

Noi sottoscritti, Monica Morazzoni, Valeria Pecorelli e Matteo Di Napoli, dichiariamo con la presente che la pubblicazione

Morazzoni M., Pecorelli V. e Di Napoli M., "Proposal for the Sustainable Enhancement of the Cultural and Social Heritage of the Alps: The Project "La Montagna al Femminile"", in *Sustainability*, vol. 17, n. 1611, 2025, DOI <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17041611>

è frutto di un lavoro congiunto.

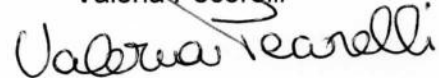
Tuttavia, il contributo di Monica Morazzoni è relativo al paragrafo **1. Introduction**; il contributo di Valeria Pecorelli è relativo al paragrafo **2. Objectives and Methodology**; il contributo di Matteo Di Napoli è relativo ai paragrafi **3. Educational Declinations**, **4. Discussion: Toward a New Cultural Enhancement of Alpine Territories** e **5. Conclusions: Potential, Challenges, and Limitations of the Project**. Gli autori hanno contribuito in modo significativo alla stesura e alla revisione del testo, condividendo le responsabilità di ricerca e pubblicazione.

Milano, 2 luglio 2025

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Article

A Proposal for the Sustainable Enhancement of the Cultural and Social Heritage of the Alps: The Project “La Montagna al Femminile”

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Abstract: The snow-based tourism, long a cornerstone of economic development for mountain destinations in the Italian Alps, is increasingly unsustainable. This study explores the potential of a cultural project dedicated to showcasing the representation of women in Alpine spaces as an alternative pull factor to alpine tourism. The project aims to revitalise the cultural and social heritage of Alpine regions, offering them renewed appeal while promoting sustainable development practices. Aligned with the Declaration of Jena, the project also aims to foster cultural sustainability by amplifying the often-overlooked contributions of women across professional, cultural, artistic, and recreational spheres in the Alps.

Keywords: women; Alps; tourism; heritage; participatory methodology



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1. Introduction

Italian Alpine regions, across various geographical scales, have emerged from a long period of marginalisation to become central in a renewed debate aimed at addressing developmental delays and practices that often neglect the protection and enhancement of landscapes, ecosystems, and resources [1] (pp. 283–288, 318–319). Since the post-war era, with a marked acceleration from the 1960s onwards, these mountain areas have been shaped by predominantly exogenous development models. Tourism, in particular, has dominated the most suitable areas, positioning itself as the only conceivable development strategy for many mountain regions, confirming the predictions of Leslie Stephen (father of Virginia Woolf), who published his *Alps playground of Europe* in 1871. This approach, however, has triggered a severe crisis in the traditional agro-silvo-pastoral model, leading to depopulation, ageing populations, abandonment of traditional activities, territorial degradation, and instability [2].

In recent years, the local population’s perception of tourism has undergone a profound shift. Many mountain destinations have reached a critical tipping point where mass tourism has become an urgent problem, exacerbated by overtourism [2–5]. The mountains, far from being merely physical entities defined by tangible attributes, are complex systems that, when dominated solely by tourism, can suffer significant negative impacts. These challenges are further compounded by the climate crisis. Extensive scientific literature underscores the heightened fragility of mountain territories to climate change compared to lowland and hill areas [6–10]. This phenomenon calls for the adoption of a different

development model, moving away from decades of reliance on the exploitation of natural resources (particularly snow) as the sole driver of economic growth.

This has led to a rise in studies and projects aimed at overcoming a development model rooted in extractive and exploitative practices, as highlighted by numerous works that have recently revitalised the academic debate in Italy [4,5,11–22].

At the same time, national policies have been directed toward addressing delays in social and economic development across Italy's Alpine territories. Initiatives such as the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) and various programs under Europe 2020, continued in the 2021–2027 Next Generation EU, aim to strengthen social, economic, and territorial cohesion, particularly in weaker and marginalised areas.

On the cultural regeneration front, areas where investments and actions focus on tourism and sports often demonstrate limited attention to tangible and intangible cultural resources. When cultural valorisation does occur, it typically centres on the patrimonialisation (making heritage) of historic assets, with tradition playing a key role [23]. This has concentrated resources and projects on recurring themes such as “authentic” products, traditional foods, and historical or rural artifacts, often to promote tourism. Since the late 1990s, such practices have systematically leveraged the resources and memories of certain Alpine territories to foster economic, cultural, and social innovation [24]. Examples include the “Sistema Montagna” project (2007) involving stakeholders from Valle Camonica (Fondazione della Comunità Bresciana, the Territorial Department of Brescia Province, the Municipality of Borno, the cultural association “la Gazza”, and IULM University) [25] and various initiatives launched in Trentino's Folgaria Plateau in the early 2000s [26]. Finally, the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the pre-existing contradictions and vulnerabilities of mountain regions [27]. It has become imperative to explore new approaches to regenerating Alpine tourist areas while prioritising the needs of local communities.

