects like BemComum, which engaged communities in cocreating solutions for different areas of interest for commonlands (like women shepherds participation and empowerment) depend on short term external funding. Today, communities lack of

the social support needed, while public funding is centred around infrastructure and technical aspects, the social aspects remain ignored.



4.3 Knowledge and Capacity Gaps

- **Devaluation of traditional knowledge:** Modernization pressures devalue traditional practices in favor of mechanization and industrial efficiency. Policies prioritize milking robots over care-centered animal management, eroding women's traditional knowledge systems (maintained through centuries by women).
- **Knowledge transmission gaps:** Intergenerational knowledge transfer is disrupted by youth outmigration and loss of traditional practices. The shift from women-led to men-led farm management- most often based on technical modernized knowledge and practices- has broken knowledge chains.
- **Technical capacity limitations:** Many community leaders lack technical expertise in forestry, ecology, or business management. This makes communities dependent on external consultants or vulnerable to poor decisions.
- **Digital exclusion:** Limited digital literacy and infrastructure access create barriers to information, networking, and participation in online spaces. This particularly affects older rural women.

4.4 Institutional and Policy Barriers

- **State agency resistance:** Government agencies managing public forests often resist community involvement, creating roadblocks even when political leadership supports devolution. Bureaucratic inertia favors centralized control.
- **Extractive industry threats:** Mining companies and other extractive industries threaten common lands with state support. Communities fighting lithium mining face well-resourced opponents and state complicity.
- **Absence of gender-sensitive policies:** Environmental and agricultural policies rarely incorporate gender analysis or address barriers to women's participation. Green transition initiatives replicate rather than transform gender inequalities.
- **Short-term project funding:** Competitive project-based funding creates precarity and prevents long-term relationship-building essential for transformative change. Networks and support systems need sustained institutional backing.

4.5 Social and Cultural Barriers

- **Persistence of traditional gender roles:** Despite awareness of gender inequality, traditional roles remain deeply entrenched. Men continue to dominate public spaces and decision-making while women bear disproportionate care burdens.

- **Normalization of violence:** Domestic violence is widely accepted as normal in rural communities, with victims silenced by financial dependence, isolation, and social pressure. This creates climate of fear limiting women's agency.
- **Lack of attractive activities:** Community life is limited to religious and summer festivals. Women cite absence of activities they find meaningful as reason for non-participation, but few feel empowered to organize alternatives.
- **Rural stigma and romanticization:** Rural areas are simultaneously stigmatized as backwards and romanticized as idyllic. Neither perspective acknowledges actual conditions or respects rural women's agency and expertise.



5. GOOD PRACTICES AND PROPOSALS

5.1 Building Women's Networks and Solidarity

- **Create women-specific spaces:** Establish networks where women must participate because no one else will. These spaces allow raising issues uncomfortable in mixed settings and build confidence through peer support.
- **Use hybrid formats:** Combine face-to-face gatherings for relationship-building with online tools for ongoing connection. Have local partners facilitate in-person participation for those with limited digital access.
- **Start where women are:** Go to villages and farms rather than expecting women to travel. Prioritize accessibility and convenience over formal settings.
- **Facilitate farm visits and peer learning:** Enable women to see each other's work and share practical knowledge. Exchange visits build trust and inspire innovation.
- **Support digital inclusion patiently:** Help women acquire devices and skills at their own pace. Create solidarity around learning so women support each other rather than feeling shame about knowledge gaps.
- **Scale gradually:** Begin with local networks, expand regionally, then nationally. Building critical mass is essential but must not sacrifice depth of relationships.
- **Make women's work visible:** Document and amplify women's contributions through videos, publications, and public events. Visibility combats invisibility and validates women's expertise.

5.2 Strengthening Governance and Legal Capacity

- **Invest in legal literacy:** Study common lands legislation and ensure all board members understand the legal framework. Share this knowledge with the broader community to prevent exploitation.
- **Establish transparent procedures:** Implement clear protocols for decision-making, financial management, and communication. Transparency builds trust and counters accusations of corruption.

- **Engage community systematically:** Hold regular check-ins with board members and community. Create multiple channels for participation beyond formal assemblies.
- **Foster inclusive decision-making:** Actively seek diverse perspectives rather than relying on those who speak loudest. Use facilitation techniques that ensure quieter voices are heard.
- **Ensure the participation of community members, particularly when dealing with other technical roles**
There can be identified barriers such as language or cultural context. Developing activities that are specifically tailored to the geographical and cultural context of the community; these are the ones that are truly effective.
- **Involve youth meaningfully:** Create roles for young people that build their capacity and connection to common lands. Support intergenerational knowledge exchange.
- **Defend against extractive industries collectively:** Build alliances across communities facing similar threats. Pool resources for legal defense and political advocacy.



