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D5.1 Policy Booklet and Policy Briefs

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[1] PU= Public, SEN= Sensitive.

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ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

CO	Project Coordinator
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
Project partners	
Galway	NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND GALWAY
TU Delft	TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITEIT DELFT
TEAGASC	TEAGASC - AGRICULTURE AND FOOD DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
UNICAL	UNIVERSITA DELLA CALABRIA
LWL	LONGFORD WOMEN S LINK CLG
UTU	TURUN YLIOPISTO
UL	UNIVERZA V LJUBLJANI
CE	CONSULTA EUROPA PROJECTS AND INNOVATION SL
HNEE	HOCHSCHULE FUR NACHHALTIGE ENTWICKLUNG EBERSWALDE
ELARD	ASSOCIATION EUROPEENNE LEADER POURLE DEVELOPPEMENT RURAL
UOULU	OULUN YLIOPISTO
ECOLISE	RESEAU EUROPEEN POUR DES INITIATIVES COMMUNAUTAIRES SUR LES CHANGEMENTS CLIMATIQUES ET LE DEVELOPPEMENT DURABLE
MENDELU	MENDELOVA UNIVERZITA V BRNE
LNU	LINNEUNIVERSITETET
HLK	HOGSKOLAN FOR LARANDE OCH KOMMUNIKATION I JONKOPING - HLK SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION

At the project Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas (FLIARA) a range of policy briefs has been developed and based on these policy briefs and other outcomes of the project a Policy Booklet has been written. This report contains (Part A) the policy booklet, (Part B) de policy briefs, and (Part C) a short introduction to the process of coming to briefs and booklet.

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PART A POLICY BOOKLET

Infrastructures for Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas

A Policy Booklet

Grant Agreement nº. 101084234

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1 INTRODUCTION

Women have long been overlooked and under-represented in the agriculture and rural sectors. Many women-led innovations and practices go unnoticed, which not only limits their potential impact, but also perpetuates the idea that women have a smaller role to play in these fields. The challenge, therefore, is to increase visibility and recognition of women's contributions and support them in becoming key players in shaping the future of sustainable agriculture and rural areas.

This booklet is based on the FLIARA project[1]. FLIARA (Female-led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas) works to improve understanding, awareness, and recognition of women's role in a more sustainable agriculture and rural future. The project combines future foresight analysis and case studies to understand women's current and potential future contribution to rural innovation and sustainability. The evidence generated also sheds light on the pathways successful women innovators take, as well as the current policies and future policy needed to further enhance women's role in rural sustainability and innovation. Through the case studies, FLIARA has engaged directly with 200 female innovators, and these activities span across ten European countries.

This booklet focusses on the development of policies that can support women-led innovative practices in farming and rural areas to initiate progress towards gender equality and sustainability.

In section 10 'About FLIARA' we provide information on how the activities in FLIARA are the source for these insights. This booklet is based on policy briefs developed by FLIARA project partners (see Annex 3 Overview of FLIARA Policy Briefs), which provide material and proposals relevant for various policy contexts.

1.1 SUPPORTING FOUR DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY

During the FLIARA project, about 200 women innovators in agriculture and rural areas have been interviewed. Although these innovators have been selected based on contributions to only one dimension of sustainability, either social, environmental, economic or cultural sustainability, the analysis of the interviews showed that they all contributed to additional sustainability dimensions. This result highlights the importance of the selected female innovators for sustainable rural development. Supporting female innovators has, consequently, a wider (and positive) impact, on sustainable development of farming and rural areas (Table 1).

[1] Funded by the European Union through the Horizon Europe programme, Grant Agreement nº. 101084234. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Table 1 Positive impact of female innovators to different dimensions of sustainability.

Total 10 Countries			Interviews	195
97.44%	Social Sustainability	24.10%	47	Outstanding Impact
Positive Impact		36.92%	72	Significant Impact
		24.62%	48	Moderate Impact
		9.23%	18	Some Impact
		2.56%	5	Minimal Impact
190 Interviews		97.44%	190	
		2.56%	5	Zero Impact
95.90%	Economic Sustainability	18.97%	37	Outstanding Impact
Positive Impact		35.90%	70	Significant Impact
		29.23%	57	Moderate Impact
		5.64%	11	Some Impact
		6.15%	12	Minimal Impact
187 Interviews		95.90%	187	
		4.10%	8	Zero Impact
96.92%	Environmental Sustainability	24.10%	47	Outstanding Impact
Positive Impact		35.90%	70	Significant Impact
		21.54%	42	Moderate Impact
		11.28%	22	Some Impact
		4.10%	8	Minimal Impact
189 Interviews		96.92%	189	
		3.08%	6	Zero Impact
93.33%	Cultural Sustailability	10.26%	20	Outstanding Impact
Positive Impact		29.23%	57	Significant Impact
		27.18%	53	Moderate Impact
		22.05%	43	Some Impact
		4.62%	9	Minimal Impact
182 Interviews		93.33%	182	
		6.67%	13.00057034	Zero Impact

Source: FLIARA, Roos et al, 2025, D3.4

1.2 SEVEN NETWORKS AS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR INNOVATION

Networking is often seen as a strength of (female) innovators. Based on their networks, women often have good basic knowledge of the local places and communities they operate in. Research in FLIARA (See Annex 1 Visions for future) revealed that rural stakeholders considered the position of women in networks as both a strength and a weakness. Extensive networks have been considered the major possibility and lack of networks as a major constraint to women's contribution to sustainability innovation.[2] This relates to the fact that women operate in a web of interdependencies that affect an innovation. Successful innovators have not secured a good position in a single network, but must manage multiple interdependencies, which can be expressed as taken place in **7 networks** (Figure 1; Table 2). Policies can support female innovation by having an eye on measures to support these networks as **infrastructures for female innovation.** As such, and for the purpose of this report, we will examine policy supports through each network, namely, social, financial, work-life, economic, political advisory, and learning (Figure 1; Table 2).

Figure 1 The seven networks for innovation

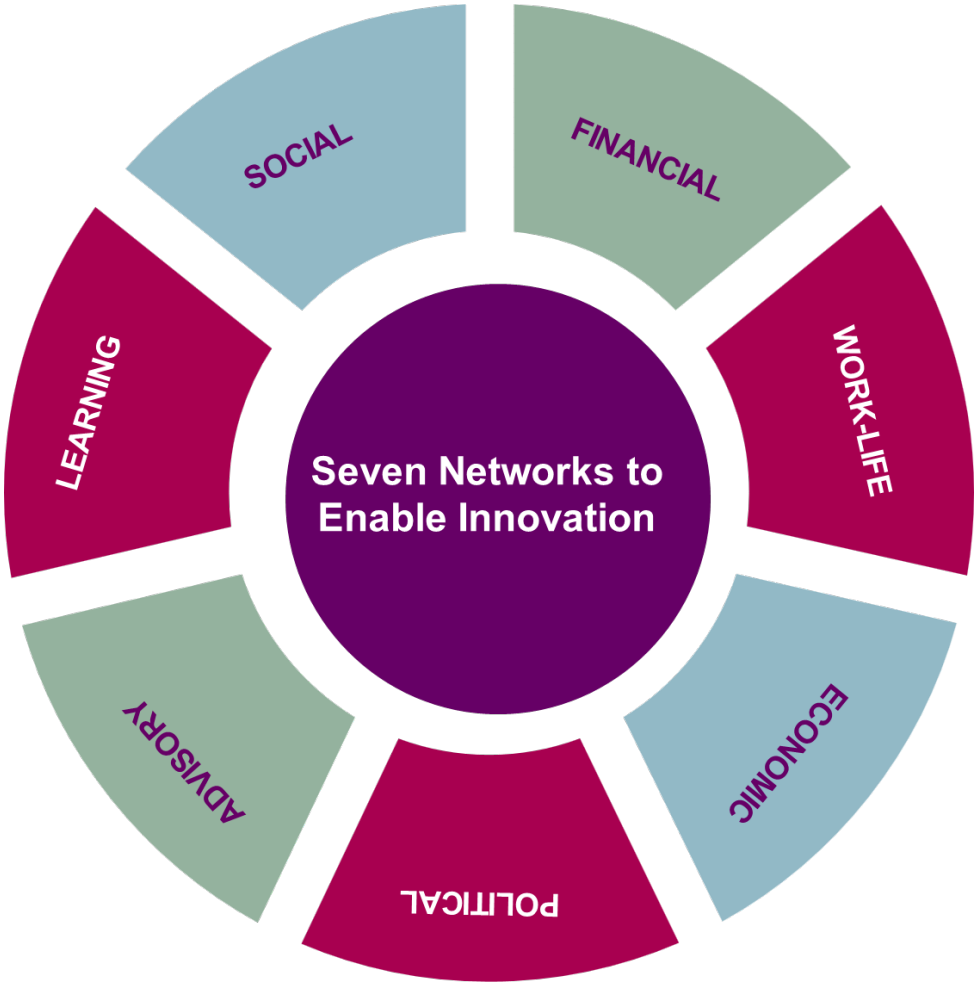


Table 2 The seven networks for innovation

Network	What is it about	Policy measures to improve infrastructures
Social Network	Parents, family, children's care, flexibility	Measures improving childcare, care for elderly, school systems
Network for Financial Security and Independence	The safety net in case of health issues, divorce, etc. Access to financial means.	Social security system, family law, have financial security in mind in developing grants and financial instruments
Working/Life Network	To achieve a healthy work-life balance	Infrastructures that enable self-employed people and farmers to relax, i.e., prevent the accumulation of stress.
Economic Network	Networks to trade products	Supporting networking for commercialization of products
Advisory Network	Access to tailormade advice	A rural advisory network that meets the needs of innovative women
Learning Network	Networks with (women) in the same situation to exchange experiences Peer-to-peer contacts with other innovators	Providing platforms, spotlighting innovation experiences, providing spaces to convene, provide opportunities to recognize and meet peers
Political Network	Access to political decision making	Organise public participation, meet with (potential) innovators

Source: FLIARA

This policy booklet gives some practical tips and insights on how to improve the infrastructure of the networks that women use to bring innovations to farming and rural areas.

Next to working on separate infrastructures, there is also a need to work on integrated policy programmes, such as a programme to support return migration of women to rural areas. As being presented below such a programme often includes working on the separate 7 infrastructures at once to make it a success.