In this context, the research project “La Montagna al femminile” focuses on the Italian Alpine territories set to host the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics, including Bormio, Livigno, Predazzo, Tesero, Cortina, and Anterselva, as well as neighbouring valleys. These areas have long been celebrated as premier destinations for snow tourism, gaining prominence since the 1960s. However, in the past decade, their status as reliable winter holiday destinations has become increasingly uncertain due to the impacts of the climate crisis. The rising unpredictability of snowfall and changing weather patterns have not only disrupted traditional tourism models but also highlighted the need to rethink different development strategies [2] (pp. 40–43).

Given the multifaceted and challenging context outlined above, this research seeks to explore critical questions about culture and heritage in mountain territories. Specifically, can innovative strategies for the valorisation of cultural and natural heritage, grounded in active community participation, serve as a catalyst for sustainable development in these regions? Can the research project “La Montagna al femminile” become an alternative resource to the usual tourist attractions in the mountains instead of snow tourism? Can a participatory cultural product contribute to the social cohesion and empowerment of members of its community? Can the exhibition contribute to the identity and cultural construction of a new narrative of a mountain territory with a tourist vocation?

A central focus of this inquiry is the recognition of local culture as a vital asset: an enduring resource that transcends seasonal tourism. By prioritising cultural heritage, including traditions, artisanal crafts, local knowledge, and intangible practices, mountain communities can diversify their development pathways while preserving their unique identities. This shift acknowledges the potential of culture to act not merely as a static

artifact of the past but as a dynamic and evolving driver of economic resilience and social cohesion [28].

Moreover, it is worth noting an additional element that has long characterised mountain territories: the role of women often overshadowed by a culture that has remained conservative toward female initiative in land stewardship, mountaineering, and exploratory journeys into mountain landscapes [29] (p. 28) [30] (p. 55) [31]. Over the centuries, mountains have often been depicted through the lens of presumed spatial neutrality, a perspective frequently adopted in traditional geographic narratives. This approach tends to treat landscapes as objective, physical spaces devoid of social, cultural, or emotional dimensions, focusing instead on their cultural and ecological characteristics. Such neutrality, however, overlooks the intricate layers of human experience, meaning, and interaction that define these spaces.

In the case of mountains, this framing has often reinforced a vision of them as timeless and unchanging arenas for conquest, exploration, or resource extraction, while neglecting the diverse narratives of the people who inhabit and shape these landscapes [32] (pp. 11–12). By questioning this presumed neutrality, we discuss a more nuanced interpretation that considers mountains as dynamic spaces imbued with cultural significance and historical and personal connections. This shift is particularly important when exploring marginalised perspectives, such as those of women, whose interactions with mountain environments have often been overshadowed by dominant, male-centered narratives [29]. Therefore, how can we truly understand a territory, a landscape, or a place without integrating alternative perspectives? Studying the mountains through the lens of women's experiences can help renew the narratives and representations of Alpine landscapes, which remain saturated with predominantly "male" stereotypes.

Historical and geographical sources reveal that, despite their marginalisation, women have historically held key roles in the rural societies of mountain regions [30], as well as in other social contexts [33–35]. Moreover, the interplay between gender, culture, and sustainability in the tourism industry is a rich and intricate subject, with implications across social, economic, and environmental dimensions. In the Alpine region, tourism has traditionally been shaped by male-dominated leadership and decision-making structures, frequently neglecting the distinct perspectives and needs of women, both as contributors to the workforce and as consumers. However, existing studies demonstrate the important role that women hold in this economic and social sector [36,37].

In Alpine history, as widely reported by the literature [31,34,36,38,39], figures such as Elizabeth Aubrey Le Blond (1861–1934) exemplify the early, yet groundbreaking, attempts in cultural and tourism innovation led by and for women. With the founding of the first Ladies' Alpine Club in 1907, Le Blond openly challenged the male exclusivity of mountaineering associations, championing a more inclusive and international vision of mountain tourism. Through her extensive literary work, including *The High Alps in Winter* (1883) and *Adventures on the Roof of the World* (1904–1916), she not only chronicled women's contributions to mountaineering but also reimagined the mountains as spaces for emancipation and experimentation. Similarly, the mountaineer Henriette d'Angeville (1794–1871) made history in 1838 by reaching the summit of Mont Blanc, breaking through the cultural stagnation of her era. Her achievement is detailed in her account *Mon excursion au Mont-Blanc* published in 1987, more than a century after her death. Despite the opposition of the deeply patriarchal society of her time, Henriette continued climbing well into her later years, achieving her final ascent at nearly seventy, when she reached the summit of Oldenhorn in the Bernese Alps. These accomplishments were not merely athletic adventures or rebellious acts for their time, but pivotal catalysts in redefining how the

mountains were experienced and narrated, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and culturally enriched approach to tourism.

2. Objectives and Methodology

The project “La Montagna al femminile”, born from a scientific dialogue between historical–geographical and cartographic sources and digital technologies, adopts photography to rediscover the feminine cultural heritage, thereby enriching geographical knowledge of the Italian Alpine space. The project examines the role of key female figures who have significantly contributed to the development of the studied mountain territories, aiming to highlight the female economic, cultural, and social practices within the Alpine context. The initiative includes the creation of a multimedia archive, the organisation of travelling exhibitions within Alpine communities (Figure 1), and the publication of a dedicated catalogue.

