

## **INDEPENDENCE AND/OR SUBJUGATION: THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN ON THE ISLAND OF ZLARIN**

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The social position of the village women of the Adriatic island of Zlarin has been examined on the basis of reflections of the subject found in proverbs, in 17th century property data from private legal documents, as well as descriptions dating from the first half of the 20th century of women's share in labour and their everyday behaviour.

The prevailing opinion is that women of the Mediterranean cultural area occupied a second rate position in society. Excluded from activities in public life, on the whole they were pushed aside to devote themselves to activities in their homes. Fernand Braudel considers, moreover, that the evident attachment of women of the Mediterranean area to their households, is a civilisation-fact of particular significance (1985:205). Therefore, the question arises if such a qualification also holds for the Croatian part of Mediterranean area, particularly in relation to the female members of the peasant social stratum. Were peasant women of the East

Adriatic region also prepared to expect only "suffering and patience" from life - as the saying goes - beside their fireplaces?

I tried to examine this issue on the example of a settlement of modest size. My selection was Zlarin, an island in the central part of the territory covered by the Adriatic Sea, located south west of the coastal city of Šibenik. The island has an area of barely 8.2 km<sup>2</sup> of well-indented coast line (18.7 km in length), added to by a deep bay along which, with the adjoining harbour, was formed the largish settlement of Zlarin. Not far inland from Zlarin is the hamlet of Borovica. The natural configuration of the island comprises two slopes - the highest elevation point being 170 metres - joining in quite a large valley with fertile arable land, which favoured the development of agriculture. Consequently, this natural circumstance led to the fact that the most highly represented group in the structure of the Zlarin population were farmers. Among other indicators, this is also illustrated by statistical data from the middle of 19th century which shows that in 1841 the share of farmers in the total population amounted to 62 per cent, while a further 13 per cent was represented by fishermen and coral divers, who also tilled the land along with their main activity. At that time, only 10 per cent of the population of Zlarin were seamen, while the remainder of 15 per cent were the children and the infirm, artisans, clergymen and employees (Stulli 1980:182).

Members of the peasant stratum were marked by an easily recognisable life style. Its formation was influenced both by the identical way of securing existential resources, and a similar worldview, as well as a uniform culture based mainly on oral communication.

Due to favourable circumstances which prevailed, Zlarin has been well-researched in ethnological and folkloric terms. In the middle of the Seventies, a group of professionals associated with the *Institute of Ethnology and Folklore* in Zagreb,<sup>1</sup> studied the history and traditions of this smallish Dalmatian island from different aspects. The outcome of the research was published in two issues of *Narodna umjetnost* (17/1980 and 18/1981), but also in book form.<sup>2</sup> I joined the research team in 1975 and 1976, my task being to describe the characteristics of the daily life of Zlarin peasants, as projected through housing and work. Along with housing, nutrition, agricultural and artisan activities, I also studied the complex of traditional costume. My research encompassed mainly artefacts which Zlarin people had at their disposal during the period of the first half of 20th century, and methods, behaviour and attitudes applied in

<sup>1</sup> Then under the name: *Institute for Folklore Research*.

<sup>2</sup> *Povijest i tradicije otoka Zlarina* [History and Traditions of the Island of Zlarin], Zagreb 1962.

the segments mentioned. At that time, I did not particularly explore the components which determine, in the cultural sense, the being of Zlarin women. However, aspects of the phenomenon in each of the researched segments were present to such an extent that they could not pass unobserved. Therefore, already then, I drew attention to the valuable role of women in the total cultural picture of Zlarin (Muraj 1981b:317). In the present study, I am returning to this phenomenon so as to illuminate it more fully. This has been made easier to the extent that perception based on my own ethnological material, could also be supported by perceptions arrived at by other researchers concerning the people of Zlarin.

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How can one establish the system of values of a certain locality in times past? In communities of similar worldview, such as peasant societies were, also denoted by the prevailing oral manner of communication, proverbs can also serve this purpose. These simple oral forms, which an individual unconsciously adopts from elder generations and passes on in the same manner to future generations, reflect the value orientation of communities in the historic dimension (Endstrasser 1991:165). Firstly, therefore, I reached out for proverbs which were interwoven in the speech of Zlarin farm labourers, encouraged in so doing by Hermann Bausinger's opinion that these formulative expressions partially show the governing life rule. "The concept of the 'rule' comprises that what is and what should be" explains Bausinger, and continues: "in this, the rule, speaking generally, it is not formulated as a regulation but as the commentary " (1968:98).