[2] Kuhmonen, Tuomas & Belyta Tembo. (2024). D2.4: Women's Potential Contributions to Sustainability Innovations. FLIARA. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14045295

2 INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE SOCIAL NETWORK

Combining work and family is in practice one of the most salient obstacles for women innovators as the distribution of work in the social network is inadequate. The social network includes the organisation and distribution of care, such as for children, parents and others. A good social network caters to the organisation of care in such a way that it provides room for innovations in other domains. There are large differences between national systems, and consequently between rural areas, in the ways this is organised. Inspirational examples can be found (see Annex 2 Selection of FLIARA Outcomes for further reading). This includes the following infrastructures:

- **Provision of adequate parental leave** advances equality and ensures that rural economies fully benefit from the innovative contributions of women farmers and entrepreneurs. Inadequate parental leave systems and stereotypical gender norms, particularly the notion that women have the main responsibility for childcare and household work, hold women back. Policy should include adequate parental leave systems that are paid, flexible, and that encourage men and women to share childcare and household work on equal terms.
- **Provision of adequate childcare pre-school and after-school activities** could do the same. Policy should therefore include adequate and affordable childcare provision as well as after school activities.
- **Improving care for single seniors supports senior women**. Women live on average almost six years longer than men and are, in average, about 3 years younger than a male partner, resulting in a growing proportion of elderly women living alone, which has significant social implications, especially in rural areas. For innovative women, this situation represents the need for assurance that they will be cared for after leaving active business. This issue also affects women who in practice take a large part in caregiving for elderly parents and good, alternative, solutions are in practice beneficial to them. Additionally, care for the elderly represents a significant public and private business sector that requires innovative approaches from service providers (many of whom are women). The focus is not only on basic care, such as retirement homes, but also on comprehensive rehabilitation, as well as cultural, educational, and recreational activities and generally on enabling active ageing.

2.1 THE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THESE INFRASTRUCTURES

The lack of adequate paid **parental leave** benefits restricts women's opportunities to combine work and family. Women typically assume, and are expected to assume, the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work. The uneven distribution of childcare and domestic work between men and women creates further barriers for women to engage in entrepreneurship and productive work. As a result, rural economies do not fully benefit from women's innovative contributions. Consequently, both material provisions and gender norms must change.

A further issue is the lack of **available childcare** in rural areas, or the lack of available afterschool activities/care. Since women typically assume the primary responsibility for childcare, this inhibits women's opportunities to allocate time to their innovative projects. Consequently, childcare provision is crucially important for gender equality and rural viability. Childcare policies vary across EU member states, thus providing unequal conditions for parents across Europe. There is a need for almost all countries to step up their policies.

Example of a challenge: No statutory maternity pay and leave for the self-employed in Germany

- While employees are guaranteed a certain percentage of their regular income and time off, financial compensation is often inadequate for the self-employed.
- This may force those affected to return to work prematurely, with corresponding health risks.
- A particular challenge exists for agricultural entrepreneurs, as their businesses require continuous management.
- Beyond agriculture, women affected by this issue work as craftspeople, small shop-owners, midwives and child minders, providing services very much needed in rural areas.
- The status quo stunts women in their entrepreneurship and hampers sustainable development of rural areas.

Source: Policy Brief DE04 Maternity Leave Reform

Example of a challenge: Inadequate pre-school capacities in rural Czechia

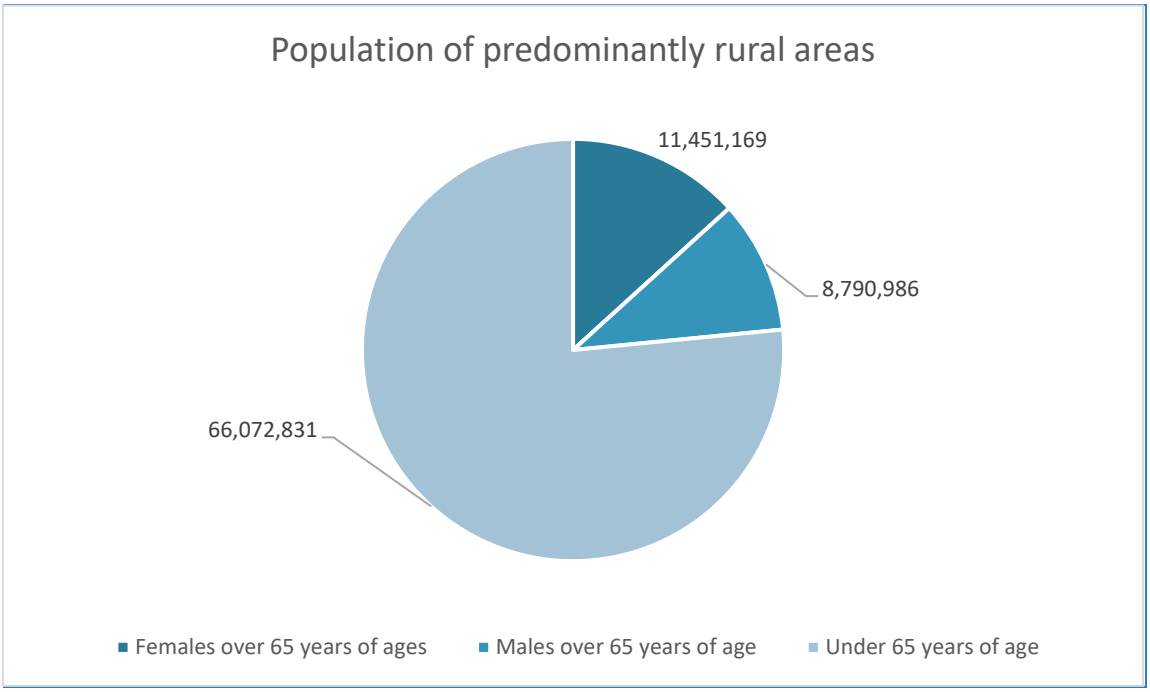
- As a result of underestimating demographic trends and parents' interest in returning to work earlier, and the needs of incoming Ukrainian mothers with young children, an acute shortage of places in preschools has arisen. Insufficient capacity does not allow parents to return to work.
- Other forms of childcare are underdeveloped.
- In addition to ensuring uninterrupted careers for women and men, an earlier return of parents to work would address the challenge of rural economic development and bring an economic effect in the form of benefits and collected taxes.
- The ill-considered administrative reform after 1989 has resulted in 22% of municipalities having fewer than 200 inhabitants and therefore a minimal budget and minimal number of qualified people. Therefore, it is not realistic to comply with government regulations as these rural municipalities are missing the capacity to organise pre-schools adequately.

Source: Policy Brief CZ05 Strengthening Care for Pre-school Children

The ageing in rural areas is, to a large extent, the **ageing** of rural women (Figure 2). Previous policies have focused mainly on pensions, which are usually low for women as pay gaps throughout a lifetime are reflected in a pension gap. In addition to material security, these women primarily need opportunities for participation in rural communities.

In addition, care for seniors could be an important economic sector in rural areas that could offer innovative opportunities to other women.

Figure 2 Elderly population in the European Union's rural areas



Source: EUROSTAT, Population in 2024

2.2 PRACTICAL TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

Best practice: Parental leave in Sweden

Social policy is not regulated at EU level, but EU member states regulate social policy themselves. Parental leave policies vary widely, thus providing unequal conditions for parents across Europe. The only country in the FLIARA project where women innovators did not identify work/family conflict as a major problem was **Sweden**. Swedish policy is therefore the inspiration for the policy solutions. It must be kept in mind, however, that the Swedish system has not been created overnight. It has been developed by many relatively small steps over many decades. In 1995, the introduction of the current system was not yet feasible and many small steps, followed by societal changes, have been necessary to come to its current state. This means in effect that building an infrastructure for social networks takes time. Benefits already come from early steps, but full benefits wait for the realisation of the full infrastructure, which can be defined as follows:

- A universal, paid parental leave system financed through the state and equally available to everyone, irrespective of employment status.
- Reimbursement should make up for lost income, with a minimum level for those without a prior income.
- Legislation should guarantee job security for the parent on leave.

- Parental leave should be offered for 18 months or more per child and be seamlessly integrated into childcare availability.
- Encourage parents to share parental leave. Each parent should formally be awarded half of the parental leave days – if not splitting 50/50 days must be transferred from one parent to the other. This sets a standard of parenting being a shared responsibility.
- Consider earmarking a portion of the parental leave months for each parent to encourage fathers to take parental leave.
- Make parental leave flexible. Allow flexibility in the use of parental leave, with parents being able to use it as a part-time option, and over an extended period, which is particularly important for the possibility of combining parenthood and business ownership.

Box 1 Insight from Policy Brief SE01 Providing Adequate Parental Leave

The Swedish system includes 480 days of universal, state administered paid parental leave, financed by statutory social security fees. Reimbursement is 80% of prior income for 390 days (up to a cap) and 90 days are paid a minimum level. 90 days are reserved for each parent. Days can be transferred to other persons if a spouse is absent, and days can also be transferred to, for example, a grandparent. There is flexibility on how much and when days are taken – it can be taken part time (25,50 or 75%) and it can be spread out over time as one wishes until the child is four years old. 96 days can be saved until the child is twelve years old. Additionally, until the child turns twelve, Swedish parents are entitled to a maximum of 60 paid days off per child and year to care for a sick child. The renumeration is the same as for parental leave days, and the days can be shared among the parents as they wish. Fathers take 40% of these days on average.

Sweden legislated shared parental leave in 1974. Men's uptake was at first negligible. In 1995, 30 days were earmarked for each parent, which in 2002 was increased to 60 days, and in 2016 to 90 days. If men did not use them, the family lost it. This gradual increase, a nudging approach if you will, has increased Swedish men's uptake of parental leave days. It is now about 30% (more than the mandated days). It has also changed gender norms. It is now completely taken for granted that men take parental leave - parents of today have never experienced any other system.

Employers no longer have a reason to discriminate women on the grounds that they may have babies and stay away from work for a long time, since the male work force is no more reliable. The system applies to the self-employed in equal measures. Legislation has, over time, changed gender norms dramatically. *Social change can thus be instigated by new laws* – they may meet resistance at first, but over time change will occur. Men and women's participation in the workforce is high in Sweden, both around 80-85%. The dual breadwinner family is the norm – less than 1% of Swedish adult women are homemakers and financially dependent on a partner.

The Swedish experience shows that social network infrastructure can be created step-by-step in which earmarked parental leave for each of the partners provided an important incentive to incorporate male partners as key actors in the social network.

Best practice: Providing adequate childcare and after school activities in Sweden

A good system of childcare and after school activities is characterised as follows:

- Provide good quality childcare facilities/preschools in all areas where people live, including rural areas
- Make childcare affordable. Make fees low and income tested so that everyone can afford them. Subsidize the cost through the tax system.
- Provide full-time daycare/preschool for children aged one or older, until school starts.
- Staff daycare/preschool with qualified personnel with adequate education. Include programmes for the education of preschool teachers and leisure time pedagogues at universities or vocational schools.
- Serve the children lunch.
- Provide meaningful after-school activities for school age children at, or nearby, the school so parents can work full-time day.