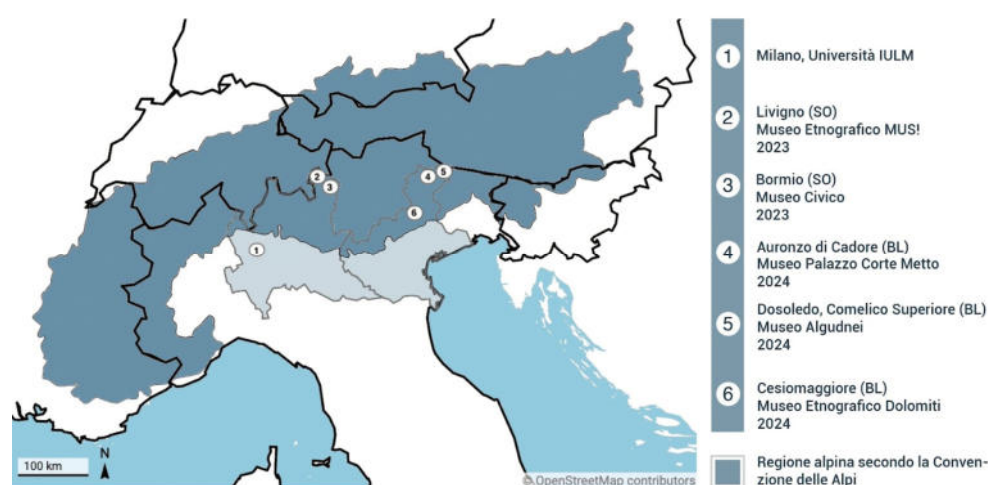


Figure 1. The route of the travelling photographic exhibition “La Montagna al Femminile” in 2023 and 2024. Cartography by Eros Roncen in <https://www.lamontagnalfemminile.it/la-mostra/> (accessed on 16 December 2024).

The public and participatory multimedia archive (<https://www.lamontagnalfemminile.it/la-mostra/> (accessed on 16 December 2024), both in Italian and in English) offers a contemporary perspective on the essence of the mountains, faced with significant climatic, endemic, and systemic challenges. This essence is deeply characterised by the presence of women-led communities, who act as active actors in managing mountain resources, caring for biodiversity, and transforming the local identity. These roles have remained largely under-recognised and overlooked. Opened to the public in December 2021, the digital archive is enriched annually with new photographs, videos, and narratives. As a participatory project, it is continually enriched by contributions of photographs, narratives, and expertise from public and private archives, cultural associations, scholars, and individuals passionate about their local heritage.

The exhibitions, launched in July 2023, as of December 2024 have been hosted in public museums in Livigno, Bormio, Auronzo di Cadore, Dosoledo di Comelico Superiore, Cesiomaggiore, and lastly at the Italian Geographical Society in Rome. The travelling exhibition usually benefits from cultural spaces offered free of charge by local museums. It features over 100 original photographs of varying dimensions, a selection of which is included in the accompanying printed catalogue. The images are organised into thematic sections titled: *Donna e Terra* (“Woman and Land”), *Donna e Vetta* (“Woman and Mountain tops”), *Donna e Viaggio* (“Woman and Journey”). Each section is accompanied by a descriptive text in Italian and English, complemented by a video. These videos, narrated by a

voice-over, recount the conditions of women from the second half of the 19th century to the present. Each section is further supplemented by maps locating the featured territories (Figure 2) and photographs (both black-and-white or colour) grouped into territorial clusters. These are presented in chronological order and accompanied by captions detailing the title, archival source, location, and year.

