Looking back at the parcoursArianna in the Val d'Anniviers

Critical commentaries on a development programme destined for the
women of the swiss alpine valleys

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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/1980>

DOI : 10.4000/rga.1980

ISSN : 1760-7426

Cet article est une traduction de :

Retour sur le parcoursArianna dans le Val d'Anniviers - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/1974>
[fr]

Éditeur :

Association pour la diffusion de la recherche alpine, UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

Référence électronique

Thierry Amrein, « Looking back at the parcoursArianna in the Val d'Anniviers », *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* [En ligne], 101-1 | 2013, mis en ligne le 15 août 2013, consulté le 08 décembre 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/1980> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/rga.1980>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 8 décembre 2022.

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Looking back at the *parcoursArianna* in the Val d'Anniviers

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Thierry Amrein

NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translation: Arethusia Plouidy

- 1 When evoking development policies and projects, it is rare that Switzerland comes to mind.
- 2 However this article deals with a project conceived specifically for the women of the Swiss alpine valleys. Carried out in Canton Valais, in the Val d'Anniviers, following on a first similar experiment in the Val Maggia (Ticino), the *parcoursArianna* was a training policy elaborated by the *Laboratorio di Ingegneria della Formazione e dell'Innovazione* (LIFI) at the University of Italian Switzerland in Lugano. Its aim was the *empowerment* and stabilisation in their environment of these women, considered disadvantaged from the point of view of their access to training and employment, due to their socio-geographical situation. This programme, which was active from 2006 to 2008, in a way constituted the “gendered” part within a much greater project entitled *movingAlps*¹, which advocated a development model for alpine valleys destined to reverse the dynamics of centralisation and to prevent the emigration of the populations of these regions. Centred on the mastering and usage of the new technologies of information and communication (Amrein, 2009), the project propounded the following objectives:
 - amelioration of the position of women in the regions considered peripheral
 - training facilities in the communication technologies
 - promotion and reinforcement of innovative entrepreneurial projects

- conception of the active presence of women with a family in regional development.
- 3 The principal aim of the research I undertook within this framework was to study if the participants for training who, in the case of the quasi totality, lived in a traditional family structure,² with most of them working part-time, would have the necessary time, energy and the support of their family circle to take full advantage of the proposed offer of training, and subsequently for their commitment to the development of an original, remunerative and personal project anchored in the region.
 - 4 My work was based on the principal assumption that whatever the didactic qualities of the *parcoursArianna* might be, continuing assignment of the participants to the educative-cum-domestic sphere would seriously impede the chances of the success of this policy, unless a thorough reshuffle of the family organisation were negotiated with the male partners.
 - 5 This questioning partly follows the same lines – I return to this reservation in the conclusion – as a now well-established tendency of development programmes which takes into account the dimension of gender. After having at first placed the accent on a “women and development” perspective (UNO: Decade for Women, 1976 to 1985) which “attempted to meet women’s needs in all sectors...”, numerous policies of development³ have in fact redirected their programmes towards a “gender and development” perspective, one that “attempts to resolve the problem of the battle of power between the two sexes and not only women’s problems” (SDC, 2003, sheet2). An evolution frequently defined as the abandon of “gender mainstreaming” for “gender mainstreaming”.

Approaching the field

- 6 To put it briefly, the data mobilised for this research were produced by essentially qualitative methods of social anthropology: presence/observation during all stages of training and also on other, more informal occasions; two campaigns of in-depth talks with each of the 39 participants and regular contacts with the initiators of the projects, as well as with other researchers working on the corresponding experiment in Ticino (Amrein, Testa-Mader, 2010).
- 7 At the end of the training, I remained in contact with two privileged female informants, so as to follow the possible initiatives that could have emanated after the training period itself.
- 8 The framework of the first series of discussions carried out during the initial semester of the course centred principally on the division of activities within the participants’ households; their motivations for the undertaking of this training, and the envisaged objectives. The second interview campaign took place six months after the end of training. Its aim was to discern the participants’ feelings after this experiment, their evaluation of the results and their future projects, together with the possible changes that following the *parcoursArianna* had provoked as to the sexual division of tasks between them and their partners.