2.3 CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

Finding a balance between work and family is a major obstacle for women's contributions to rural development.

Parental leave:

- EU member states should provide adequate, paid parental leave systems.
- The system should be flexible.
- The system should encourage parents to share parental leave days.
- It should also be accessible for self-employed people (such as farmers) and not only for employees.

Around school:

- Policy must offer affordable solutions that make the combination of work and family possible.
- EU member states should provide high quality daycare/preschool facilities and after school activities for school age children in rural areas.
- Services should be subsidized and affordable for everyone.
- The staff should be well educated.

Ageing:

- Due to the trend of ageing, the number of seniors will increase rapidly. This development needs to be addressed both for social reasons and because it is a promising economic sector for the future.
- This is a task of all stakeholders, both governmental and non-governmental.
- The approach addressing the social status of senior women includes lifelong learning, services and facilities, strategic frameworks and the allocation of tasks to the relevant stakeholders.

2.4 POLICY BRIEFS FOR FURTHER READING

CZ05 Strengthening Care for Pre-school Children
CZ06 Improving care for lonely seniors
DE04 Maternity Leave Reform
IT04 Improving Family and Work Balance in Rural Areas
SE01 Providing Adequate Parental Leave
SE02 Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities
SE03 Maintaining Schools in Rural Areas
SE04 Culture and Sports in Rural Areas

3 INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE NETWORK FOR FINANCIAL SECURITY AND INDEPENDENCE

This is about the network that not only helps to overcome the financial challenges in case of health issues, divorce, etc. but also helps to get access to finance needed for innovations in farming and rural areas. Issues of relevance are:

- **Legal position.** Traditional farming systems in Europe are patriarchal. Land was owned by males and in succession the farm went to sons and not to daughters. Although laws have changed to allow for equal rights, practices have not always followed these changes. Many women still contribute with unpaid (and not registered) labour to a farm they legally do not own, and have a weak position if the relationship is broken up by a divorce or the demise of their partner. Policies and legal frameworks to ensure that women have easy access to the rights of all their contributions, should be set up as part of the equal rights agenda. The details of family law vary by member state and so the right remedies differ by member state. It is, however, essential to promote practices that form a sound base for the acknowledgement of female contributions in all circumstances. Good infrastructures assure that women can fully exercise their rights and benefit fairly from the labour and initiatives they invest in a joint enterprise, without their contributions being undervalued. This may also hold for practices of registration of joint companies and the ways in which female contributions are being acknowledged in statistical representations of reality, which often still focus on representing the head of the family in family farming.
- **Start-up finance, training and mentoring vouchers for rural women.** Women in rural areas face significant barriers when starting a business, including limited access to finance, tailored training, and mentoring. To address these challenges, we propose an integrated voucher-based support scheme offering start-up funding and which may also provide access to other infrastructures such as the advisory network (access to tailored advisory services) and learning network (access to entrepreneurship training and personalised mentoring). These vouchers would help women cover essential start-up costs, build skills, and gain confidence through individual guidance. Although such programmes exist in several EU countries, they are often project-based. There is a strong need to embed these tools into national policies to ensure long-term, stable support for women entrepreneurs in rural areas**.** The financial innovation support should be able to cater to various stages, sizes and types of businesses.
- **Improve access to finance for women-led rural and farm innovation**. Access to finance at the right level and at the right time in the development of women-led rural and farm innovation is part of the key to success. Access to finance to start and develop an innovation remains a significant barrier limiting the potential for women-led innovation in rural and farming contexts. This is relevant as many female entrepreneurs in farming and rural areas run micro-businesses that are relatively small-scale and do not align with the typical business operations targeted by funding sources. Examples include food cooperatives, knowledge

initiatives, and voluntary associations. These unique small-scale rural and farming activities often fall between different funding schemes, which are designed for larger businesses. Dealing with this barrier is also complex. There are many sides to the access to finance issue. This calls for policy action at a variety of levels, from more direct support to better monitoring of the issue. We need funding agencies that can adapt financial funds for small businesses, those that do not have financial profit and growth as goals, or that are not technology based, but sustainability based. Adjusting the size criteria is especially relevant for agricultural support, which aims for large-scale economically effective farms and thus disregards landowners of small farms. Also funding for small-scale environmental initiatives are missing. This is relevant for the design of the new CAP and National level CAP Strategic Plans. Communication about created opportunities is also relevant to ensure that female entrepreneurs feel that these opportunities are also mend for them.

- **Simplifying Innovation Support Systems.** With simplified rules, lower fees, and better support systems, small businesses can navigate bureaucracy and grow sustainably. Small businesses struggle with the same regulations as large companies, leading to high compliance costs and administrative burdens. They lack resources to navigate bureaucracy, hindering growth. Simplified rules, lower fees, and better support systems are needed. A user-friendly, centralized online resource could help startups access necessary information and support more easily. In the FLIARA interviews and Community of Practice events (CoP), female entrepreneurs from farming and rural sector emphasized that women are often engaged in SME operations that are relatively small scale and/or does not represent average rural operations, that are better recognized in regulations or CAP subsidy options
- **Close the gender pay gap.** This gap manifests in multiple forms, including the persistent undervaluing of professions socially coded as feminine — often associated with care and relational work — compared to those regarded as masculine, which tend to be better paid and more institutionally recognised. Other forms need to be addressed as well.

3.1 THE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THESE INFRASTRUCTURES

Traditionally “women’s role on the farm can be informal and unpaid”[3]. This traditional role, which has been enshrined in legal and policy frameworks, stands in the way of the acknowledgement of female contributions to rural areas and, although in theory, frameworks allow for equal rights, the practical outcomes and choices within the systems do not materialize these equal rights. Women remain underrepresented in entrepreneurship. Access to funding remains the main challenge for new women

[3] Aisling Murtagh, Maura Farrell, & Louise Weir. (2024). D1.3: Assessment of Rural and Farming Policy and Legal Frameworks in relation to Women-led Innovation. FLIARA. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14045163, p. 47.

entrepreneurs and many women must rely on personal savings and informal sources of funding to launch their business ideas and start innovation journeys.

Example of a challenge: Definition of farm managers based on patriarchal traditions of family farming

In family law, the idea of a single (usually male) 'head of the household' has been abolished, in European statistics of family farming this has not yet been the case.

The Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2018/1874 on integrated farm statistics defines: "Manager of the agricultural holding is the natural person responsible for the normal daily financial and production activities of the agricultural holding." (http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg_impl/2018/1874/oj). This is interpreted by EUROSTAT (in its 2024 Metadata on Farm structure) in a way that "only the main holder (one person) is accounted", which is often a rather senior male. This definition (based on the Commission Implementing Regulation) is at odds with EUROSTAT's broader definition of farm management as "all persons responsible for the day-to-day management of the holding". It does not help the acknowledgement of female contributions to farming as the statistical definition of family farming is based on single (in practice, patriarchal) leadership. EUROSTAT data shows that the contribution in annual working units (excluding housework) by other family members is substantial and is in some Member States and EU regions even larger than the number of annual working units of the "sole" farm manager (EUROSTAT ef_lf_main).

Current **innovation funding support systems** are not often well-adapted both to small businesses, which, although contributing to a fair standard of living in rural areas, have been started without financial profit and growth goals, and to enterprises which are not focused on technological innovation. Women entrepreneurs often avoid external funding due to financial risks and value preservation. Current support systems are inadequate, particularly for rural areas. Specialized funds exist but are fragmented, and many businesses struggle to qualify for national support. The financial innovation support should cater to various stages, sizes and types of businesses. This has led to unequal impacts, particularly affecting women-owned businesses in rural areas. Consequently, many do not seek or receive adequate financial support. Some entrepreneurs avoid external financing altogether since they are afraid that criteria privileging economic growth before other goals will lead to dependence on financiers' intentions and compromise their vision of a sustainable society.

While numerous specialized support systems exist, they often cater to specific stages of business development and the systems may not communicate with each other, creating a fragmented support landscape.

Finding financial support for initiatives that aim to sustain existing communities or projects becomes even more difficult. Funds are more readily available for technological development than for production development, administration, or marketing. This may, for example, lead some businesses to engage in construction projects just to qualify for rural development support. As such, ingenuity is needed to navigate the complexities of the existing business support system. Women-led rural and farm innovation comes in

many forms, from livelihood focused businesses to innovations focused on a social mission. This calls for policy innovation and specific tailored finance support to capitalise on the distinctive nature of women-led farm and rural entrepreneurship.

In conclusion, public funding provides an important source of finance however there are still barriers impacting women leading rural and farm innovations engaging in the funding system such as finding match funding, the bureaucratic nature of the application process and the time it takes to apply and receive funding.

Box 2 Insight from Policy Brief FI03 Special targeted support for atypical rural SMEs

> In interviews and Community of Practice (CoP) events, female entrepreneurs from the farming and rural sectors emphasized that women often run small businesses that do not align with typical business operations and thus feel unrecognized in regulations. Examples include small-scale (sometimes organic) farms, alternative organizational forms, and tourism enterprises. These small-scale rural and farming businesses often fall between different regulations, which are designed for larger traditional operations.

Small businesses face significant challenges due to policies that apply the same regulations to both large and small companies. Consequently, complying with regulations and reporting requirements takes too much time and resources for small businesses. A large company can hire legal advice and economic experts to help them navigate government requirements, but a start-up or a small company has neither the necessary skills nor the resources to do so. These circumstances in turn can hamper business growth prospects.