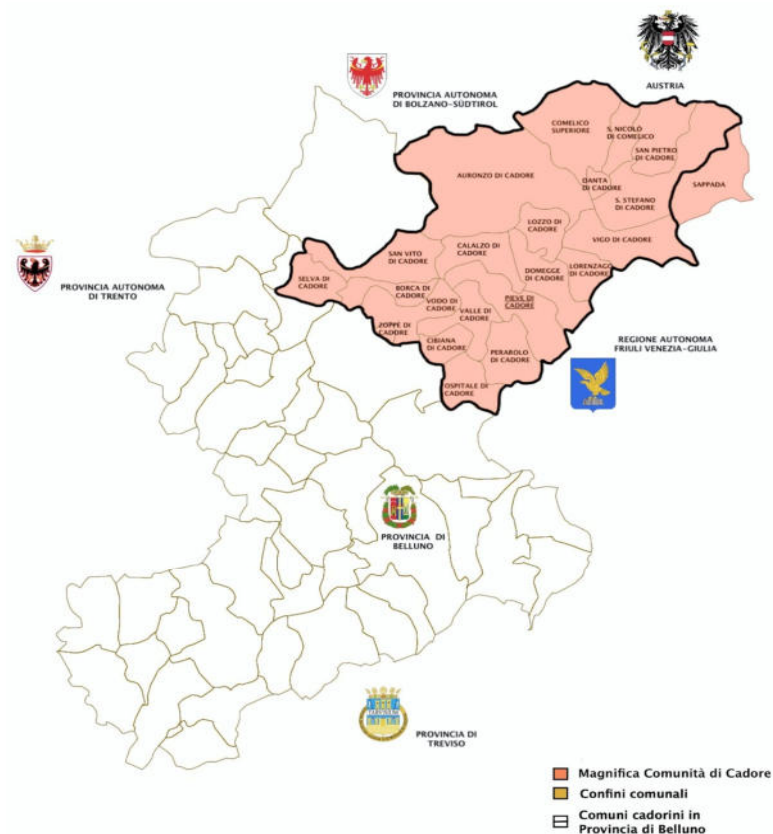


Figure 2. An example of cartographic representation of the territories involved in the project: the 22 municipalities of the Magnifica Comunità di Cadore (Veneto, Italy). Geographical readings, mediated by the presence of maps, allow for both the localisation of the territories where the photographs were taken and the highlighting of the evolutions and transformations of the land's functions, predominantly from agricultural to tourist use. The legend indicates: a. the geographical area of the Magnifica Comunità di Cadore; b. the division into municipalities; c. the Cadore municipalities within the province of Belluno. Cartography by Eros Roncen in <https://www.lamontagnalfemminile.it/portfolio/i-22-comuni-della-magnifica-comunita-di-cadore/> (accessed on 16 December 2024).

In the *Donna e Terra* section, for example, the images evoke the challenging living conditions faced by women (see for example Figure 3). From adolescence, women took on the work of men who were compelled to emigrate for most of the year to supplement the poor income offered by the mountain economy. The photographs depict the hard labour performed by women within the local economy of mountain communities, where they played a crucial role in ensuring survival [40].



Figure 3. *Hay to the Tabià.* The wooden barns in Cadore and the Dolomites were called “tabià”. Women of all ages (from young girls to the elderly) carried enormous baskets full of hay and straw there, where the livestock’s food was stored for the entire winter. This picture is an example of the women’s hard agricultural work. Cadore, First Half of the 20th Century. Archive of Magnifica Comunità of Cadore—Arnaldo Marchetti Photographic Collection (<https://www.lamontagnalfemminile.it/donna-e-terra/> (accessed on 16 December 2024).

The section devoted to *Donna e Vetta* illustrates instead how the advent of mountaineering as a popular activity initiated a form of “women’s sporting movement” with women, particularly from wealthy social classes, beginning to participate in climbing and winter sports [31] (pp. 30–32). In the 20th century, the mountain’s appeal for sports purposes surged with the massification of tourism and the growing popularity of trekking and skiing. Skiing, in particular, brought women to the highest altitudes, as snow sports spread from Saint Moritz to the Alta Valtellina, the Dolomites, and the mountains of Piedmont and the Aosta Valley, eventually reaching the peaks of the world [31] (p. 33) as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. *The conquest of the Rocca summit (Fiemme Valley, Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy).* A woman alpinist conquered the Rocca peak on the Corno Nero (2439 m) on 5 August 1925. These female successes were

also repeated in other winter sports, such as skiing: in 1936 the first all-female skiing competition was organised in Valtellina (Lombardy, Italy). The Sertorelli sisters, Cecca and Costanza, from Bormio, were unbeatable downhill and slalom skiers. Thanks to their performances, skiing ended up being a taboo for women. AMCF-Archive Magnificent Community of Fiemme <https://www.lamontagnalfemminile.it/donna-e-vetta/> (accessed on 16 December 2024)).

In the *Donna e Viaggio* section, the pictures illustrate how mountain tourism, starting in the 1950s, transformed the local economy, partly due to women managing the first hotel establishments [38]. The Alpine space began to be reshaped into a tourist destination, while travel evolved first into an experience of identity-seeking and later into an assertion of women's emancipation. For women in some mountain areas, such as Cadore in Veneto, travel also defined migration abroad for work as nannies, ice cream makers, and factory workers [41]. Their remittances played a vital role in supporting the local economy for many years (Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5. *High altitude with style.* Milanese tourists walking on the scenic Fanes Plateau (2171 m) in the early 1950s. Today it is part of the Fanes-Sennes-Braies Nature Park and is also recognised for its extraordinary natural beauty by UNESCO. Fanes Plateau, late 1950s, APA-Archive Private Albertini (<https://www.lamontagnalfemminile.it/donna-e-viaggio/> (accessed on 16 December 2024)).



Figure 6. *The Ice Cream Vendors.* The ice cream sellers trade was a form of seasonal migration, unique to certain towns in Cadore, Zoldo Valley, and other Alpine valleys such as Valtellina. Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, it brought many Italians to migrate to Central Europe. The women were primarily responsible for sales. Germany, 1960s, UNITEIS Archive.