Some socio-economic indications concerning society in the Val d'Anniviers

- 9 Certain people would be surprised to learn that a mixed public-private *pool* had estimated that certain women in a State as prosperous as Switzerland were in need of development aid, all the more so if the choice fell on the Val d'Anniviers. More than many of the country's other mountain regions, this valley made its entry into modernity several decades ago and is clearly registered in the category of Alpine Resorts (Diener, 2006)⁴.
- 10 This territory, lying laterally to the Rhone valley is indeed faced, as are a number of other alpine valleys, with an economy that is a monoculture centred on tourism, but it does not give those who frequent it the image of an island of precariousness within the ocean of Helvetian opulence. If it were a question of privileging one region among the most disadvantaged in the canton, the Val d'Anniviers would not, in my opinion, seem to be a priority.
- 11 Mountain agriculture was still omnipresent in the valley during the first half of the last century, but tourism and its concomitant activities – the hotel trade, construction, services, handicraft, etc. – have continued to largely dominate the local economy since the 1960s. There are now in the valley no less than four tourist resorts, all of which are sources of employment, though some are partly seasonal. Nevertheless, a quarter of the active population of Anniviers descend daily into the plain for their work, principally to the towns relatively near: Sion and Sierre. Whatever that may be, and following an in-depth study by the ETHZ⁵ (Buser *et al.*, 2005) and perhaps more in a proactive spirit destined to ward off future difficulties than to remedy present ones, the deciders' choice, backed by the local authorities' support, actually fell on Anniviers.

Acceleration of geographic mobility rather than depopulation

- 12 If there is a population flux in Valais, it has been bidirectional for a long time. At the turning point of the 20th century, the former negative migratory balance was already starting to become inversed. From then on we have continually observed an upward swing of this movement, consecutive to the industrialisation and agricultural development of the plain along the Rhone, the great construction sites which opened up in the lateral valleys (tunnels, dams) and subsequently, to the birth and the strong growth of the tourist industry with, consequently, a better accessibility to the area.
- 13 The image of closed and isolated societies was already barely relevant in the past, and is totally inappropriate today. One only has to consult the statistics⁶ to observe that if the percentage of migrants who settled in Anniviers was still limited up to about forty years ago, the present tendency is significant: the establishment in the valley of male and female workers from abroad, and city dwellers attracted as much by the environment and the quality of local life as by the possibilities of employment – named by Camenisch and Debarbieux (2011) “amenity migrations” – rather than the emigration of the indigenous population. Incidentally, as we shall see further on, the “female migrants”, Swiss or from abroad, account for more than half of the participants in the *parcoursArianna*.

The *parcoursArianna*, theory and practice

- 14 Giuliana Messi, creator of this plan of action and directress of the section Gender of the LIFI defines the *parcoursArianna* as follows: “*percorsoArianna* è un progetto mirato a diffondere, sviluppare et consolidare spirito e pratiche di microimprenditorialità al femminile in alcune regioni dell’arco alpino svizzero. Per le donne è diventato particolarmente difficile, se non impossibile conciliare lavoro retribuito e famiglia e, nella maggioranza dei casi sono costrette a rinunciare a un’attività lucrativa che le allontanerebbe troppo, sia del punto di vista dello spazio sia da quello del tempo dalla famiglia.”⁷
- 15 Practically speaking, the conditions for participation in the training are simple: any woman domiciled in Anniviers⁸ can participate in it, independent of her socio-professional trajectory, her age, her qualifications or her spheres of competence. Moreover, participation in the *parcoursArianna* is completely free of charge. A certain availability and an Internet connection are the sole exigencies required. The success registered at the first information session *in situ* is quite unexpected – more than forty women are ready to embark on it, whereas the limit for the initiation of training was fixed at twelve and the number registered was proportionally much lower in the Val Maggia.
- 16 The course is organized in two phases of one year each, leading ideally from the apprenticeship of computer tools to the conception, followed by its realisation, of a project for a micro-enterprise. It takes the form of *blended learning*⁹. A face-to-face meeting takes place once a month with a proposition of both technical and theoretical teaching, as well as group studies of reflection geared to develop the spirit of enterprise and creativity. The different themes confronted together during these sessions are subsequently developed by personal study at home, linked with the subject dealt with during the preceding session. The commitment required by the participants in their home is a minimum of half a day a week. It is obviously much more time-consuming for those who develop, in a group, a concrete project from the second year on of training on.
- 17 When referring to the numerous LIFI publications, it is clear that two aspects merge in the presentation of the ambitions of the *parcoursArianna*. Firstly, the interest manifested in the professional future of the women themselves and the supposed emancipating virtues of the training. Secondly, the accent placed on the advantages that society in the valley as a whole could derive from a more noticeable integration of women into the local economic fabric, thanks to the multiplication of the kinetic energy this movement would create, but also due to an attitude towards the world of work considered as being *specifically feminine*. On the other hand, the calling into question of a woman’s role in the domestic sphere is never heralded as such in the objectives.
- 18 Promising intentions and experimental didactics elaborated on solid conceptual bases (cf. Schürch, 2006; Rieder, Schürch, 2008) are actually registered in a somewhat classic gender system, since the aim of the training is in fact, as we have already stated, that varied learning and mastery of new technologies allow a woman to create her own enterprise without, however, neglecting her tasks in the domestic sphere. A sometimes quasi messianic promotion of information and communication technologies (ICT), which, incidentally, enters into contradiction with one of the motivations often