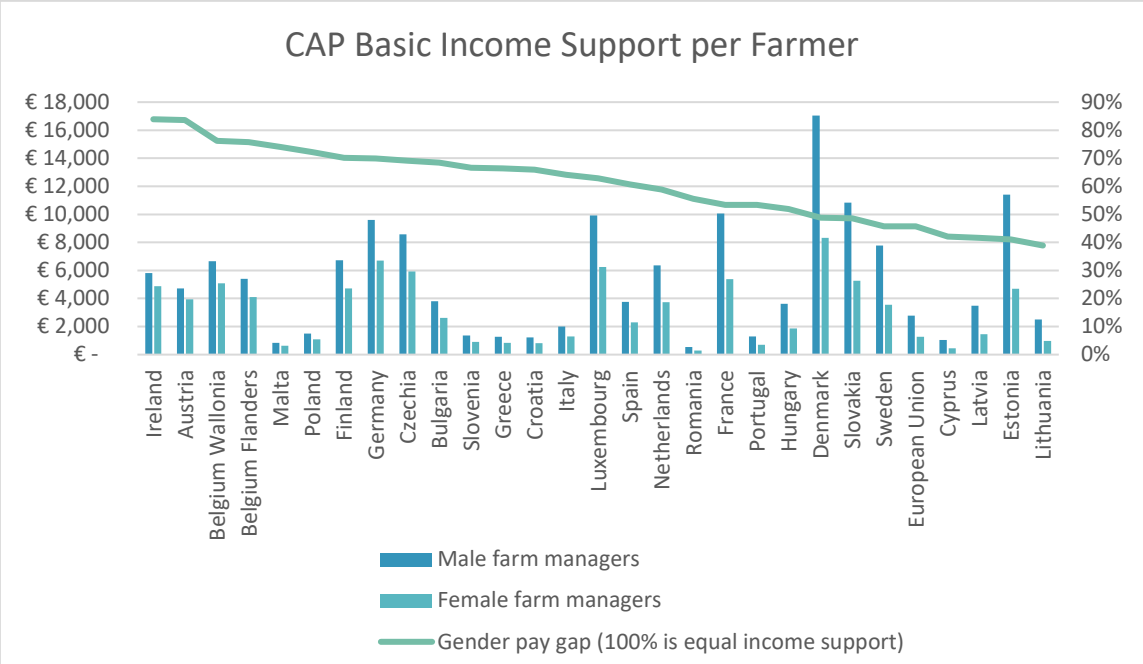
Some businesses are too small to qualify for national support funds, posing significant obstacles in bureaucracy. This is especially clear when it comes to agricultural support which aims for large-scale economically effective farms and thus disregards small landowners. Additionally, small-scale landowners, often seasonal and dependent on harvest periods and varying weather conditions, find it challenging to anticipate their need for extra or seasonal workers. Flexible and simplified hiring procedures for fixed-term seasonal and short-term temporary workforces would greatly benefit these rural operations.

Reduce pay gaps between hard and soft professions The gender pay gap persists within the EU. One of the causes is that male-dominated (technical) professions are paid better than female-dominated (social and humanistic) professions. A potential solution could be to reevaluate the salary scales in the public sector.

The financially largest contribution of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS), is based on the number of hectares of a farm. The outcome of this is that farms with male farm managers get more BISS than farms with a female farm manager (Figure 3). Many female farm managers add extra value to products produced on the farm, rather than receive extra income (including extra CAP) by enlargement of the farm. The issue of getting **access to land** (traditional values within family farming result in larger farms being more likely to be allocated to male family members) may be part of the explanation of these differences in farming styles. In practice, the CAP produces a gender pay gap by the way it is allocating its support.

FLIARA evidence suggests that female initiatives create extra value for the farm that contributes to all dimensions of sustainability in rural development.

Figure 3 Gender Gap in CAP Basic Income Support for Sustainability based on planned allocation 2023-2027 and farm structure 2020



Source FLIARA based on EUROSTAT and EC

3.2 PRACTICAL TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

Practical tip: Business plan support enabling access to finance

National/regional governments could provide rural women entrepreneurs with a well-developed business plan with micro-credit programmes, small grants and facilitated bank loans. Women entrepreneurs would ideally be assisted in developing a business plan and in applying for microcredits/small grants – to increase chances of success. These financial instruments should be easily accessible (very low level of bureaucracy). This action would help women, and particularly those who did not inherit a farm or an asset, to develop their ideas and projects.

Source: Policy Brief IT02 Funding and Advisory Services for Women Innovators in Rural Areas

Women leading farm innovations may not aspire to develop a large business with high turnover but develop a business that complements the existing family farm, its scale and their own work-life balance choices. Due to the small size of many innovative enterprises that were part of the FLIARA case studies, impact was not necessarily strong on economic metrics such as turnover or job creation. However, these impacts can also emerge but may take time. Starting an innovation may follow a more organic pathway. Development in different steps may take a longer path and establishing financial sustainability is built over time. It is important that the public and private finance system appreciates this and is designed to support this type of innovation, which plays a key role in adding to the quality of live in rural areas.

More broadly, the case studies highlight the need for improved access to finance. Many women were using their own resources (home office space, savings) and did not use external sources of finance such as loans and grants. A gender gap in access to finance to support innovation and entrepreneurship is perceived based on general access to finance figures. Regular access to financial incentives and personalised support would significantly strengthen women's entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in rural and structurally weaker regions. This leads to the following **practical tips**:

- Policymakers should widen the scope of subsidized rural economies to atypical farm related economies compared to traditional farming operations.
- Policymakers should recognize better the need for flexibility in hiring a seasonal, temporary and part-time workforce.
- Policymakers should recognise the needs of small, often sole operator or family run rural businesses, which often miss out on subsidy schemes because their operations are considered too small.
- By revising the rural policy strategies to cover better exceptional and innovative women-led rural solutions, we can amplify women's contributions for the future and support meaningful and sustainable change in rural communities.

Box 3 Insight from Policy Brief RO03 Supporting Women's Return to Rural Areas and Promoting Female Entrepreneurship

Start-up Nation Program for Romania

The Start-up Nation Romania program offers grants for newly established companies, including start-ups, small businesses, and SMEs, with a focus on entrepreneurship. The program includes two pillars: one for local applicants (Pillar I) and one for those returning from the diaspora (Pillar II). It provides non-reimbursable funding of up to 100,000 lei for creating one job, or up to 200,000 lei for creating two jobs, covering up to 95% of eligible project expenses. In 2022, the program allocated a total budget of 520 million lei for local entrepreneurs and 20 million lei for the diaspora. Managed by the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism, it promotes smart, sustainable growth through digitalization, innovation, and job creation. This program can be an essential policy tool to support women entrepreneurs returning to rural areas, fostering economic development and job creation in these communities.

The financial innovation support should be able to cater to various stages, sizes and types of businesses. While specialised funds exist, they are fragmented, and many businesses struggle to qualify for national support. Consequently, norm-breaking, sustainable companies face funding challenges, especially non-tech and small businesses.

- Address barriers impacting women accessing existing public and private finance sources, such as administrative burdens attached to grant support and pre-conceptions about bank loans.
- Improve understanding and monitor how women-led innovation gains access to finance, including better gender data on public funding and private finance for supporting enterprise in rural and farming contexts.

To meet the needs of small-scale businesses and farms, especially targeting women in rural areas, we propose that small and large companies play in different leagues. This can be done through :

- fewer and less-complicates rules for small businesses.
- lower fees and user-friendly access to information.

Employers can also take action to keep women as part of their workforce. Data shows that a significant proportion of women would like to return to work sooner if employers created suitable conditions for them. This would certainly benefit employers, who would thus retain qualified workers. According to the findings of the FLIARA project, a number of innovative women left their original qualified professions for this very reason and started their own businesses in the countryside, where they can organise their working hours according to their own needs and those of their families.

3.3 CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

The basic position of women in family farming and family business models needs to be safeguarded. Although formal laws explicitly putting women under the supervision of males have been abolished decades ago, practices based on the once formal patriarchal system are resilient within families, established ways of working and financial relationships, and there is a need to actively protect and promote the position of women in the financial security network.

There is a strong need for stable and predictable support structures. This includes the integration of voucher schemes into national policies and the establishment of sustainable funding mechanisms that go beyond short-term project cycles.

The current gender pay gap is partly due to the perception that technical fields should be paid more than more socially oriented work, even though the qualification requirements in what are considered to be softer fields are sometimes higher. This division is increasingly unjustifiable, as physically demanding work in technical fields is declining due to mechanization. These disparities should be gradually addressed, starting in the public sector through wage scales, and eventually extending to the private sector. Subsequently, stakeholders in the private sector will also consider their rules for evaluating employees. The Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS) should be based not on the dimension of the farm (in term of hectares) but other parameters should also be considered as it is currently a practice of indirect discrimination of women that have extra barriers to get access to land.

3.4 POLICY BRIEFS FOR FURTHER READING

CZ04 Reduce to pay gaps between hard and soft professions
DE02 Empowering Rural Women through Tailored Measures
ES01 Financial gaps and opportunities for rural women-led innovation projects
FI03 Special targeted support for atypical rural SMEs
IE01 Improve access to finance to better support women-led rural and farm innovation
IT02 Funding and Advisory Services for Women Innovators in Rural Areas
IT03 Local Support to Women Innovators
NL01 Promoting a Diversity of Inclusive and Sustainable Agricultural Practices
RO01 Unlocking the potential of rural women through inclusive CAP measures

RO05 Promoting gender equality in Romania's rural communities by supporting innovative women driving sustainable development

SE07 Addressing Inequities in Financial Support to Enhance the Sustainable Transition

SI01 Start-up Finance, Training and Mentoring Vouchers for Rural Women

4 INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE NETWORK THAT ENABLES A HEALTHY WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Being successful in a rural initiative can result in becoming irreplaceable, which is a trap making it impossible to find a healthy balance between work and relaxation, resulting in the accumulation of stress. Ensuring opportunities for a healthy work life balance is essential for rural attractiveness and for rural women to sustain their initiatives. Next to a range of soft measures and measures improving the division of care work (see 2 Infrastructure for the social network), policies can address this issue by establishing a farmer relief service.

- Implementing a **farmer relief service** is crucial for farmer well-being, animal welfare, local employment, and ensuring gender equality and safety for farmers and small children. Without substitutes, farmers struggle to take the mandated five-week vacation, leading to overwork and stress. This impacts farmer well-being and animal welfare. Implementing a farmer relief service could boost local employment and it is crucial for pregnant farmers and those with small children, thus ensuring farm safety and gender equality. A new regulation about substitutes is proposed to cover the costs of leave from the farm, childcare and unplanned situations.

4.1 THE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THESE INFRASTRUCTURES

Most farmers cannot afford to pay for substitutes on the private market, and not everyone can rely on friends, family, and neighbours. Those who can't rely on this support experience stress and put their animals, themselves and their children at risk.

Women farmers interviewed in the FLIARA project relied on family for extra childcare and family logistics. This includes partners, parents, and stepparents. If agriculture is to be able to meet contemporary requirements for preparedness in times of war and crises, a new generation must enter the industry. For young families to invest in agriculture and animal husbandry, economic and social conditions must be greatly improved in the long term.

A farmer relief service is especially important for pregnant farmers and for those with small children. The solution for many farming parents is to bring their children along while working on the farm. However, having children in agricultural work involves a major safety risk that many farmers are concerned about.

Farmers, without a substitute, cannot take a well-deserved holiday of several weeks, since the animals need daily attention. The combination of long working hours, working alone, high performance requirements, increased vulnerability, conflicting signals from the government, and the deterioration of economic conditions has meant that many farmers are overworked and suffer, contrasting starkly with the comprehensive legislative protection for workers in the European social model of society.

