

# Online business training for rural women



*Rural Woman: Employment and New Technologies (Mujer Rural: Empleo y Nuevas Tecnologías)*

## In brief

The Rural woman: employment and new technologies project involves eight local action groups in five Spanish regions – Andalusia, Asturias, Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León and Madrid. Part of the National Rural Network, the project aimed to stimulate women’s entrepreneurship and increase their use of information and communication technologies. It employed an ‘employability agent’ in each area, who could support women entrepreneurs. It also ran 11 online training courses which attracted 833 women, and held seminars on how to set up co-operatives. The result is that 43 new businesses have been founded. They and their products are listed in the *Vivero Virtual*, an online ‘virtual incubator’. The project also supported the creation of networks and women’s associations.

The initiative is part of the broader National Rural Network (NRN). It ran from 2010 until 2013 with support from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Environment, but is continuing with local government finance. Its strengths were the close involvement and support of the local action groups, and making women the protagonists.

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## Eight rural areas

*The Rural woman: employment and new technologies* project involves eight local action groups in five Spanish regions – Andalusia, Asturias, Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León and Madrid. It is part of the National Rural Network (NRN) which is a platform linking rural policy actors (national, regional and local authorities, professional associations and ecological groups) in order to strengthen alliances and disseminate good practices. The €500,000 project was financed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Environment.

Women in rural areas in Spain suffer from multiple discrimination. Fewer of them work and fewer use ICT. Gender roles are strongly imposed and gender stereotypes are more widely and deeply rooted. The project aimed to promote women's entrepreneurship, consolidate existing businesses, and encourage women to enter business fields which have been the preserve of men. It wanted to promote equal opportunities and inclusion in business, increase women's use of ICT, and build their self-esteem and motivation. It also wanted to create links which would enable women to exchange knowledge and experiences and to promote women's business associations.

It promoted women's entrepreneurial and social economy initiatives (cooperatives, worker-owned companies and partnerships) using information and communication technologies (ICT), in order to give men and women equal access to work and business opportunities. The participants were women in rural areas aged between 20 and 60. The project paid special attention to young women, those involved in informal activities, and harder-to-help women. Women's entrepreneurs associations have also benefitted. The initiative ran between 2010 and the end of 2013, but some of its activities are continuing with other funding.

The project's main achievement has been to support around 1,000 women, run 11 training courses for 833 of them, and set up 43 new companies. These are listed online in the *Vivero Virtual* (virtual incubator – <http://www.mujoyempleo.com>), which describes the enterprise and the products. The project partners have also used the networking opportunity to create the Federation of Development Association for Gender Equality (FADIG).

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## Policies to support women entrepreneurs

A number of policies and programmes support female entrepreneurship. The promotion of entrepreneurship in rural areas and, in this context, the encouragement of women to access and use ICT, are specifically included in the current *Plan for Equal Opportunities in Sustainable Development in Rural Areas* (2011-14) prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Environment and the Directorate General of Equal Opportunities (DGEO) through the Women's Institute, the public body responsible for the design and implementation of the equality strategies at national level. The plan encompasses fostering business creation, training and support services and setting up businesswomen's associations and networks.

As well as this, the Women's Institute and the regional equality departments (regions have exclusive competences both in active labour market and equality policies) have developed plans, programmes and projects which include support for women's entrepreneurship, some of which are active in rural areas. Awareness-raising, training and specific guidance count among the usual activities. Finally, the DGEO has a specific sub-directorate focused on these issues and a new *Plan for the Promotion of Rural Women*, elaborated by the Women's Institute, is at the draft stage. According to the draft of the *Equal Opportunities Strategic Plan 2013-16*, this plan will focus on promoting women's entrepreneurship, associations and rural networks and their access to ICT.

*The Rural women: employment and new technologies* project was funded through a call for proposals for cooperation projects among local action groups. The call had 11 thematic areas, and the project falls under that for "gender equality and social sustainability". As well as this targeted support, the NRN's *Programme of Activities 2012* advises that all cooperation and pilot projects should aim to make positive gender impacts. This is encouraged by the presence of the Women's Institute on the NRN's monitoring committee.

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## **Employability agents and online training**

The project had two phases. The preparatory phase surveyed the current activities of women entrepreneurs, what kind of support they have, the sectors they are working in, the obstacles they encounter and how they deal with them. A strategic plan and individual training pathways were developed. 'Employability agents' were recruited to advise and support business initiatives as they emerged, and the 'Virtual Enterprise Incubator Web 2.0' network was set up, to offer female entrepreneurs services, advice and tools to support their activities.

The project then moved on to its 'performance phase' during which it provided online training on the basis of the individual training pathways prepared during the first phase. This focused on business leadership, information and communication technologies, business plan creation and digital marketing. It also covered the provision of services like assistance for dependents which allow women access to the labour market. In each area an 'employability agent' was engaged. These agents are entrepreneurship specialists who inform, advise and assist women to create, consolidate, diversify and improve their business. They gave priority to creative and innovative business, especially those developing local services.

The network also supported social economy enterprises such as cooperatives, and organised workshops and seminars on how to create a cooperative, so as to empower women and strengthen their autonomy. At the same time, it encouraged women entrepreneurs' associations by creating and revitalising existing partnerships and associations, encouraging the creation of structures to expand the role of women, working with institutions and financial organisations, and attending forums and business meetings.

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## **Local authorities carry on the work**

The project coordinator believes that the most positive impact of the project has been the provision of specific tools and instruments to promote equal opportunities in rural areas. It has used its financial resources efficiently and sustainably, by building up relationships with other local public services, which means that they are likely to continue to employ the employability agents. Its transferability is aided by the fact that it has coped with the diverse conditions in the five participating areas.

The chief motor for the initiative's success was the participation and commitment of local action groups, which have a deep expertise and knowledge of their territory. The close relationship with women from the areas involved was also an asset. These factors won the initiative strong support from women's associations and other public and private bodies where women play a leading role, such as local authority gender equality departments and businesswomen's associations.

Participation is a key lesson: women should feel that they are part of the project. The initiative's outcomes started improving when women realised that they were the main protagonists. A second lesson is that managers of gender projects need to be tenacious in overcoming obstacles such as the shortage of finance brought on by the economic crisis. The fact that the network covered areas of Spain was a strength, but also posed the challenges of managing the differing circumstances and coordinating the different local action groups.

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## Contacts/Further Information

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### Further information

[Website](#)



[Project information sheet](#)



[Good practice case study](#)



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Image from project website

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