mentioned by the participants during the interviews I instigated, notably, to break away for a while from the family framework: "I believe in fact, it's because women, there are many who stay at home devoting themselves to their household tasks and this gets them away from that schedule. All the time at home, the children, the housework... And now they can do something else on the side. That must be a breath of fresh air!" (Quoted from an interview).

The women following the *parcoursArianna*

- 19 I would specify from the start that the group concerned in this text consists of women living in an alpine milieu and not "*montagnardes*" (Debarbieux, 2008) in the sense that one would refer to persons having in common traditions and a past to ascribe to them any unity of thought or action. The protagonists of the *parcoursArianna* may well inhabit the same territory, but a good number of them were not born there and those that do originate from there have sometimes lived elsewhere for a long time. It is not possible in their case to speak of a shared cultural system. As with Rudaz and Debarbieux (2012), I am in no way referring to an imaginary community of "*mountain women*".

All Anniviardes, but of diverse origins

- 20 The question of the origin of the protagonists of the *parcoursArianna* is interesting for more than one reason. Firstly, because less than 50% of them are natives of the valley, a proportion which corroborates the demographic tendency observed over several decades in the Val d'Anniviers (cf. note 6): the high augmentation of persons from outside who decide to spend their lives in this type of mountain commune (Cretton, Amrein, 2012; Perlik, 2011). This important evolution disrupts the persisting idea of an alpine cultural specificity, of practically homogenous collective identities and of communities with a high smack of authentic flavour.
- 21 The distribution by age of the 39 participants on a continuum going from 30 to 58 years old highlights a strong presence of women between 35 and 45 years old. This is quite logical; as their children are becoming more and more autonomous, they are the ones who primarily appear to be concerned by a socio-professional repositioning or by a reintegration into a social and economic life. The quasi-totality of the women are, or have been married, are mothers of one or several children and only twelve couples are composed of two partners, both originally from the valley.
- 22 Far removed from the image of a physical compartmentalization of wives in the home, the majority of the participants in the *parcoursArianna* are actually very present and active in the public sphere and are therefore rarely *merely* housewives. The great majority of them have had a training for one or several professions and work in one way or another outside the family framework, even if practically never full time, except for three or four women who are bringing up their children alone. Whether they participate in the management of the family enterprise, be they doctors, teachers, nurses, or they juggle with the small, non-rewarding, badly paid seasonal jobs, these Anniviardes are quite representative of a middle class in the Swiss alpine valleys given over to tourism. Salaried or self-employed, they also multiply activities that are intermittent, indispensable, but generally voluntary, in the heart of the local

community and their role of “taxi mums” is not the least of their obligations in a valley where the accumulation of distances to cover is stressful: “Here, everyone is like that. The women especially, they rush. Taking the children to school, fetching the children from the day nursery, and the majority work as well so... And there are also their children’s other occupations. Music lessons, football practices, all those sorts of things.” (Quoted from an interview).