The exhibition also features photographs showcasing women's artistic production, both in visual arts and writing, which has contributed to raising awareness of the Alps and establishing them as a sought-after destination for travellers of both past and present [42] (pp. 11–17). This form of documentation primarily focused on the "picturesque" and the "sublime" while deliberately neglecting the "everyday" [43] (p. 58), a choice that, since the 19th century, has fuelled the Alps' tourism success and transformed their economy from rural to service-oriented.

The photographs, sourced from public and private archives, highlight the cultural and social dimensions that make the mountains attractive. These images reveal the relationship between the perceived marginality of Alpine territories and the strength of women's contributions to rural labour, the conquest of Alpine summits, and the enhancement of mountain spaces for tourism. The use of images contributes, in this perspective, "to understanding territorial construction and its related social organization [. . .], just as the performative dimension of images highlights how the visual sphere itself participates in the construction of geographical reality" [44] (p. 64). Therefore, work was carried out on images and with images, both recent and historical, accessing public and personal archives, while also acknowledging those informal collections of photographs tucked away in drawers that contribute to shaping the biographies of places and spaces [45]. In this context, "the photographic source gains greater significance because the internet, the web, is becoming the optimal destination for photographic images and historical photography, offering access to the source and facilitating the use of the image itself" [46] (p. 803).

Working with images allows for the creation of a lens through which reality can be observed, because of their power to signify "something" and thanks to the observer's ability to interpret the meanings imbued in a place, environment, and landscape. Photographs and videos in a specific context are products of social constructs, serving as privileged channels for observing and recording information about the materiality of a territory, as well as for understanding how identities and everyday experiences are constructed within geometric space [47,48].

Studying with and through images expands the alpine territory and landscape with new geographies, adopting a feminine perspective that has long been overlooked. Consequently, the data collected in this study challenge the assumed marginality of women in mountain contexts, as previously noted by Rossi [33,38], re-centering women within the mountain space and contributing to the still limited geographical literature on this subject.

The active participation of local communities in the exhibition provided a curated selection of documents imbued with deep meaning and emotion. This involvement also brought to light symbolic and identity-related aspects, enriched historical narratives, and illuminated socially significant realities. Moreover, the rediscovery of visual sources from personal archives acknowledged informal collections of photographs—those often tucked away in drawers—that contribute to shaping the biographies of Alpine places. This hidden heritage has fostered reflections on lived space, the sense of place, topophilia, landscape transformation, and the emerging environmental challenges of today.

Specifically, also the selection of photographs was carried out through an active participatory process. The communities hosting the traveling exhibition selected 10 images for each section, showcasing subjects representative of their territory. Although this number may seem limited, it aligns with the organizational constraints of the exhibition spaces and the unique nature of the show, which is itinerant and aims to expand over time by involving as many communities as possible. The photographs are displayed in chronological order, from the invention of photography in the 19th century to the present day.

3. Educational Declinations

The project embraces the principles of Public Geography [49]: it uses tools and modalities designed for different audiences to encourage the enjoyment of geo-documentary and geo-cartographic assets and to strengthen the social impact of geographic knowledge. In particular, to make the exhibition user an active receptor, activities were designed to be carried out during the visit with questions, games, and reflections for different target audiences (children, youth, and adults). In addition, schools in the territories were involved through activities related to the exhibition's themes and elaborated for each grade level. The exhibition lends itself well to disseminating historical–geographical knowledge about their territories among the younger generations. It also raises their awareness of gender issues, as envisaged in Goal 5 of Agenda 2030 (*in particular 5.1, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.a*), which aims to achieve equal opportunities for women and men in employment and politics and aspires to the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls (including the abolition of forced and early marriages). This is the goal of a journey that began in 1979 with the United Nations Convention against Forms of Discrimination against Women and continued in 1993 with the UN Declaration to Eliminate Violence against Women. The UN's recommendations have been incorporated by Italian educational institutions within the Civic Education pathways, regulated by Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019. It contains the guidelines for such teaching, which identify “where not already provided for, specific goals for the development of competencies and specific learning objectives, in coherence with the National Directions for the curriculum of preschools and the first cycle of education, as well as with the document National Directions and New Scenarios and with the National Directions for high schools and the Guidelines for technical and professional institutes in force”. These indications focus attention on the civic values of solidarity, freedom, and equality in the enjoyment of inviolable rights and the fulfillment of non-derogable duties. Gender issues are fully part of this didactic–educational context.

The “La Montagna al Femminile” project took charge of this dissemination effort of knowledge and values, with an initial experiment in the town of Bormio, where the exhibition was on display from August to November 2023. The educational activities helped to popularize knowledge of the themes covered in the exhibition, raise awareness of gender issues and recognition of the role of women in supporting the mountain economy and society. Students gained awareness of the importance of women in land management and increased their knowledge of their own territory and sense of belonging: by observing the many images on display from the archives of local families, students felt like protagonists of the territories, recognizing relatives and ancestors portrayed in the photographs.