Consequently, expecting a possibility for observation of life rules, I chose three examples from a collection of Zlarin proverbs. The first runs: "Stay, girl, by your hearth and you will not get a bad name" (Kranjac 1981:19).<sup>3</sup> The expression "hearth" should be understood in its figurative meaning as a symbol of the house, the home. The next example, which is also widely disseminated in other Croatian regions, reads as follows in the Zlarin variant: "The wife holds up three corners of the house and the husband the fourth" (ibid.:21).<sup>4</sup> The third example runs: "A worthy woman is as good as a man" (ibid.:23).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In the original: "*Stoj, divojko, kraj komina - ni o tebi zla spomina*".

<sup>4</sup> In the original: "*Žena drži tri kantuna kuće a muž četvrti*". The broad dissemination of the mentioned saying in all parts of Croatia could support the opinion concerning a uniform origin in Antiquity or mediaeval times of a large number of sayings, which as borrowed sayings from antique sources were translated and spread into various European languages (Endstrasser 1991:159–160). Also accepted and adopted in the community in question, they bear witness to the Mediterranean cultural environment in the traditional culture of the eastern Adriatic region.

<sup>5</sup> In the original: "*Valjana žinska ti je napar muškoga*".

These three examples would seem to provide glimpses of the governing local ideology on the social position of women. In the first example, the attitude regarding the place of a woman, and particularly that of a young girl, i.e. the private environment is fairly clearly expressed. The unwritten moral code could be recognised in the recommendation on restraint from participation in public life.<sup>6</sup> In regard to the second example, it could be said that, admittedly, it does manifest a positive evaluation of a woman's contribution in daily life. That contribution is indisputable and irreplaceable, located, of course, within the framework of privacy and limited to home and family. Finally, the third example demonstrates the social inequality of the sexes, for *some* woman may have the worth of *any* man, only when she is *estimable*.

So in these Zlarin sentences, too, one can recognise the fact of the second rate, subjugated position of women, in keeping, after all, with that of other Mediterranean women. However, some theoreticians went even further, considering the subjugated position of women a universal and pan-cultural fact (Ortner 1983:154). In the endeavors to clarify the position of the human being in social relations, which also include this universal phenomenon of male domination, certain ethnologists and sociologists considered the key category to be the division of labour. In doing so, their starting point was the assumption that the place that an individual takes in the division of labour is closely connected with the distribution of power (Papić & Sklevicky 1983). Deliberately intensified, these assumptions were expressed by the stereotyped ethnological image of the male warrior, hunter, fisherman, stockman, and the female custodian of the hearth, cook, weaver, and tailor. One dichotomy, expressed by the *superiority* of the man in relation to the *obedience* of the woman, links on to another dichotomy formulated in the world of the *private* discounted area in relation to world of the *public* in which authority, might and power dominate. If, on the other hand, one thinks along the lines of the relations between the categories: nature - culture, one derives the dichotomy of the area outside of the home, in which *money* is created, as against the area inside the home in which *lives* are created (Harding, 1983:282).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This attitude was still being supported in the written legal documents in the late Middle Ages, for examples, in the statutes of the Dalmatian cities, while it derived from the then ruling Church doctrine of woman as a weak and unstable being. Analysing the position and role of women in society and the family in the city of Dubrovnik from the 13th to the 15th centuries, Zdenka Janeković-Römer established that women were mainly restricted to life within their homes, engaged in housekeeping and tasks which were essential for survival of the family (1994a:126).

<sup>7</sup> This does not relate only to relations in times past; some have remained entrenched right up until the present day. This is testified to, for example, by modern research of use of space in the village of G.F. in the French province of Lorraine. Susan Carol Rogers

It is understandable that such a generalised picture of universal socio-sexual relations imposes the necessity that the dichotomies in question - regardless of whether they are actual or illusory - should be placed in the historic process. Thus, they should be observed in a defined social context during a defined period, in correlation with actual social and economic events. Perhaps then their outline will not be so defined.