- 23 The fact that most of the participants have a part-time professional occupation – usually between 30% and 50% – also places them in the average for Swiss women, but the low percentage of hours accomplished, the accumulation of different jobs and the irregularity of the offers of work according to the seasons, are the particularities of the alpine region where they live.

Some constants in the matter of gender relations

- 24 I am concentrating here on some significant elements of gendered organisation in the domestic sphere of the women following the *parcoursArianna* and which, to my mind, have been responsible for the lack of success in the training project.
- 25 I had already obtained confirmation during our interviews that from the moment they set up house together, a compulsory passage, or at the latest on the birth of one or several children, again a stage impossible to circumvent, the organisation of the couples of my protagonists and the sexual division of the tasks thus implicated, cut the latter off temporally, partially, or sometimes completely from the world of work. In the immense majority of cases, it is in fact the man’s career that has been privileged to the detriment of his partner’s and this “choice” went so adamantly without saying that most of the time it would not even have been worth discussing it seriously. And no matter whatever training or profession the woman may have had at the moment of setting up house together: “It’s true that for me this was not my way of looking at things, but I don’t like conflict, so... I should have liked to say ‘listen, I earn my living as well as you do, there’s no reason for us not to...’ But I mean, that was simply beyond his understanding (laughter). He said ‘but it’s you who produce the children!’ and I said to myself ‘oh yes, I’m the one who produces the children, that’s true’.” (Quoted from an interview).
- 26 The model “two persons, one career” (Crompton, 1999; Méda, 2008) thus still continues to be an operative reality in Anniviers, which corresponds, by the way, to a phenomenon identified as much in feminist literature (Kergoat, 2012; Maruani, 2003) as in the recent statistics on a national or European level¹⁰: “The priority given by the couple to the masculine professional project registers the couple under an operating function which is a good description of the notion ‘two-persons, single career’. We refer to these couples as being organized on the basis of a priority given to the ‘masculine career’.” (Roux *et al.*, 1996, p. 51).
- 27 Another phenomenon at this start of the 21st century appears to be out of keeping with the feminist statements of the last decades on the access to remunerative work as a determining emancipating factor for women. It seems, in fact, that a majority of the protagonists of *parcoursArianna* clearly privilege the mother-child relationship, their existence revolving round the family for several years at least, to the detriment of any professional ambition: a preference which blocks their reintegration into the world of work a few years later, within an already unfavourable context. Basically, an

emancipation/autonomization which would be acquired via the professional universe is far from constituting a priority for these women, often overworked, and many of them voluntarily criticize the present devaluation of the role of housewife. On the contrary, they consider they are lucky not to be obliged to work for financial reasons, thanks to the fact that their partner's income is sufficient. A tendency that must, of course, be considered within the context of the lack of attractiveness of the local labour market.

- 28 Note must be taken that for a good number of my interviewees, their views on the sex-based roles no longer correspond to stereotypes in this domain. The majority of them have no objection on principle to a more egalitarian division of domestic tasks or to a different time distribution for salaried work between men and women, but one is forced to admit that this evolution in viewpoints has very little impact on daily practice.
- 29 As for those who would be tempted – or obliged – to practise a more regular remunerative activity, the daily management of their existence, this “conciliation” between work in the home and on a professional level, “which concerns women, and them only” (Delphy, 2001, p. 34) is a real difficulty for them. Their masculine companions all work full time anyway; it would be difficult to notice any signs of change – and of incentive for such a change – as concerns the sharing of work between men and women in the Val d'Anniviers. However it is precisely this “conciliation” that the instigators of the *parcoursArianna* advocate and attempt to favour when they claim that the women involved could combine all the better family life and professional activities, thanks to the new technologies and to the development of micro-enterprises.
- 30 The question often came up during the interviews of the charge imposed on the women by the attempts of combining educative-cum-domestic work and professional activities, and the difficulties they met with when attempting to dissociate the two domains. This incites me, following Galerand and Kergoat (2008), to speak of the concept of “indissociability of spheres”¹¹, that could also be qualified as an aporia of conciliation and which one of the protagonists of my research describes very well: “A woman, she always has this little worry-spot whispering: ‘oh dear, I must organize, must deposit the children there’ [...]. Even when working 100%, she has this permanent little worry: ‘What time do my children come home?’ Whereas a man, he goes to work with no worries. If he is asked to make the dinner and look after the children he will do so. But this is not automatic [...]. A man, he comes home at six o'clock, he hasn't really thought of the children.” (Quoted from an interview).