In addition, Class IIA of the Alberti Institute of Higher Education in Bormio, on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, participated in the competition “Geographical Readings of the Role of Women in Alpine Spaces”. This event consisted of the presentation of photographs from private archives, the best of which were awarded prizes and included on the “La Montagna al Femminile” digital portal. The other schools visiting the exhibition, on the other hand, participated in the compilation of educational fact sheets, an example of which is given below (Figures 7 and 8).

LEARNING ACTIVITY - GUIDED REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

GOAL:

To reflect on gender difference and its evolution over time. Formulate precise and pertinent questions for explanation and elaboration during or after listening. To take the floor in communicative exchanges by formulating questions, giving answers, and providing explanations and examples. In discussions, one must understand the positions expressed by peers by expressing one's opinion.



Children are asked to observe the picture, place it in the correct geographical environment, and identify the activity the woman is performing. A reflection on the clothing is proposed, making it clear why the woman is wearing those very clothes and whether they are functional.

It is then proposed, as homework, to search for images from different historical periods presenting women skiers to discover how their clothing has changed over time.

Children are led to reflect on the late entry of women into the world of sporting competitions, using the photographs from the exhibition below, and try to get them to think about the reasons why.



The children then make a poster on which they draw a timeline and place pictures and names of famous women who have practised mountain sports.

Figure 7. One example of primary school teaching sheet tested in Bormio in 2023. Source: elaboration by Paola Valagussa, teacher.

LEARNING ACTIVITY - WRITING LAB

GOAL: To produce written accounts of personal experiences or experiences of others, containing essential information about people, places, times, situations, and actions.

The children are asked to identify with a mountain woman from the past from among the images shown and to write a text in which they recount their life experiences. The resulting entries will be entered into a competition in which a winner will be announced at the end of the exhibition in the destination.

The prize-winning text will then be published, subject to authorisation, on the website dedicated to the 'La Montagna al Femminile' exhibition.

Task

Choose one of the pictures on the page and pretend to be the main character. Introduce yourself by saying your name, what period you live in, and where. Then tell about your day, the jobs you do, your joys and labours. Remember to also describe your environment and the tools you use.

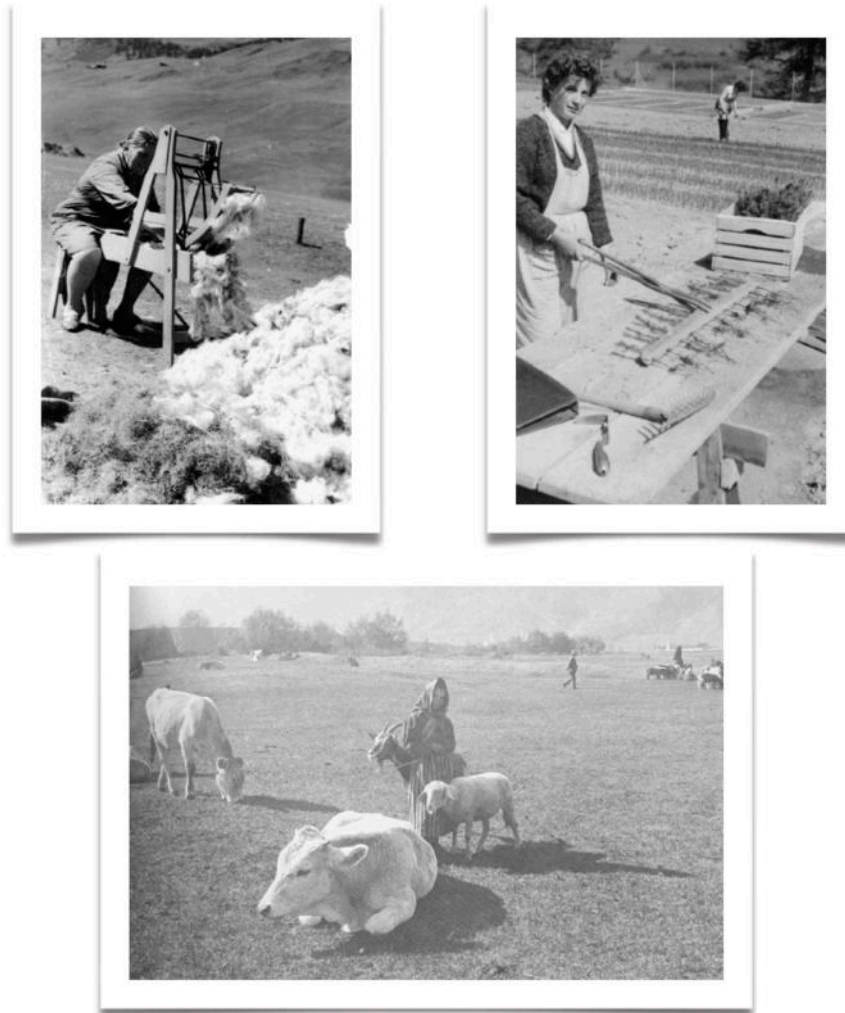


Figure 8. Second example of primary school teaching sheet tested in Bormio in 2023. Source: elaboration by Paola Valagussa, teacher.