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Does the example of the Zlarin community make possible an attempt at such an interpretation? We are already familiar with the stereotype expressed in Zlarin proverbs, the existence of which obviously reaches far back in time. However, the description of the real position of woman, related to her share in labour, economic power, social communication and level of self-awareness which prevailed in the first half of 20th century will be shown hereunder. In order to perceive a process of change, one should know the conditions preceding what was found in the 20th century, when economic as well as family-social context greatly changed.

Unfortunately, we do not possess the relevant information acquired by the ethnographic method. I therefore resorted to an indirect source. What is in question is a collection of 47 published wills, by which Zlarin people living in the second half of the 17th century expressed their last wishes. We are referring, therefore, to written sources, private legal documents which by their character have strictly limited purpose and are expressed in a formal way. In other words, they were written in accordance with the conventional form of a notary document. Therefore, a question of a methodological nature could be put: can such sources provide a real insight into the status of social relations during a given period, or do they - as Carlo Ginzburg also warned - filter or distort in some way (1989:9). But, keeping in mind, that wills are generally made at a very serious and tranquil moment of human life, as a personal statement through which individual experience of the world and people around one is filtered (Janeković-Römer 1994b:3), we can treat them as an illustration of reality.

The Zlarin testaments - made between 1661 and 1663 - were written in the Glagolitic script by four local priests - Father Mate Despot, Father Matij Perošić, Farther Gustin Vidulin Černarić and Father Jivan Oštarić. Ante Šupuk transliterated them and published them in 1957, together with other similar documents from the broader surroundings of the town of Šibenik.

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then established that two marked spheres existed: the female tied to the household and privacy and the male linked with the village and public life (1979:87–110).

It can be detected from the entire body of testaments that the properties of husband and wife were differentiated in Zlarin families. The husband - and father - mainly, owned the real estate, while the wife - and mother - owned the money which she had brought into the household through her dowry. This property system was also observed in relation to bequests, and thus the amount of the wife's dowry was expressly stated. For example, in Jive Jiglica's will of April 27, 1677 it is written that *his wife Luce continues to be the mistress of her dowry of 30 tolars which she brought into the marriage* (Šupuk 1957:187).<sup>8</sup> In some instances, the husband made provision for his wife after his death by gallantly adding an amount of money to her dowry, as did Mare Jurinović who by his testament of July 8, 1670 confirmed that he was leaving his wife a *further 200 libras to be added to the amount of 200 libras she had brought into their marriage as her dowry* (ibid.:158).<sup>9</sup> The same principle of property division was applied to descendants of the married couple. Sons were left real estate, and daughters amounts of money, regardless of whether they were unmarried, when it was allotted as a dowry, or married, in which case the amount served to increase the dowry already paid. For example, in his will dated January 10, 1679, Vice Juranov leaves *250 libras each to my six daughters in addition to what they have already received, recommending they should be satisfied with this and not aspire to portions which belong to their brothers* (ibid.:191).<sup>10</sup>

However, the fact that a female could count on her own financial property throughout the course of her life, regardless of her status, did not exclude her disposal with real property. This can be seen, for example, in the last testament of Mara Ljubina dated January 15, 1663 who left *her daughter-in-law Jela the best garden bed, because of the love which she showed to her in her infirmity* (ibid.:107).<sup>11</sup> The inheritance of land through the female line can also be seen in the example of the already mentioned Jive Jiglica who stresses that *the garden bed with the almond tree belongs to his wife Luce, having been left to her by his mother, Luce's mother-in-law, Klara* (ibid.:187).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In the original: "Moja žena Luce donila je k meni dote tolari j(=30), ona budi gospodarica od nee doti."

<sup>9</sup> In the original: "Budući donila žena moja libar s (=200) dote, a ja joj ostavljan od moga dobra libar s (=200) kuntradote."

<sup>10</sup> In the original: "...ostavljam, da nema nijena sestra doiti braći na dija, nego da se kunte(n)taju k onomu, ča im ostavljam."

<sup>11</sup> In the original: "Ostavi nevisti Jeli gredu vrtla najbolju, ka se nahodi, za ljubav, ku mi čini u mojoj nemoći."