Conclusion: Women's geographic mobility and inertia in gender relations

- 31 Even if the links which attach a person to his work and his family are complex and dynamic, I was struck when analysing the data of this research by the numerous similarities in the organisation of the family systems of the 39 participants in the *parcoursArianna*, although they came from very different regions and social backgrounds. Therefore it cannot, among the women from Anniviers who participated in the training, be a question of relating the present state of the gender relations to some local archaism. These data tend to show that these women, despite their varied origins, their diverse social status, the continuum of their ages or even more so, the

events which have punctuated their lives up till this day during the winter of 2006 when they registered for the training, constitute a particularly homogenous group from the point of view of their past family trajectories and their present family gender regime¹² (Connell, 1992, p. 120).

- 32 We must recognize that in spite of the undeniable interest the training aroused in numerous participants, this emancipating proposition did not, by a long way, lead to the expected results. Several interesting projects have been sketched out and one of them has been favourably finalized¹³, but at no time has it led to profits and professionalization. The tendency was rather to a reproduction under different forms of the habitual feminine voluntary work, which corresponds to the “results” obtained in the Val Maggia (Testa-Mader and Messi, 2005). Four years after the end of the experiment, the memory of the *Arianna* interlude has begun to fade and, after several timid hopes and tentative approaches, the creation of micro-enterprises is for the protagonists no longer a really topical question. Other than considering in an optimistic and non-utilitarian view that these two years of apprenticeship will have facilitated the personal development of certain feminine inhabitants of the Val d'Anniviers – a supposition propagated without much conviction by some of the women and impossible to evaluate – or that the beneficial effects will be realized *one day* for a few of them, the issue of such an investment can hardly be called successful. From a strictly economic point of view one can even speak of a total failure – a failure sanctioned after evaluation by the stop put to the financing of the *parcoursArianna*¹⁴ – since, despite the importance and the cost of the experiment undertaken, not a single job has been created by and for the participants of the training, whereas that was clearly its aim.
- 33 We have seen at the beginning of the text that the ambition of the “gender and development” approach is to include the men in projects formerly reserved for women. Moreover, one must know what is really meant by this, especially in the case of a training programme of this sort in a developed country. It must not terminate in the result, brought about by an effect of social crytomnesia, that the injustices which inspired the promoters of development to place the accent on women should be buried away and allow the gender *men-streaming* to take the form of a masculine re-appropriation of the benefits of development: “There is also much fear among those who have fought the gender war over the years that bringing in men would be the equivalent of letting in the enemy.” (Correia, Bannon, 2006, p. 254). In fact, in the opinion of the majority of the participants of the *parcoursArianna*, the non-sexual mixity of the training was an essential condition for its good functioning. : “Do you find it is good thing that the programme be reserved for women or would it have seemed possible for it to be a mixed group, too? – Nooo, on no account! Are you nuts?!? No, it's great to assemble the women, we've so many ideas. No, no, with the men it wouldn't have been the same at all, no, no.” (Quoted from an interview).
- 34 In the case discussed here, the problem was not so much the direct implication of the men in a development programme rightly reserved for women, than the attempt to make them become conscious “in parallel” of the unequal sexual division of household activities, so that their companions dispose of better conditions for following the suggested programme. For, like Dauphin and Slawinski, who question it thus: “Can one aim at sexual equality without totally disrupting the existing structures?” (2008, p. 9), I consider, after this anthropological field in the Val d'Anniviers, that it is useless to

register a preoccupation with sexual equality in practices if one does not endeavour to question the patriarchal structures still in existence. The testimonies gathered during this research show that if the desire for change and reorientation was strong, although badly defined, for the women registered for the *parcoursArianna*, the articulation between their professional and family spheres has remained little propitious to the creation of micro-enterprises within the framework of the training they have undertaken.