4. Discussion: Toward a New Cultural Enhancement of Alpine Territories

The Alpine spaces featured in the female narrative largely, though not exclusively, overlap with the areas set to host the 2026 Winter Olympics. This choice reflects a critical perspective on the legacy of major events in relation to their territorial impact on vulnerable Alpine areas [20,50–52]. Such a legacy can only be positive if it includes local communities, who are the custodians of environmental and cultural heritage. Subsidiarity is crucial in these fragile territories, where investment in ecosystem services, healthcare, and education—whether from private or public actors—often falls short, with resources being drawn instead to leisure clusters [53] (pp. 67–68).

The Alpine mountain region, however, is primarily a *place*, endowed with its own social, cultural, and environmental identity that must not be distorted or forgotten. It is a repository of natural and human stratifications, events, peoples, communities, crafts, and landscapes. As such, it must be observed, understood, and experienced with sensitivity, particularly in the context of the climate crisis. Mountains are inhabited spaces, governed natures, and cultural landscapes where humanity plays a key role in shaping their evolution.

The project “La Montagna al Femminile”—as already mentioned—engaged local populations, inviting them to explore their archives to uncover photographs that reflect the role of women in their Alpine spaces. Thanks to the participatory methodology, this initiative raised awareness among mountain inhabitants about women’s contributions, making them active participants in the research project. All the same, the project aligns with the objectives of the Jena Declaration, signed on 18 March 2021 (by Benno Werlen and Michael Meadows, President of the IGU), and supported by UNESCO and the Club of Rome. The declaration asserts that “transformations to achieve a sustainable way of life will generally be accepted if they are developed together with ordinary people, specific stakeholders, and political actors at all levels, in collaboration with experts and academics. This implies a radical paradigm shift, moving away from the imposition of universally valid strategies handed down from above (‘top-down’) toward specifically tailored approaches” (p. 2).

Thus, “La Montagna al Femminile” may serve as a pivotal project to refocus mountain communities at the heart of development policies and the regeneration of local environmental and cultural capital, as also highlighted in the document “Per una nuova centralità della montagna” (A New Centrality for the Mountain), known as the Camaldoli Manifesto [54].

From a practical perspective, in addition to the creation of a digital archive, the project “La Montagna al Femminile” has contributed to revitalizing the exhibition spaces of the host locations, often consisting of small ethnographic museums managed by volunteers. The community was also encouraged to visit local museums, as they were directly involved in selecting the images that best represent their identity. Finally, the exhibition offers an alternative cultural resource for tourists to enjoy during their vacation, providing a unique glimpse into the feminine aspect of life within these communities and territories.

The selected photographs depict moments of daily life in settings where natural and anthropogenic elements are deeply intertwined. The project confirms the insights of the Jena Declaration, which emphasizes that “many sustainability policies are developed based on a dichotomy between humanity and nature, considering nature as the environment surrounding humanity. Yet, through our bodies, we ourselves are part of nature, and we incorporate it into our actions in specific ways based on what we are doing. This premise reverses the perspective on sustainability, shifting from a vision rooted in the opposition between nature and society to one that highlights their interdependent relationship [...]. Establishing sustainable ways of living in the long term requires recognizing daily actions

as the primary drivers of transformation. This calls for respect for the diversity of cultural, social, and regional practices, as well as past experiences of adaptation" (p. 2).

La "Montagna al Femminile" achieves this by giving voice to the women who inhabit high-altitude lands, creating opportunities for deprived environments, landscapes, and ecosystems. The exhibition, for example, features images of women who cared for seeds for reforestation areas: the "peciolère" (as they were called in the Fiemme Valley in Trentino), who were also responsible for spring digging, weeding, sowing, and covering seedlings. The exhibition recounts the lives of these and many other women of the Alpine mountains, whose work often went unrecognized socially and economically.

Moreover, this exhibition pathway aligns with the guidelines set by UNESCO in 2003 [55] through the "Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage", which highlighted the importance of "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills [...] that communities, groups, and, where applicable, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (p. 5). In this regard, the Jena Declaration also emphasizes that "A profound transformation of society for all generations requires that young people be particularly and strongly involved in this change from the very beginning. This requires that they have access to sound information and education and, at the same time, be involved in civic and political participation" (p. 3). The didactic declination described in the previous section could be significant to achieving this in practice, by integrating educational tools and approaches that not only provide knowledge and skills but also promote young people's critical awareness and active involvement. In this perspective, education becomes not only a vehicle for education but also an engine for conscious and participatory generational change.

The project, moreover, fits within the broader framework of a new culture of intangible and local heritage appreciation, which has influenced museum practices since the 1980s [56] (p. 404). It can be understood as a conservational ethnography driven by scientific studies but inspired by the spontaneous efforts of local communities [57] (pp. 60–67) and their "desire to return" to a past at risk of being forgotten [58] (p. 20). It is also supported by the growing demand for cultural tourism [59] (p. 18), which seeks knowledge not imposed from above but mediated by and dedicated to local communities [60] (p. 48). The exhibition, resulting from participatory processes and dialogue among curators, local communities, and visitors [61] (p. 17) [62], transcends the purely aesthetic value of the chosen photographs, imbuing them with cultural and social significance by contextualizing them and making their meaning explicit [28] (p. 58).