<sup>12</sup> In the original: "...jednu gredu vartla, u njoj e mendula, ku joj e ostavila mati moja Klara, a neje svekarva."

In this generally patrilinear line of inheritance of real estate, men usually took care that their wives had tenancy of family estates, either to the end of their lives or eventual discontinuance of their widowhood through conclusion of a new marriage. Thus, Filip Dejan on October 20, 1672 determined that his wife *if she does not remarry, will be the mistress of all his real property, and that nobody should be allowed to evict her from his house* (ibid.:162).<sup>13</sup> Since sons were the greatest threat as far as such evictions were concerned, Jure Škaričin from Zlarin protected his wife Gašpera in his testament of January 19, 1682 by *threatening his sons Mate and Šime with the punishment that they would live only on grass and water if they reached out for their mother's portion while she was still alive* (ibid.:197).<sup>14</sup>

Such a protective attitude was the practice in the case of unmarried daughters, too. This is seen in Šimun Dečan's testament of September 14, 1667 in which his *daughter Manda participates in property with her brothers, and if she gets married, her brothers must secure her a dowry of 200 libras* (ibid.:157).<sup>15</sup> If, on the other hand, the family did not have sons, the daughter would become the universal heir of both personal and real property. In such a case, she would have the same obligation which was applicable to sons, to secure the mother life-tenancy. This is evident from the example of Mare Juranović of Zlarin who, by his will of June 10, 1667 left *all his real and personal property to his daughter Jivanica with the proviso that she kept the mother with her* (ibid.:156).<sup>16</sup>

Although we are aware that texts from testaments reflect only one level of reality and that the everyday was, no doubt, considerably more complex - particularly if one bears in mind relations in those poor and less eminent families which did not make wills - some observations suggest themselves. First of all, the Zlarin woman, regardless of whether she had the status of wife, widow or unmarried girl, was never deprived of her rights in regard to property. She was not, admittedly, fully equal to men, but awareness of her property was lastingly present in the family. It can therefore be assumed that her social position was adequate to such awareness, and, along with this, also the level of her power. One gains the

<sup>13</sup> In the original: "Ako se ne uda i da stoji na momu, da je dona i domina od sega moga nobila i štabila i da ju nima potisnuti nikore iz kuće moje."

<sup>14</sup> In the original: "Ostavljam od svega moga dobra moji redi moji sini Matu i Šimu i ki bi od njih parvi potega na dil za života matere njihove, a moje žene Gašpere, da mu se nima dati ništar nego da žive o travi i vodi i u providenju njegovu, a od moga dobra ništar."

<sup>15</sup> In the original: "Kéi Mande, ka je doma, da je dilnica s braćom ako ne bi se odala; ako bi se odala, da joj dadu braća libar s (=200)."

<sup>16</sup> In the original: "Ostavljan mojoj kćeri Jivanici sve moje nobilo i štabilo i da nima od sebe otisnuti mater svoju... Ostavljan moju kćer reda od moga dobra, ča se nahodi."

impression that conciliation prevailed over expressly patriarchal authority in the Zlarin family of the second part of 17th century.

Such situation also has its historic background. An incidental glance into the mediaeval period in the eastern Adriatic region shows that the position of townswomen, when property was the issue, was different from that of village women. Thus a statute of the city of Split, as early as in 1384, ratified the provision that the wife of a peasant had the right to half of the property which her husband acquired in the course of marriage, and the same rule was applicable to peasant wives in other Dalmatian towns. Thus, while the wives of Dubrovnik - in the period from the 13th to the 15th centuries - frequently had to satisfy themselves with only a paltry sum of money and possibly part of the household inventory, the bed particularly, at the same time peasants from the surroundings of the town were bequeathing their wives houses and land (Janeković-Römer 1994a:131—139).

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It still remains to examine the socio-economic context in which Zlarin women farm labourers lived and were active in the 20th century. The natural characteristics of Zlarin's Mediterranean climate - olives, grape vines, vegetables, some grain, and then sheep, goats and food yielded by the sea - were the basis of the economy. It was structured in such a way that horticulture and growing of grain satisfied household needs in kind, while olive growing, viticulture and, to some extent, sheep raising, contributed to creation of financial income through sale of oil, wine and lambs. Fishing, sea-faring and coral diving were basic branches of the Zlarin economy in addition to agricultural activities.

