

## Expanded abstract

# The Care Sector in the Asturian Social Economy. An Analysis from a Gender Perspective

The accelerated ageing of the population represents a significant challenge for contemporary society. One of the challenges associated with this demographic shift is the growing need for long-term care, which underscores the necessity of revising the economic organisation model (Juliá et al., 2022). In recent decades, the provision of care has become a topic of social visibility, and the phenomenon of the so-called “care crisis” has gained international recognition. Indeed, since the 2008 economic crisis, reductions in public assistance for those in need of care, coupled with a decline in household incomes, have resulted in the reallocation of care responsibilities to families, which previously bore these responsibilities through state or market-based solutions (Di Masso et al., 2021; Gálvez and Rodríguez, 2013). This situation necessitates a reassessment of the care system, which currently relies on women as the primary caregivers, with the state, market, or community providing only supplementary support (Bodoque, Roca, and Comas-D’Argemir, 2016).

The employment in the care sector represents an outsourcing of familial care responsibilities and is characterised by a lack of social value, job insecurity, and a feminisation of the workforce. The association of feminised jobs with certain sectors, such as care, continues to reinforce social and familial divisions of labour as well as gender hierarchies (Baruah, 2023). In this context, the care economy makes an important contribution to social welfare, highlighting the value of this emerging sector. It has significant potential for job creation and is strategic in nature, as it must respond to a rapidly growing social demand. (Arando et al., 2024).

The anticipated growth of the sector must be accompanied by a shift in the model, supported by community-based services where the Social Economy has an opportunity to develop. In this new framework, Social Economy initiatives play a crucial role in meeting the care needs of the population, which are essential for the functioning of the economy and territories (Osorio-Cabrera et al., 2019).

## Objectives

The main objective of this article is to enhance our understanding of the current position of companies in the Social Economy that provide services linked to the care economy in Asturias. To this end, we adopt a global approach, complemented by a gender perspective.

It is acknowledged that the care sector is characterised by a high degree of feminisation and undervaluation. Consequently, it is hypothesised that women encounter specific constraints within this sector, including the rigidity of public contracts, the prevalence of multiple admin-

istrative procedures, the low profitability of services, and labour shortages. Additionally, the position of the Social Economy (SE) in this field and the shift of activities towards rural areas present further challenges.

These factors define the sector in the region, where employment vulnerabilities are heightened, gender gaps and discriminatory practices common in the labour market and society are exacerbated, and the implementation of robust social welfare infrastructure and accessible, high-quality public services is imperative (Baruah, 2023).

## Methods

A mixed methodology is used, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative analysis draws on official figures from secondary sources to gain insight into the care sector's situation in Asturias and the role of the Social Economy in it.

The qualitative analysis gathers information from primary sources through in-depth interviews and focus groups with associations representing both the demand and supply of the sector, as well as experts in social services and social innovation. This approach aims to identify opportunities for Social Economy companies in the care sector in Asturias.

## Findings

This study presents a quantitative analysis of the care sector in Asturias from both the demand and supply perspectives. In the context of this research, the results are primarily focused on the supply side, encompassing services provided by both Social Economy enterprises and other companies. A total of twenty-five Social Economy companies in the care sector in Asturias have been identified, all of which are classified as SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises). Of these, 32.0% are microenterprises, 48.0% are small enterprises, and 20.0% are medium-sized enterprises. In 2022, the Social Economy constituted 10.5% of companies in the sector, with 13.6% of the workforce and 13.8% of the sector's business volume and total gross value added (GVA).

Among the various sub-sectors of the care industry, social economy companies engaged in "social services activities without accommodation for the elderly" are the most prominent, representing 32.0% of all social economy companies. Consequently, this is the most significant activity within the sector. This sectoral characterisation has implications for these companies and their employees, as they are often based in rural areas and are heavily dependent on providing home-based services.

The qualitative analysis explores the position of the social economy in the care sector and in services that support the development of a community care model. This includes two key concepts: support services, which significantly contribute to the maintenance of dependent individuals in their homes and familiar environments; and the community care model, in which the entire community is involved in care and in enhancing the quality of life for those who require it.

The notable surge in demand is characterised by a number of distinctive features, one of the most significant of which is the evolving profile of service users, who are increasingly demonstrating higher levels of dependency. Social economy companies have already implemented significant modifications in their facilities with the objective of adopting a more personalised approach. However, they acknowledge that this represents a significant challenge.

Furthermore, the difficulties encountered by Social Economy companies in recruiting and retaining qualified personnel represent a significant obstacle to their daily operations and the expansion of new activities within the care sector. This challenge is particularly pronounced in home care services due to the distinctive characteristics of service delivery processes and the inferior working conditions compared to other care services, especially in rural areas.

## Conclusions

This study shows that the Social Economy plays a pivotal role in the development of the new community care model, while also offering a promising avenue for local female entrepreneurship and employment. However, it is imperative to implement measures to ensure the success of women's participation in the care sector. There are concerns regarding the economic sustainability of the new model, as it is uncertain whether administrations alone will be able to bear the costs of the proposed model in light of the rapid growth in demand.

The consequence of inadequate economic conditions in public contracts and agreements, in conjunction with a scarcity of available personnel, compels Social Economy initiatives to operate with considerable deficiencies in terms of both human and financial capital. This situation is especially problematic in rural areas due to the inherent complexities of providing services in such contexts.

The establishment of a community care model will be challenging in the absence of the social economy, particularly in rural and remote areas outside of major cities. It is therefore vital to ensure the continued viability of the social economy business network during this period of transition, given the significant risks it faces. Without the maintenance of these enterprises, there will be a lack of care service providers committed to territorial development and social cohesion, with the potential for a complete absence of service provision due to low economic profitability. It is essential that public administrations listen to and support the needs and demands of social economy companies, recognising the high levels of professionalism with which they deliver their socially critical services.