5. Conclusions: Potential, Challenges, and Limitations of the Project

Following the principles of the Third Mission, Italian universities in recent decades have begun to assume a renewed social role and engage in interactions with local communities [63]. The project "La Montagna al Femminile" aligns with this process of knowledge dissemination while consciously avoiding non-participatory initiatives. Such initiatives are often criticized in the academic literature [23,64–66] for their temporary nature, frequently manifesting as seasonal events (e.g., special openings of museums, historical buildings, festivals, or exhibitions) focused especially on tourism promotion. Moreover, the lack of local community involvement risks a re-invention (and often commodification) of traditions to cater to visitors' imaginaries [14,67].

By contrast, "La Montagna al Femminile" seeks to actively involve the local community, aiming for a more accurate interpretation of scientific research while disseminating knowledge and fostering identity-based values. This approach aligns with Goal 5 of the AGENDA 2030, UNESCO's directives and the principles outlined in the Jena Declaration. However, the project has faced challenges, such as sustaining collaboration over time with

a network of local actors and maintaining the motivation of non-academic participants—a critical factor in ensuring long-term impacts on the territory when working for and with a community.

The project's mobile collection of archival photographs has engaged local populations and helped to enhance awareness of the territory by highlighting its symbolic, identity-driven, semantic, and structural dimensions. This effort enables the reconstruction of diverse and multifaceted perspectives on the local environment [47] (p. 62). Working with photographs may provide a unique lens for observing reality, as images inherently convey meanings that allow for nuanced interpretations and attributions of significance to places, environments, and landscapes. Similarly, David Harvey observes that “groups of people tend to identify similar images regarding the spaces around them and appear to develop analogous ways of judging their significance and behaving within them” [68] (p. 89). Nonetheless, alongside a “shared image” of space, each individual carries their own unique image, shaped by personal experiences and knowledge, which evolves over time [69] (p. 13). Photographs and videos created within specific contexts are thus social constructs that serve as privileged tools for both observing and documenting the materiality of the territory. They also illuminate how identities and everyday experiences are constructed within space [48].

The study of images, both with and about them, thus expands and redefines Alpine landscapes and territories through a gendered lens, long overlooked in research. The data collected challenges the presumed marginality of women in mountain settings, repositioning them at the center of the Alpine spatial narrative and contributing to a geographical literature that still remains pretty limited on this subject. Furthermore, the project aims to dismantle polarized views of mountains as either romanticized spaces of pure conservation or sites of consumerist exploitation [70]. Instead, it advocates for a perspective that embraces the complex physical, cultural, and social dimensions of mountain environments, forming the basis for multiple development and recognition processes [71]. To reach a wider audience, the exhibition was also made available in a digital format, consistent with the Faro Convention (2005), which promotes the use of digital technologies in the context of geo-cultural heritage [72].

While the primary aim of the exhibition has been to restore the historical memory of women's social, economic, and cultural roles, it also acknowledges their contemporary contributions to the cultural, museological, and archival sectors. Across the studied regions, the exhibition has benefited from the collaboration of numerous women, including cultural policymakers, local historians, museum and archive curators, volunteers, and entrepreneurs. Cultural economist Martha Friel (during the conference *Gender Cultures*, 24 October 2024 at IULM University in Milan) argues that “La Montagna al Femminile” exemplifies women's significant roles in Alpine society and opens broader avenues for reflection. In 2023, women represented 49.5% (46% in Italy) of the workforce in the cultural sector within the European Union—a proportion slightly higher than the economy-wide average of 46.4% as presented by Eurostat data in 2024. Women thus constitute a substantial share of cultural employment in Italy, matching men in numerical terms despite well-documented disparities in pay and roles.

Friel also highlights the growing number of women founders of innovative startups focused on cultural heritage valorization and creative industries. However, in Italy, only 13% of innovative startups are led by women. An interview with Matteo Da Deppo, director of the Rete Musei del Cadore, conducted during a conference in Rome on 19 November 2024, revealed that many women now hold leadership positions in museums and cultural associations in mountain regions. Despite this, there remains a lack of recognition within local

mountain communities regarding women's contributions to the economic development of these territories, as the mountain is still predominantly viewed through a male-centered lens.

This study raises several questions that warrant further investigation, such as an analogy with certain visual elements of contemporary times: if in old photographs women were depicted bent over the land, today they are portrayed as agricultural entrepreneurs. If they were once pioneers of skiing, today they are celebrated athletes. A potential future research direction could, therefore, explore how and whether the role and representation of women in Alpine societies have evolved also thanks to technology. A second direction could focus on a comparative study between the Alps and the Apennines, the mountain range running along the backbone of the Italian peninsula. This could also include a comparison with non-European mountain regions undergoing tourism development. Specifically, a collaboration with women climbers of Machu Picchu was recently initiated (January 2025).

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