In the customary division of labour, men pursued activities such as fishing, sea-faring and coral diving. They participated partially in the growing and processing of olives (in the grinding of olives, for example), in growing of grapevines (the treading of grapes was, without exception, male work), and of wheat and barley. The work in vegetable gardens was done solely by women. In addition, they did the daily cooking, kept their houses clean and tidy, laundered clothes and partially sewed them and pursued handicrafts (for example, spinning wool from the fleece of their sheep which was used to weave fabric or to knit garments for the members of the household). Together with the men, they participated in some tasks connected with olive processing (olive grinding, for example), tending the grapevines (for example, they did the protective spraying of the vines, although they had to carry the 20 litre capacity copper sulphate sprayers on their backs), raising grain and work around the livestock.



Thus, the combined economy with its division of labour possibly burdened in equal measure both men and women, although the rhythm of their labours differed. Namely, the male work - fishing, maritime activities, crushing the grapes and grinding the olives - had periods of intensive work interchanged with periods of ease - while the daily work load of the women ran more or less at the same intensity, without interruption.

However, this balance achieved to an extent was abruptly disturbed at the beginning of the 20th century. The attack on the vines by phylloxera caused catastrophic decay of the vineyards, culminating in the crisis around 1905. It happened that, at the same time, there was an essential change in sea-faring: sailing ships, which the people of Zlarin used, were ousted by steam-ships. "The wasteland in the vineyards" - concludes Bernard Stulli in his review of Zlarin history - "the ruin of the large sailing ships and constant decline in olive-growing merged into a crisis of such magnitude and structure that it initiated a permanent general decline, a continuing retrogression which hit everyone without exception" (1980:67). At the same time, a world labour market was activated: the most pronounced was the demand for labour in the expanses of America. Men from Zlarin found their way out from this dispiriting situation in leaving to find work abroad.

And now came the turning point for the being of Zlarin women. "Many Zlarin men" - testifies their fellow-townsmen Ante Kranjac - "would depart for America as soon as they married leaving their wives with a recently born child, or one still to be born. Over 90 per cent of them would return after a certain length of time, would leave again and return again, while a small number of them, however, would illegally abandon their wives and stay in America for good" (1981:17). So it was, that the beginning of the 20th century initiated what some authors (Erlich 1971:464) regard as the tragedy of lonely women.

However, the Zlarin woman accepted this situation as a challenge. She did not permit her economy to be destroyed and took over a series of male jobs, both in agriculture and outside. This greatly increased her labour contribution. A description of a working day (noted down in 1975/1976) based on the narrative of Zlarin women about their own practice - particularly Marija Vukov-Colić, born 1890 - can serve as an illustration. The description relates to tasks which were carried out during the period of earthing up in the vineyards (or pruning of the grapevines), keeping in mind that vineyards were mainly located at Srma and Zblaće, inland areas across the sea from the island.

The day began when they woke up at two o'clock in the morning. With necessary tools on their shoulders or carried in their hands, they would go to their boats and row themselves to the other shore. Upon

arriving in the vineyard they would dig there until noon. During the noon-day hours of scorching heat, they would retire to their field shelters where they would eat a meagre meal, comprised mainly of left-overs from the evening before supper. After a short rest, they would continue with the digging until evening. Then they would gather some dry twigs as kindling for their fires, or prune the grapevines (if it was pruning time) collecting the prunings for the sheep, and carried the loads on their heads to the boat. Then followed the row back across to the Zlarin waterfront, and then they returned home, lit the fire, cooked supper, and fed the livestock...

Zlarin women also helped with building jobs, went fishing, turned with their own hands the heavy mill-wheel for grinding the olives, and made the *opanak*, strapped soft-soled footwear. Understandably, with such a labour share the Zlarin woman independently managed her household, made decisions, and created income. In her role as mother, without the daily presence of her husband, she alone socialised her child and introduced it to their culture. Thus, she carried a heavy physical and moral burden, but, in doing so, she became the self-aware mistress of her small holding.