If farmers are not able to rest, it can lead to burnout and decreased attention to detail, which can negatively impact animal care. Regular rest periods allow farmers to recharge,

thus reducing their stress and improving their ability to manage their farms effectively. This, in turn, ensures that animals receive consistent, high-quality care, as a well-rested farmer is more attentive and capable of identifying and addressing health issues promptly. Additionally, taking breaks can prevent decision fatigue, leading to better management practices and overall healthier livestock.

4.2 PRACTICAL TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

Farmer substitutes enable farmers to get time off or get extra help when sick. Substitutes can be a solution for recurring leave off the farm, child-care, or when something unplanned happens, in case of illness for example.

Box 4 Insight from Policy Brief SE05 Implementing a Farmer Relief Service

Best Practice from Finland

Finland's farmer relief system, regulated under the statute 20.12.1996/1231, is designed to support agricultural entrepreneurs by providing substitute services during vacations, illness, or other periods of incapacity. This system ensures that farmers can maintain their operations without interruption, promoting their social security and work motivation. The relief service includes assigning substitute workers or compensating farmers for the costs of self-arranged substitutes. This approach not only enhances farmer well-being but also contributes to local employment and farm safety.

Additionally, implementing a relief service for rural areas could significantly boost local employment by creating job opportunities for residents, while supporting the local economy by keeping jobs within the community and reducing the need for external workers. Certain practical tips should be considered:

- Many female innovators have a diversified enterprise: they, for example, do not only grow food, but also process it and distribute it to customers. A relief system organised in a silo, stepping only in in part of these activities, does not provide the necessary relief. It should be integrated to cover all activities.
- It is necessary to organize the system in such a way that there is the possibility of finding reliable substitutes easily.
- Many women are still overburdened with domestic work and care and are consequently working in a double shift. Facilities that address these activities provide also a positive contribution to a healthy work-life balance.

A farmer relief system can also work as an entry point to farming for young potential successors who have finished education, but whose parents are still too young to transfer their farm to a new generation.

4.3 CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

A new regulation about farmer relief services is proposed to cover the costs of leave from the farm, childcare and unplanned situations.

4.4 POLICY BRIEFS FOR FURTHER READING

ES02 Family & Work Conciliation Policies for Women in Rural Areas
IE09 Balancing Women-led Innovation, Rural and Farm Family-life: The Need for Improved Policy Support
IT04 Improving Family and Work Balance in Rural Areas
SE05 Implementing a Farmer Relief Service

5 INFRASTRUCTURE FOR COMMERCIALIZATION OF PRODUCTS

Economic networks to commercialize products can make a difference. New initiatives are often in need of novel markets. As an innovator in the FLIARA showed, school canteens may be a relevant new market for local farm products. Organising a local market can also be a way to help commercialisation. There are also examples of female initiatives organising marketisation by various producers through a website and a weekly delivery structure. For building such commercialisation networks are essential.

- **Strengthening the Commercialisation of Women-Led Rural Products and Services through Support Networks.** In rural areas, women are generating high-quality, locally rooted products and services across agriculture, tourism, crafts, education, and culture. These initiatives not only support environmental sustainability and social cohesion but also represent powerful engines of economic resilience. Yet many remain invisible or commercially fragile due to weak market access, limited support structures, and a lack of coordinated promotion.
- **Supporting Direct-to-Consumer and Short Supply Chain Farming**. Direct-to-consumer (DTC) and short supply chain (SSC) models offer critical pathways toward more sustainable, equitable food systems. Women farmers and rural entrepreneurs are key drivers of these models, enhancing food sovereignty, reducing carbon footprints, and revitalizing local economies. Yet, these initiatives remain under-supported in existing CAP and national policy frameworks. A targeted effort is needed to foster DTC and SSC farming, integrating them fully into the mainstream rural and agricultural strategies.

5.1 THE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THESE INFRASTRUCTURES

Challenges include:

- **Fragmented and informal market presence**: Many women entrepreneurs sell their products locally or online in small volumes, without stable channels or scale-up opportunities.
- **Limited access to support tailored to rural, gendered needs**: General business programmes often do not consider the realities of micro-scale, care-constrained, or seasonal female entrepreneurship.
- **Lack of structured branding and promotion tools**: Few opportunities exist for women to co-brand, certify, or jointly promote their products under a shared rural women identity.
- **Underrepresentation in cooperatives and value chains**: Women remain marginal in many agricultural and craft cooperatives and often lack support for joining or founding such networks.

Farming is often judged by whether farms are a successful player in producing food for the world market. This is being supported by current agricultural subsidy frameworks and

food market structures that favour large-scale production and long, centralized supply chains. To stay competitive under this framework, farmers need to enlarge their scale (more hectares per farm), resulting in less and less farms, contributing to an alienation between farming and society and less farm enterprises in rural areas.

- Next to this there is space for farmers with more direct relationship with local and regional customers using DTC and SSC models—such as CSA (community-supported agriculture), farm shops, online farm-to-table services, and farmers' cooperatives—. Often operate at smaller scales and face challenges accessing investment, scaling logistics, and navigating complex food safety regulations. Technology plays also a role in (online) marketing.
- Female-led initiatives play a larger role in these more local market-oriented practices.

5.2 PRACTICAL TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

Based on Spanish experiences with existing initiatives (best practices) a list of practical tips can be provided.

Box 5 Insight from Policy Brief ES03 Strengthening the Commercialisation of Women-Led Rural Products and Services through Support Networks

Existing Initiatives: Several initiatives offer a foundation for a stronger network:

Desafío Mujer Rural (MAPA): National program with training, business support, and a digital promotion platform.

PAEM (Chambers of Commerce): Business support program with widespread access points.

Ganaderas en Red: Grassroots network for female livestock farmers offering mutual support and advocacy.

Red de Mujeres del Mundo Rural de Álava: Local intergenerational network promoting women's economic empowerment.

Lánzate Rural: Project focused on building rural women's entrepreneurial skills through training and mentoring.

Practical Tips to open-up local and regional markets so rural women can commercialize their products and services.

- **Coordinate existing programmes** (e.g. in Spain: *Desafío Mujer Rural*, PAEM, AMFAR) into regional ecosystems with common objectives, communication tools, and shared logistics.
- **Support access to** branding, packaging, distribution, and consultancy services for rural women-led initiatives.
- Encourage the development of **joint platforms** (physical or digital) to showcase and sell products under collective identities, e.g., in Spain: *Hecho por Mujeres Rurales (*Made by Rural Women).
- Promote **collaborative business models** and cooperative innovation, which includes the funding and mentoring of novel inclusive cooperatives, especially in

sectors where women are underrepresented, e.g., agritourism, food processing, artisan crafts.

- Provide legal and administrative assistance to facilitate cooperative formation in rural contexts.
- Leverage public procurement and territorial branding; create local quotas and simplified procedures to include women-led businesses in public procurement, such as, school meals, hospital food, regional fairs.
- Encourage inclusion of women-led products and services in tourism routes, quality labels, and regional development branding efforts—especially under shared identifiers such as *Hecho por Mujeres Rurales* (Made by Rural Women).
- Include women-led enterprises in Smart Villages strategies and Local Action Group (LAG) activities.
- Boost digital and commercial skills through targeted capacity building; fund training programmes in digital commerce, storytelling, marketing, and pricing strategies.
- Promote women's participation in national and international fairs and virtual marketplaces.

Tips for specific local food commercialisation measures include the following:

- Create dedicated CAP (including LEADER) funding windows for DTC and SSC models.
- Simplify food safety and logistics regulations for small-scale, direct-selling farmers.
- Support digital infrastructure investments (e.g., online ordering, logistics platforms) for rural farms.
- Promote consumer awareness campaigns highlighting the benefits of short supply chains and women-led initiatives.
- Establish mentoring and training programs for farmers shifting to direct sales models, with special outreach to female entrepreneurs.
- Pilot public procurement schemes prioritizing SSC suppliers for schools, hospitals, and municipal services.

Access to Digital Platforms for Market Linkages and Networking

- Networks, supply chains and cooperatives can all assist in creating market linkages for women entrepreneurs in farming, food production and rural businesses. These can become powerful tools for women to connect to markets, share knowledge, market information and business skills. These range from WhatsApp and Facebook groups to Agri-extension apps and online marketplaces. Finance and training could be key to opening up this digital market for women.

Evidence from the FLIARA project's Spanish case study confirms that rural women often operate alone, selling through informal or digital channels, with limited access to commercial infrastructure, branding, or business development tools. While national programmes like *Desafío Mujer Rural* and PAEM offer relevant resources, these are

often underutilised or not integrated into a coherent, gender-responsive commercial ecosystem.

The development of a support network specifically aimed at commercialising women-led rural products and services can support the economic network. This would connect existing resources, offer tailored support, and promote visibility, collaboration, and access to strategic markets—contributing directly to the EU Rural Vision 2040 objectives of stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas.

Box 6 Insight from Policy Brief NL03 Supporting Direct-to-Consumer and Short Supply Chain Farming

- Many of the female innovators interviewed by FLIARA show a strong combination of local networking and innovation.
- **Regional food hubs** in Germany and Belgium demonstrate that strategic logistical support can scale SSC models effectively.
- **French public procurement laws** now encourage sourcing from local, small-scale producers—a model adaptable to other contexts.

5.3 CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

Supporting the commercialisation of women-led products and services is not only about economic empowerment—it is about recognising the full value of women's contributions to rural sustainability, culture, and community resilience. A dedicated support network for rural women's access to markets can strengthen regional economies, reinforce social cohesion, and advance commitment to gender equality and rural development in line with the EU Rural Vision 2040. National and regional policymakers should create integrated support systems that connect existing programmes and fill gaps in visibility, training, and branding. Local authorities and development agencies must facilitate women's access to markets, infrastructure, and public procurement opportunities. Civil society and rural networks should lead co-creation efforts, ensure inclusive governance, and amplify women's voices in commercial strategy. EU and national funding instruments should prioritise collaborative, women-led models as key drivers of innovation and sustainable rural development.

The following actions can not only support a higher share of local food production and establish closer links between consumers and food production, but, for a large part, may also contribute to other women in rural areas producing new local products and services:

- Prioritize support for direct-to-consumer and short supply chain models.
- Recognize and nurture the leadership of rural women in innovating local food systems.
- Adjust legal, funding, and regulatory frameworks to match the needs of diverse, community-centred farming and production models.
- To call for organizations (local authorities, schools, offices) to buy food at local farms; adopting local producers as key suppliers.
- Short supply chains are not a nostalgic return to the past—they are a vital part of sustainable rural futures.