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NOTES

1. "The project *movingAlps* was initiated in 2001 by the Jacobs Foundation in collaboration with the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs of the Confederation (SECO); the Federal Office for Professional Training and Technology (OFFT); Swisscom; and the governments of the cantons concerned: Graubünden, Ticino and Valais". (Consulted 18.05.2013)
2. Heterosexual nuclear structure comprising under the same roof wife, husband/partner and child(ren), in which the man is the only, or the principal purveyor of earnings and the woman is in charge of the major part of domestic-cum-educative tasks.
3. Cf. Bessis, 2001; Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme, 2012; Council of Europe, 2004; SDC Gender Tool Kit, 2003.
4. National programme of research PNR 48: "Landscapes and Habitats in the Alpine Arc" (consulted 18.05.2013).
5. ETHZ: Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zürich.
6. "In 2000, the Anniviards (inhabitants of the Val d'Anniviers) by origin represent less than 60% of the residents of the valley. The installation of persons arriving from other regions in Valais has increased regularly, although very progressively, to reach 13.5%. The highest progressions have been registered by the arrival of Confederates from other cantons, whose number has tripled over thirty years, to reach 16% of the inhabitants; the proportion of foreigners has quintupled over these last thirty years and represents at present 12% of the total population." (Chauvie & Gabbud, 2002, p. 4).
At the end of 2011, the commune of Anniviers totalled 2611 male and female inhabitants: Swiss: 2092; foreigners: 519.
7. "The *parcoursArianna* is a project with the aim of diffusing, developing and consolidating the spirit and practice of feminine micro-entrepreneuriat in certain regions of the Swiss alpine arc. It has become particularly difficult, if not impossible, for women to combine remunerated work and family life. The majority are therefore obliged to renounce the taking up of a lucrative activity implying their distancing themselves from their place of residence or a change in their domestic timetable." (consulted 18.05.2013).
8. A project of fusion of six communes in the Val d'Anniviers came about in 2009 on the creation of the single "Commune d'Anniviers".
9. By "blended learning" must be understood usage of different types of training, including "distance" communication instruments and "attendance" learning.
10. "...the *model sole purveyor with conciliation*, also named *contemporary bourgeois model* in which the mother works part-time, are the most prevalent models in several modern, industrialized societies in Western Europe." Federal Office of Statistics, "Conciliation employment and family". Thematic outline. (consulted 18.5.2013)
11. "For men, work is situated on only one side of the public/private scansion (the first, of course), whereas for women, it is situated on both sides." (Ricci-Lempen, 2007, p. 36)
12. "The state of play in gender relations in a given institution is its 'gender regime'".
13. A collection of fairy/folktales for children and suggestions for walks titled *Rozimma, raconte-nous Anniviers*, which has been fairly successful since published in December 2008, but whose publication has not been renewed.
14. The implementation of the *movingAlps* and *parcoursArianna* policies in Switzerland came to an end after the conclusion of the experiment in Anniviers due to the withdrawal of the institutions which financed them because of lack of observable results. A full account of the entirety of these projects can be found in the publication *MovingAlps Vademecum* (Rieder, Schürch, 2008).

RÉSUMÉS

When evoking development policies and projects, it is rare that Switzerland comes to mind. However the object of this text is a project conceived specifically for the women of the Swiss alpine valleys. This programme entitled *parcoursArianna*, aimed at the empowerment and stabilisation in their habitat of women considered greatly disadvantaged from the point of view of training and employment, due to their socio-geographical situation. The afore-mentioned objectives should have been attained thanks to the creation and deployment of an original “specifically feminine” micro-entrepreneurship within a local economic fabric essentially turned towards tourism.

Starting from the results of a long-lasting anthropological field in the framework of this course of training, which also highlights the growing diversity of the populations in the Swiss alpine valleys, I question the fact that the initiators of this type of project implicitly make the women alone bear the responsibility and the charge of the new social dynamics which they attempt to initiate, without seriously taking into account the local norms of the sexual division of the tasks within the domestic sphere.

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Keywords : gender, development, mobility, domestic sphere, Valais

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