But still, the phenomena of the symbolic level of culture continue to demonstrate the second-rate position of women. Research of life and annual customs (Rajković 1981) shows a marked desire for male children. Thus, wedding ceremonial also foresaw throwing of grain in the bride's wake while the wedding procession was passing; at the same time they would say: *May there be as many sons as there are grains!* In addition, the birth of baby boy was celebrated with more splendour. As a family festivity, name-days were celebrated primarily for male members, even in their absence. Women continued to maintain modesty in many public displays. So they very rarely participated in masked carnival processions, known for rough and often licentious pranks.

It could be concluded that, in the newly arisen situation, Zlarin women achieved a certain balance between the old and the new order of things. The majority retained, as in other communities after all, their "typically female" share in activities related to nutrition, costume, and habitation. To this they added what was, in many respects, an independent contribution to the organisation of family production and generation of material goods. However, they did not behave radically in relation to these changes; avoiding hasty steps forward, they implemented them gradually. This was more significant than might at first be imagined. Namely, by this they also nurtured the cultural identity of their community. Unlike men, women maintained local style of dress, and they wore traditional costumes well into the 1970s (Muraj 1981a). They played a prominent role in both transmission and preservation of artistic folklore heritage. Research carried

out into traditional music showed that women were familiar with - as regards both music and text - a series of wedding songs, carols, narrative and love songs, as well as lullabies and laments (Bezić 1981). They liked to sing while dancing the *kolo*, or round-dance, especially as Sunday *kolo* dancing was a popular leisure pastime (Ivančan 1981). Children, on the other hand, were drawn to evenings when, gathered around the fireplace, they would plunge into world of fairy tales and tradition through the tales told by their grannies. One summer afternoon in 1975, two Zlarin women showed command of such a repertoire of narratives that, stimulated by a researcher, they told in one breath nine longish stories, mutually complementing each other (Marks, 1980). We owe Olinko Delorko, who was on the island in 1955, an impressive description of one of female narrators of traditional poetry. He wrote: "Acalin Antula carried herself with great dignity. Every day I was at Zlarin, she would say a few poems. (...) While she was talking she would hold knitting in her hands and knit. (...) While reciting the poem, she was concentrated and never faltered. Poems issued came from her mouth with measure, exactly, without stammer, as if she was reading from books" (1980:284).

My stay in the Zlarin community in the Seventies was full of encounters and long conversations with local people. This helped me to establish that it was precisely self-awareness which was also the distinctive feature among the Zlarin female population of all ages at that time. The labour, responsibility and management of property which they faced every day, and the economic power at their disposal contributed to a far more marked authority and decision-making capability than I had noted among women in village communities in some other parts of Croatia. But with all that, they retained restraint and modesty in their behaviour. The ambivalence of their social position could, therefore, be interpreted on one hand by the fact that real patriarchal pressure in Zlarin was never too strong, so that the awareness there of the relative independence of women is a phenomenon of long historic duration. On the other hand, Zlarin women, as did other Mediterranean women, accepted that worldview by which - reasonably or not - they preferred private rather than public power: power within the home and family.

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(Translated by Nina H. Antoljak)

## SAMOSTALNOST I/ILI PODREĐENOST: AMBIVALENCIJA DRUŠTVENOG POLOŽAJA ŽENA NA ZLARINU

### SAŽETAK

U prilogu se raspravlja o položaju seoskih žena u društvenoj sredini stanovništva nevelikog dalmatinskog otoka Zlarina. Ponajprije su razmotrene refleksije toga položaja u poslovicama kao svojevrsnom pokazatelju kulturne ideologije. Zapažanja o imovinskom stanju i društvenom tretmanu žena iz 17. st. temelji se na korpusu građe od 47 onodobnih oporuka. Slijedi opis položaja žena s obzirom na njihov radni udjel, gospodarsku moć i stupanj samosvijesti, kakav je prevladavao u prvoj polovini 20. st. Dok se u simboličkim fenomenima kulture taj položaj doima drugorazrednim i u javnome životu naizgled potisnutim, istodobno su upravo seoske žene u mnogome vodile organizaciju obiteljske proizvodnje, stvarajući materijalnu dobit i egzistencijalne izvore, te imale istaknutu ulogu u čuvanju lokalnoga kulturnog identiteta.