5.3 Implementing Co-Production and Participatory Methods

- **Identify community values first:** Begin governance processes by exploring what communities truly want—jobs, ecological health, cultural connection—rather than imposing external priorities.
- **Use arts and convivial methods:** Employ creative, welcoming approaches—shared meals, storytelling, arts—that make participation enjoyable and meaningful rather than bureaucratic.
- **Ensure genuine power-sharing:** Co-production requires actual sharing of decision-making authority, not token consultation. Communities must have real influence over outcomes.
- **Embed values in governance structures:** Translate community values into formal agreements, certification schemes, and management plans so they endure beyond initial enthusiasm.
- **Apply political pressure strategically:** When agencies resist community involvement, mobilize politicians and public opinion to compel cooperation. Document successes to build case for broader policy change.

5.4 Integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge

- **Respect and value TEK:** Recognize traditional ecological knowledge, especially women's knowledge, as essential expertise rather than curiosity or nostalgia.
- **Document knowledge systematically:** Record traditional practices, seasonal calendars, species knowledge, and management techniques through participatory methods that respect knowledge-holders.
- **Combine with scientific knowledge:** Integrate TEK with scientific research rather than treating them as oppositional. Both contribute to effective ecosystem management.

- **Support knowledge transmission:** Create opportunities for elders to teach younger generations through apprenticeships, workshops, and collaborative projects.
- **Adapt traditions thoughtfully:** Recognize that traditions can evolve. Not all traditional practices are sustainable or equitable, but neither should modernization automatically displace them.



5.5 Policy Recommendations

- **Integrate gender analysis in all environmental policy:** Require gender impact assessments for conservation, climate, and agricultural policies. Ensure women's participation in policy development.
- **Support community management of common lands:** Reform legislation to facilitate community control over common lands. Provide technical and financial support for community governance.
- **Fund long-term initiatives:** Shift from short-term projects to sustained institutional support for networks, capacity building, and community-led initiatives.
- **Recognize care work in green transition:** Center care, reciprocity, and interdependence in climate adaptation frameworks rather than prioritizing technological efficiency.
- **Protect commons from extractive industries:** Strengthen legal protections for common lands against mining, industrial forestry, and other extractive activities. Respect community right to refuse.
- **Invest in rural development:** Provide comprehensive rural development programs addressing transport, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities rather than expecting commons management alone to solve rural poverty.
- **Value traditional knowledge in formal systems:** Integrate TEK into forest management certification, conservation planning, and agricultural extension services.

6. CONCLUSION

This Erasmus+ project has revealed both the profound challenges facing women in commons governance and the transformative potential of their leadership and knowledge. Across diverse European contexts—from Portuguese baldios to Norwegian mountain pastures to Welsh community forests—consistent patterns emerge: women possess invaluable ecological knowledge and play essential roles in community stewardship, yet face systematic barriers to recognition and participation.

Three core principles emerge as essential for transformation:

- **Centering care and interdependence:** Moving beyond extractive, technocratic approaches to embrace care-centered relationships with land, animals, and communities. This requires valuing women's knowledge and labor rather than marginalizing it.
- **Building collective power:** Creating safe spaces for women to connect, learn, and organize enables transformation from individual struggle to collective action. Networks turn isolation into solidarity and invisibility into influence.
- **Integrating knowledge systems:** Bridging traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary science, legal frameworks, and governance innovation. Neither tradition nor modernity alone provides complete answers.



The path forward requires addressing not only gender inequality within commons governance but the broader systems of rural marginalization, economic precarity, and ecological degradation that shape women's lives. This demands holistic approaches linking governance reform, economic development, social services, legal empowerment, and cultural revitalization.

Ecofeminist frameworks remind us that justice for women and sustainability for ecosystems are inseparable goals requiring systemic transformation. Culture-based solutions offer alternatives to top-down technocratic interventions, placing community knowledge and values at the center of climate adaptation and conservation.

There is a major challenge in ensuring the participation of community members, particularly when dealing with other technical roles that may identify barriers such as language or cultural context. It is necessary to develop activities that are specifically tailored to the geographical and cultural context of the community; these are the ones that are truly effective.

The women leaders featured in this project—managing common lands, building networks, fighting extractive industries, and reimagining human-nature relationships—embody the change needed. Scaling their innovations from individual communities to systemic transformation is the challenge before us.

This requires sustained commitment from institutions, adequate resourcing, legal reform, and political will to support community-led governance. It demands that we listen to rural women, value their expertise, and create conditions for their full participation. Most fundamentally, it calls for reimagining our relationship with land and each other based on care, reciprocity, and collective liberation rather than extraction, domination, and individual accumulation.

The knowledge, practices, and proposals documented through this project provide roadmap for more equitable and sustainable commons governance. The question is whether we have the courage to follow it.

COMMENT Maybe also limitations and difficulties to work for women commoners across EU? (as mentioned in my previous comment). The need for local languages, and events directed for local communities (with no criteria of 4 countries etc..)



6. ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

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