5.4 POLICY BRIEFS FOR FURTHER READING

ES03 Strengthening the Commercialisation of Women-Led Rural Products and Services through Support Networks

NL03 Supporting Direct-to-Consumer and Short Supply Chain Farming

6 AN ADVISORY NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE

Advisory services have been a cornerstone for farm innovation policies for decades. However, many female innovators feel that they are not taken seriously by advisory services. Female innovators, and the specific innovations they are developing, are not always recognised by advisory services and these services, consequently, do not contribute to their full potential to increase women's engagement in rural sustainable development and contribute to gender equality. This issue can be addressed by the following key infrastructures.

- **Empowering rural women through targeted advisory services.** Women in rural areas are key drivers of innovation and sustainability, yet their needs remain underserved in existing advisory systems. This situation calls for a dedicated regional advisory network, with specialised advisors trained to support women. It also recommends broadening the scope of services to include support for diverse business models, not only those within traditional supplementary on-farm activities, but also emerging, socially oriented, sustainable and community-based ventures where women are often at the forefront. Advisory programs should adopt flexible and inclusive formats, that reflect women's needs and realities. Promote confidence building and mentorship (rural women-to-women mentorship scheme). Advise is provided by professionals. By strengthening women's representation in professional networks, the advisory network can be improved as well.
- Providing **access to information about funding and capacity building programmes** and giving rural women proper **support to apply** for such programmes. Hence, it would be important to have a national platform where all the information about funding can be easily accessible; furthermore, advisory service could also guide women innovators starting from scratch in finding access to funding (like microcredit, small grants and accessible bank credit). In addition, public desks in rural areas offering women-centred services are a valuable tool to help women develop business plans for innovative and sustainable agricultural and rural projects.

6.1 THE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THESE INFRASTRUCTURES

There is a lack of a gender-responsive advisory services who understand and address the needs and potentials of women in rural areas.

Women are frequently underrepresented in decision-making structures and professional networks, e.g. chamber of agriculture and forestry, farmers union, cooperatives, other advisory boards, etc., limiting their influence and access to key information and support.

Women in rural areas often face challenges accessing information on funding and capacity building programmes, and often do not receive adequate support to apply for such programmes. In many cases, they feel that they are not the target group for the programmes.

6.2 PRACTICAL TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

Practical tips:

- Establish **regional advisory services network for women**. Ensure at least one specialised advisor in each region, trained and equipped to support women, well familiar with specific challenges and opportunities faced by women in agriculture and entrepreneurship in rural areas. Such advisory support can be provided primarily within the public agricultural advisory service (such as provided by the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia), while regional business incubators may also play a complementary role by offering specialised support for women-led rural enterprises and start-ups. This also requires that advisory support for women on farms and in rural entrepreneurship is recognised and included as a standalone thematic area within the broader framework of public agricultural and rural entrepreneurship advisory services, ensuring that gender-specific needs are addressed systematically and consistently across regions.
- Recognise and support **diverse business models**. Advisory services must formally recognise and support women in developing diverse forms of entrepreneurship such as social entrepreneurship, different sustainable models, and community-based forms of entrepreneurship. These are areas where women can truly excel, bring innovative, inclusive and locally rooted solutions to rural challenges. The advisory services must recognise these models as equally valuable and impactful as more traditional, profit-driven forms of entrepreneurship.
- Support **flexible and inclusive training formats**, promote confidence-building and mentorship. Offer advisory services and capacity-building programs that account for women's time constraints resulting from traditional gender roles – such as caregiving and household responsibilities –, by providing flexible options like evening sessions, online modules or on-site childcare. Keep in mind that traditional top-down approaches (lecture–listening) often fail to produce the same level of engagement or empowerment. Participatory, reflective, and relationship-based methods, such as storytelling, experience-sharing, and group learning, are more effective. Women often exhibit lower levels of confidence in technical or entrepreneurial skills, despite having the necessary capabilities. This highlights the importance of mentorship, empowerment, and trust-building in advisory practices. Support and formalize rural women-to-women mentorship schemes in agriculture and entrepreneurship.
- Strengthen **women's representation** in governance and networks. Introduce gender quotas or targeted inclusion measures to ensure women's representation in key rural and agricultural decision-making bodies such as chambers of agriculture and forestry, farmers' unions, cooperatives, LAGs, different advisory boards, enabling more balanced participation and access to information and support.
- Promote **the provision of women-centred services** at local open desks. The staff of these association should be well trained on the different funding and capacity building programmes available at the European, national, regional, and local levels for women-led innovation in rural areas. Involving local municipalities or the LAGs to

support these open desks, also in terms of logistics, can be useful. Advertise the set-up of such open desks through the local LAGs, at farmers markets and through existing local and regional women farmers' and rural entrepreneurs' networks.

- **Train advisors** and **regional and LAGs operators** on the importance of women-led contributions in rural development and sustainability.

Box 7 Insight from Policy Brief SI02 Empowering Rural Women Through Targeted Advisory Services

Farm advisory services in Slovenia are primarily provided by the public institution Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia which operates as broad and well-structured advisory network at three levels: 1) national, with headquarters in Ljubljana), 2) regional, comprising 8 regional advisory centres employing around 70 advisors specialised in various agricultural fields, and an additional 40 other advisors who work with young farmers, and other thematic groups and 3) local level with 59 local units and approx.170 advisors who generally do not have specialised roles. The Chamber is the most recognizable institution, accessible all over country and well trusted by (especially traditional) farmers. Advisory service is organised in five topics: 1) advisory support for successors and retiring farmers, 2) farm economic efficiency consulting, 3) legal assistance, 4) psychosocial support and 5) social security for farmers and family members.

Each regional advisory centre employs one to two specialised advisors for young farmers. Legal and social security support are centrally coordinated, with regional advisors offering basic guidance, while complex cases are handled by central experts. Psychosocial support is a newer advisory area and still developing. The largest advisory area is farm economic efficiency consulting, which includes business planning, CAP measures for farmers, and supplementary on-farm activities—a particularly relevant field for women. Many rural women realise their entrepreneurial ideas through these activities, as they are more accessible than starting an independent business, especially in terms of legal, tax, and administrative requirements.

FLIARA innovator Damjana Ostanek Herič successfully took her first entrepreneurial steps by registering a supplementary activity on farm, through which she developed a recognisable vegetable processing business.

6.3 CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

Women in rural areas are key drivers of innovation, sustainability, and community resilience, yet they are still not recognised as a distinct target group in need of dedicated advisory support, unlike young farmers who already benefit from tailored services. To unlock their full potential, a more inclusive, gender-responsive advisory framework is needed. Establishing dedicated advisory support for women in every region, adapting training formats for women's needs, and ensuring women's presence in decision-making bodies are essential for building more resilient rural futures. Regional business incubators may also play a complementary role by offering specialised support for women-led rural enterprises and start-ups.

Women must have accurate information and support to apply for funding and access capacity building programmes at European, national and regional levels.

Policymakers should fund localized advisory services/open desks supporting female-led innovation.

6.4 POLICY BRIEFS FOR FURTHER READING

IT02 Funding and Advisory Services for Women Innovators in Rural Areas
SE08 Reforming the Knowledge Support System to Foster Innovation in Rural Areas
SI02 Empowering Rural Women Through Targeted Advisory Services

7 INFRASTRUCTURE FOR LEARNING NETWORKS

Rural women can learn a lot from each other and can also be motivated by good examples of other women they can see and with whom they can exchange experiences. Peer-to-peer learning is an important way for innovators to learn. It is therefore essential that infrastructures are in place to accommodate these exchanges. Throughout the FLIARA project, the importance of networking places, easy access to training and visibility of female rural innovations have been stressed as of vital importance.

- **Improve networking support and social spaces for rural women both physical and digitally. Create platforms for sharing experiences.** Networks supporting women, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, and local communities are crucial for the success of women-led innovations. These initiatives aim to empower rural women, foster sustainable development, and improve political participation, ensuring inclusive, effective governance and strengthening local cohesion in rural areas. Innovative women benefit greatly from mutual support and experience-sharing. It is beneficial to create a common framework that enhances motivation, support, and the exchange of experiences and information—while still preserving valuable face-to-face interactions. Co-creation platforms offer support and facilitate exchange of information on alternatives, examples and good practices. Strong networks have the potential to positively impact the self-esteem and morale of rural women. This stems from the difficult landscape for small businesses as expenses rise and many areas experience a decline in residents. A national co-creation platform could consist of smaller local platforms working towards building successful collaborations and growing the bandwidth of small businesses. Proposed policy measures include creating collaborative social spaces, offering logistical and financial support to women's networks, expanding digital connectivity, and promoting peer-to-peer learning.
- **Training for women innovating in farming and rural areas.** Next to the creation of platforms for interaction, dedicated training is called for. The platforms mentioned above can be used as places where information on free and public training courses can be easily found.
- **Promote digital knowledge and skills.** Leveraging digitalisation to empower farm and rural women can be achieved on a number of levels and has the potential to advance farming and enhance rural regions. Digitalisation, including infrastructural development, access to digital tools, support platforms and training in digital literacy can enable rural and farm women to harness technology for personal, professional and economic empowerment. Digitalisation can effectively bridge gender gaps by allowing access to key resources, including agricultural advisory services, digital technologies in farming, business training, and markets and finance. In doing so, it can significantly enhance rural women's livelihoods and in turn rural communities.
- **Promoting positive images of rural farming women and rural women entrepreneurs across all education curricula.** Persistent stereotypes about farming and rural entrepreneurship undermine the aspirations of young women.

Mainstream education at all levels often ignores or caricatures rural life and agriculture, particularly female roles in these sectors. Reforming curricula and promoting positive, diverse images of rural women entrepreneurs is crucial for building an inclusive, future-proof rural economy.

7.1 THE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THESE INFRASTRUCTURES

Small businesses have limited resources. Women-led enterprises may have difficulties in accessing specific networks e.g. in policy and economic-technological domains. Virtual networks or physical hubs for networking are rare in many rural areas despite that they are needed. There is need for improvement and adequacy of actions supporting higher rural connectivity and social inclusion, as well as rural businesses and innovation. Gender equality challenges related to building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions, particularly in improving women's participation in rural politics need to be addressed.

Challenges include the following:

- Limited participation of rural women in organisational decision-making, which, besides systemic barriers, is influenced by women's empowerment and their motivations to engage in the decision-making process.
- Insufficient support for women's networks and civil society organizations hindering the creation of collaborative social spaces and the expansion of rural development initiatives.
- Lack of financial and logistical mechanisms to support women's networks, knowledge exchange, and community engagement in rural areas.
- Limited access to digital connectivity and necessary technological infrastructure, hindering the formation of online networks and access to funding opportunities.
- Barriers to peer-to-peer learning and mentoring for women, especially in rural areas, due to a lack of structured support programs and platforms.
- Economic sustainability challenges for women-led rural businesses, stemming from limited access to resources, knowledge, and best practices.

In many cases, women lack sufficient self-confidence, information, and role models to start a business in rural areas. At times, they even underestimate their own abilities, which is sometimes referred to as an imposter syndrome.

European as well as national public agricultural **training programmes** mostly target large conventional agriculture rather than alternative forms of sustainable agriculture. Furthermore, the set-up of the courses teaching basic entrepreneurial skills may be such that women do not considers these as fit for them.

Women tend to lead small-scale farms, multifunctional farms, or environmentally sustainable farms (organic, agroecological, etc.). They therefore need to acquire specific knowledge and skills related to these models of agriculture.

Training courses about sustainable farming techniques (e.g., organic, regenerative, permaculture, etc.) are often unavailable through public institutions/public educational

system. Training on specific competences such as those needed to run a farm kindergarten, or a social farm, are also limited.

Digital and entrepreneurships skills are required to manage a rural entrepreneurship as well as a farm. Currently, these skills are acquired mainly through paid courses run by associations, NGOs, or private individuals. Women interviewed indicated that it was difficult to access information on available training courses in their regions.

Addressing skills gaps appears as one important part of the key to unlocking increased levels of women starting rural and farm innovations.

- To empower women as innovators and leaders in rural and farm-based innovative enterprises, training programmes must reflect their realities. They must be flexible, inclusive, practically applicable and future focused.
- Possessing essential skills and expertise can support taking first steps where women decide and prepare to develop an innovation.
- Many educational materials present rural life as outdated or secondary, reinforcing urban-rural divides and gender biases.
- Teenage girls from rural areas rarely encounter inspiring role models who combine farming, entrepreneurship, sustainability, and leadership.
- In many family farms, traditional gender models are internalised and it is difficult to change these.
- This gap leads to brain drain from rural areas and the underrepresentation of women in rural innovation.

Traditional gender roles in farming and rural business may influence women's participation in acquiring technological knowledge and, consequently, in **technology adoption**. Innovations carried out by women on farms and in rural businesses can require technology to enhance efficiency (e.g. machinery, software packages), but investment to support these technical needs is lacking and can be a considerable challenge for many women. A **lack of training** in key areas of technology and AI use is a challenge.

The CAP Strategic Plans across the EU aim to establish Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) Coordination Groups to enhance the flow of knowledge related to new technologies and innovations. However, women's participation in these groups remains significantly limited, which marginalises them from accessing this crucial source of knowledge and innovation.

7.2 PRACTICAL TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

Practical tips for network support:

Launch platforms for exchanges (Box 8) and policy programmes for improving network support (Box 9). Platforms increase the availability of mentoring and peer to peer learning opportunities. They contribute to build confidence and leadership skills. A peer-based mentoring approach appears a promising way forward.

Box 8 Platforms of exchanges (based on various Policy briefs)

Practical tips: Platforms for exchanges

- Identify and document best practices for providing platforms that enable to build networks and which may also create community spaces in rural areas.
- Explore existing infrastructure, opportunities and involved actors by engaging with the Local Action Groups and local initiative groups.
- Create adaptable pilot model to test and improve.
- Invest in new community or multifunctional centres or repurpose existing buildings, spaces and physical infrastructure to provide safe, accessible spaces for women to meet, collaborate, and organize.
- Ensure these spaces are open to other community groups, fostering inclusivity and strengthening local ties.
- Ensure all support is easy to access and transparent to foster trust and participation. Mentorships and peer to peer programme should also be offered.
- Use real case studies to show what the supports and good practices look like in practice.
- Expand successful initiatives and platforms to all regions of the country, ensuring that rural women across different areas can benefit from shared resources and knowledge.
- Provide the necessary infrastructure and funding to scale these efforts and ensure their sustainability over time.

Box 9 Insight from Policy Brief RO04 Improving networking support and social spaces for rural women

- *The Women's Vicinity of Saschiz* (Romania): Inspired by the Saxon tradition of community organizing, is an informal network founded in 2015 to develop social and cultural projects, fostering strong bonds among women based on shared community belonging.
- *See Her Elected Program* (Ireland): Offers training, mentorship, and networking to support rural women's participation in local democracy.
- *ACORNS Program* (Ireland): Provides peer-to-peer learning and mentorship to bridge the skills gap among rural women entrepreneurs.
- *German Rural Social Projects*: Create new meeting spaces to improve social life in rural communities.
- *Women's Rural Entrepreneurial Network* (Ireland): Supports independent women entrepreneurs in Cork and Limerick through local action groups (LAGs).
- *Slovenian Agricultural Women's Association*: Empowers rural women in agriculture through collaborative initiatives.

Best practice: The Czech Women's Union's initiative to create a platform and invite other interested professional and regional institutions to cooperate. This is a body of interested institutions and organizations, which determines the organizational structure, rules (including financial) and implementation team. The programme includes the following:

- Establish community engagement programmes.
- Connect schools with local action groups.
- Create connections between urban and rural areas.
- Create cooperation hubs.
- Strong involvement from municipalities.
- Use women's strengths to facilitate platforms for cooperation.
- Appreciation of soft and social values.
- Extensive educational background.
- Organisation skills.

Source: Policy Brief CZ02 Create a platform for sharing experiences and examples of good practices

Promote female role models in education:

- Review and revise education curricula at all levels to include contemporary rural themes and role models, with a gender-sensitive lens.
- Integrate case studies of successful rural women innovators into civic education, entrepreneurship, and sustainability classes.
- Support teacher training programs that challenge stereotypes about farming, entrepreneurship, and gender.
- Develop national campaigns featuring rural women leaders across media and education platforms
- Encourage rural schools and universities to organize field trips, guest lectures, and mentorship programs led by rural women innovators

Source: Policy Brief NL02 Promoting Positive Images of Rural Farming Women and Rural Women Entrepreneurs Across All Education Curricula

Practical tips to improve **access to training**:

- Strengthen local training infrastructure and support partnerships between women's organisations, farming bodies, and education providers to create accessible, community-based training hubs in rural areas.
- Develop micro-credential and recognition of prior learning systems that validate on-farm, intergenerational, or self-taught knowledge often held by rural women, allowing them to access further education or funding opportunities.
- Create and expand training initiatives that focus on key gaps and novel areas, such as, digital literacy, e-commerce, finance skills, precision agriculture technologies, data management, entrepreneurship and social media marketing, all tailored to the needs of rural and farm women. Prioritize hands-on, locally delivered trainings that fits rural contexts and women's time constraints.
- Increase the availability of more flexible funding so that women can access support towards the cost of training specific to their needs and business innovation: Innovation skills vouchers for women could help to support the costs of training. This could be flexible to allow covering costs of short courses to longer

more in-depth training. This should also include covering the costs of remote and online learning to ensure a wide range of options are opened up in a rural (more remote) context.

- To gather information on specific interests and needs (both in terms of content and logistics), it can be helpful to conduct a regional survey among women farm managers and rural entrepreneurs, involving local women farmers' and rural women's associations.
- Advertise the courses through regional and local farmers organizations, LAGs and other rural networks, making sure to reach women.
- Organise a course branded “for rural women” to ascertain that the target group knows they are welcome. Even if the course materials are not different from the course not branded for rural women, this can help to attract women who otherwise would not come and provide a place for networking between women

Box 10 Insight from Policy Brief SI01 Start-up Finance, Training and Mentoring Vouchers for Rural Women

In Slovenia, between 2015 and 2018, a national programme to promote women's entrepreneurship was introduced. The programme, led by public agency in the collaboration with Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, primally aimed to unemployed women with higher education and a viable business idea. The initiative included a two-month entrepreneurship training and a grant of EUR 3.000-5.000. Participants were required to complete training and received individual mentoring to develop their business model. Although not exclusively focused on rural areas, the programme aimed to reach women from diverse backgrounds. As a result, **over 1.000 women successfully started their own business.**

Building on this foundation, efforts to promote women's entrepreneurship have continued through public calls for awarding the best business models by beginner women entrepreneurs. Nowadays, a particular emphasis is placed on the mentoring scheme, which has been recognized as one of the most valued forms of support among aspiring women entrepreneurs.

This aspect was especially appreciated by the **Slovenian FLIARA Ambassador, Saša Kržič**, who herself participated in one such programme and highlighted mentoring as a crucial element in her entrepreneurial journey.

A specific area of interest is **digitalisation**. There are gender stereotypes around digitalisation that can be addressed as follows:

- Fund or support campaigns of visibility around women’s use of digitalisation in rural business or leading on-farm innovations. Use media, case studies, awards and speaking opportunities to highlight women engaged in digitalisation and their success in doing so.
- Mobilise local champions and influencers who can advocate for women utilising digital options in their business and on their farm. Such role models can create an awareness around the issue, changing attitudes and empowering young girls and other potential innovators.

In remote areas next to training also **access to digital Infrastructure and devices** is of importance:

- Starting with access to highspeed broadband and good mobile phone connections could make considerable difference for rural women innovators.
- Dedicated subsidies, grants or partnerships with tech companies could help women starting or scaling up a small to medium on farm or off-farm rural business make smartphones, computers and other digital devices more affordable and accessible. This also goes for on-farm machinery, new equipment, equipment or software which is too expensive but could potentially launch a business or farm diversification.
- Use programmes such as LEADER and the CAP Strategic Plan to provide funding calls specifically for women to access digital devices or improved infrastructure.

Artificial Intelligence has the potential to create impact for rural women in farming and business. The power of AI could have potential ranging from on-farm issues to smart tools and weather predictions. It could assist in business administration, accessing foreign languages and international markets. Training and access for rural and farm women is essential and can come in the form of training grants or microloans for women using AI to community-based training programmes, or specific programmes. Tax breaks or funding to companies that build in AI tools and training or partner with rural women's cooperatives.

7.3 CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

Women in rural areas face significant barriers to active political participation and lack sufficient support networks, hindering their capacity for innovation and social impact. To address these challenges, it is crucial to invest in creating collaborative social spaces, providing logistical and financial support to women's networks, and expanding access to digital tools and peer-to-peer learning platforms. Strengthening these initiatives will empower women to actively engage in decision-making processes and foster sustainable rural development.

Training rural women strengthens agricultural sustainability and fosters inclusive development of rural areas.

- The training must be designed to meet women's demands and needs.
- Women farmers' and rural women's associations should be involved in designing appropriate training courses.
- Policymakers should fund localized training programmes tailored to women's needs.
- A regional coordination among stakeholders and public institutions offering different types of training courses would be useful and important.
- Stakeholders should facilitate mentorship, trainings, and visibility opportunities.
- By investing in these strategies, women's innovations in farming and in rural areas can be enhanced by favouring sustainable change in rural communities.

Improving access to adult and further education opportunities related to entrepreneurship and innovation for women in rural and farming contexts appears part of the key to unlocking increased opportunities. This includes women interested in

starting up an innovation as well as enabling women already on their innovation journey to further develop a sustainable business. There is also a need to understand this issue better and the gender balance of current uptake of adult and further education opportunities related to entrepreneurship and innovation.

Without visible role models, the next generation of rural women entrepreneurs will hesitate to lead.

- Reform educational materials to reflect modern rural life and women's leadership.
- Promote positive rural identities alongside urban ones.
- Inspire young women to see farming and rural innovation as desirable, viable futures.
- Address all people involved in family farming with this message

Digitalisation holds transformative potential for rural women in business and in farming, empowering them with access to wider markets, financial services, and vital information that was once beyond their reach. Therefore, investing in digital literacy and infrastructure for rural women is not just a technological advancement, it's a crucial step toward gender equality and economic and social resilience.

7.4 POLICY BRIEFS FOR FURTHER READING

CZ01 Include more gender education in School Curricula
CZ02 Create a platform for sharing experiences and examples of good practices
DE01 Connecting Women: A Driver for Agricultural Innovation
DE03 Learning how to Engage with Stakeholders
EU01 Spotlighting Rural Women in Sustainable Innovation
FI04 Co-creation platforms for rural women
FI05 Visibility platforms supporting rural entrepreneurship and renewing rural image
IE02 Improve skills training opportunities targeting women-led rural and farm innovation
IE03 Women's Empowerment as a Driver of Rural and Agricultural Innovation
IE04 Innovating from the Ground Up: Digital Policy Pathways to Support Women in Agriculture and Rural Areas
IE05 Building a Gender Inclusive AKIS in Ireland
IT01 Training for Women Innovating in Farming and Rural Areas
IT05 Reframing and Expanding AKIS in Italy to Reach Women Innovators
IT06 Spotlighting Women in Sustainable Rural Innovation
NL02 Promoting Positive Images of Rural Farming Women and Rural Women Entrepreneurs Across All Education Curricula
RO04 Improving networking support and social spaces for rural women
SE09 Education on Sustainable Food Production in Swedish Schools
SE10 Diversifying AKIS in Sweden

8 AN INTEGRATED POLICY NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE

Policies in rural areas are multi-level. Local policies, regional policies, national policies and the EU Common agricultural policy interplay. Local policy makers can play a role to support innovators to provide access to other relevant policy makers: this helps to have a supportive policy network. For all government levels this adds to the agenda to allow for a strong multilevel policy network.

- **Apply gender mainstreaming in all policies**. Gender mainstreaming involves that gender will be on the agenda of all stages in all policies to be made. Applying gender mainstreaming is a principle included in the Comon Agricultural Policy of the EU. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states: “In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women” (Article 8), which means that it is an active obligation to promote equality between women and men. Gender mainstreaming is an important tool in the integration of that principle into to the CAP and other rural policies. Currently, the uptake of gender mainstreaming in the domain of farming and rural areas stays behind; using this method is instrumental to achieve more equality between women and men. Introducing this method to all policy initiatives is an important step forward. Ignoring inequalities in policy making is at odds with EU principles.
- **Supporting women’s return to rural areas and promoting female entrepreneurship.** In many rural areas there is an outflux of young women to work and study elsewhere. Having focused policies to accommodate a rural return for women can boost rural regeneration**.** Women returning to rural areas—often with international work and/or study experience—drive sustainable innovation in local communities. Targeted support through grants, reintegration programs, and peer networks can enhance rural entrepreneurship and development while fostering knowledge exchange between returnees and local women—a key condition for sustainable innovation.
- **Local support to women innovators.** Local authorities can support women-led innovation projects in different ways, thus contributing to improving the quality of life in rural communities. Public spaces and public land could be rented/made available to facilitate the creation of innovative projects led by women. In addition, local services may be used to support initiatives. Policy makers can also contribute by making their own political networks available for women innovators to address issues at the rights places: with visible support of local policy makers doors may open that otherwise stay closed. The experience is that this has not always been the case with the innovations studied in FLIARA and in some cases, a supporting political environment has been very helpful in getting an innovation forward.
- **Women’s empowerment and breaking barriers to women-led rural and farm innovation.** Greater policy focus on issues of women’s empowerment and breaking down barriers impacting equality between men and women is a key part of the policy mix to better support women-led rural and farm innovation. Women

that successfully navigate a path towards rural and farm innovation still must break down barriers. Empowering these women to overcome barriers that hold them back, such as 'imposter syndrome', lack of supportive networks, local attitudes and expectations is a key part of the policy challenge to better supporting women-led rural and farm innovation. For women in more vulnerable and marginalised circumstances, limitations on their empowerment are even greater calling for integrated supports that address the range of unique barriers to innovation faced by them.

8.1 THE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THESE INFRASTRUCTURES

Innovation involves doing new activities beyond usual expectations, which, consequently, are often not foreseen by policies and regulations. The interviews with female rural innovators reveal that bureaucratic hurdles, such as delays and time-consuming regulations need to be navigated. Political support and political interest are sometimes lagging, which hinders the development of the innovation.

Gender can play a role in appreciating innovations. Only a minority of farms, farmland and farming output is managed by females. Farmers organisations that talk with authorities reflect this situation as being an 'old-boys network'. Many schemes are formally gender blind, but implicitly they post a picture of a farmer as a man on a tractor and this is what is supported (there is an implicit gender bias) by the allocation of funding based on hectares and investments in machinery. For more alternative styles of farming (whether they are executed by males or females) there is often less or no support. Information on support programmes does not always reach the proposed recipients of a programme in the sense that they consider these programmes as relevant to apply for.

Box 11 Gender in EU Regulation on CAP Strategic Plans

Gender in specific objective 8 of CAP: 'to promote (…) gender equality, including the participation of women in farming' [EU Regulation on CAP Strategic Plans, Art. 6-1h]

"Equality between women and men is a core principle of the Union and gender mainstreaming is an important tool in the integration of that principle into to the CAP. There should therefore be a particular focus on promoting the participation of women in the socio-economic development of rural areas, with special attention to farming, supporting women's key role. Member States should be required to assess the situation of women in farming and address challenges in their CAP Strategic Plans. Gender equality should be an integral part of the preparation, implementation and evaluation of CAP interventions. Member States should also strengthen their capacity in gender mainstreaming and in the collection of data disaggregated by gender." (EU Regulation on CAP Strategic Plans, preamble 33)

Gender mainstreaming, although a principle in many policy documents, is often not applied adequately. There is an implementation gap between objectives and policy instrumentation and policy monitoring. For example, in the Common Agricultural Policy

gender is part of specific objective 8 but not of the result indicators and is so no part of every step in the policy cycle (Box 11)

Many successful innovative women in rural areas had previously lived, studied, or worked abroad (or in urban areas) before returning to rural communities. This trend includes both women returning to their home villages and urban-born women choosing to resettle for a rural life. Their diverse experiences position them as crucial agents of sustainable rural transformation. Supporting these returnees with targeted measures can enhance rural development and foster innovation by promoting the exchange of knowledge and skills with local communities—an essential condition for context-sensitive, sustainable solutions. Such a policy can address **all infrastructures** defined in this policy booklet. Specific for this group is the challenge of weak reintegration mechanisms: absence of structured peer-to-peer knowledge exchange between returnees and local women and lack of formal reintegration programs connecting returnees to local communities. So, there is a lack of tailored policies to support women returning to rural areas and insufficient support for women aiming to implement ecologically, socially, and culturally sustainable projects

For women who do not migrate to other (urban) areas, there is (in many rural areas) limited access to education and skill development: few scholarship or training opportunities aligned with sustainable rural development and women's professional interests. Political support is needed to promote infrastructures as laid out in this booklet. This includes policies to listen to the needs of local women themselves and take steps to navigate the system in a way that supports their needs.

Women-led innovation is a source of economic empowerment for women in rural areas and farming. However, wider social and cultural issues impact women’s empowerment:

- Gender based discrimination, traditional social norms and gender stereotypes can impact women becoming involved in innovation and developing their innovation.
- Women in rural areas and farming are key drivers of innovation, sustainability and community resilience. Yet they remain underrepresented in and need greater visibility within farm and rural innovation ecosystems.
- Addressing this imbalance is not only a matter of gender equality but of rural economic and social development.

8.2 PRACTICAL TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

Practical tips on gender mainstreaming

The website of the European Institute for Gender Equality offers extensive resources and practical guidance on how to implement gender mainstreaming effectively. Tips include the following:

- Gender mainstreaming is a cyclical process. In every step of the policy cycle gender should be taken into account. It is not sufficient to take gender into account in the definition of policies, but also in planning, implementation and policy evaluation gender aspects must be on the agenda.

- Stereotyping: Go beyond traditional gender roles in presenting and illustrating polices.
- Representation: Ascertain that interest and matters are discussed with representatives of all genders.
- Beneficiaries of policies. Consider explicitly who will be addressed by the policies and include a gender inclusive approach regarding the proposed beneficiaries.
- In many farms, formal farm managers are male and have a formal say about important decisions. Look for ways to enhance a better gender representation in the farming sector to formal decision-making powers.
- Family farming is an important backbone of European farming. Many farming families still have traditional gender roles and a step towards modern European family relationships is needed from a gender mainstreaming perspective.
- Farming and rural communities often maintain more traditional gender roles than urban settings, a reality frequently overlooked in gender equality and emancipation policies. It is therefore essential to start with the fundamental steps of gender mainstreaming, as these may not yet have been implemented.

Practical tips to support women's return to rural areas and promote female entrepreneurship

To support women's return to rural areas and promote female entrepreneurship, policies must address three key areas. First, national-level interventions are essential to facilitate return migration through targeted scholarships, reintegration programs, and accessible, low-bureaucracy grants that encourage women to start innovative rural initiatives. Second, local and regional efforts should focus on strengthening female entrepreneurship by expanding support networks, enabling access to resources, and fostering collaboration through women-led associations and trans local networks. Finally, improving the attractiveness of rural life for women - particularly those returning or migrating from urban areas - requires investment in public infrastructure, such as transport and education services, and the inclusion of women in local governance. Ensuring women are part of decision-making processes at the community level is vital to shaping inclusive, responsive rural development.

Reinsertion and integration programs support the reintegration of women in rural communities and the effective use of their skills. Including peer-to-peer knowledge exchange programs that link returnees with women in the community/region for mentoring and facilitate exchange of best practices.

Start-up grants and funding for rural innovation provide financial support to women returnees to launch start-ups or innovative rural projects, with a focus on small and medium grants that are non-reimbursable, easy to access and have low administrative/reporting requirements.

Attract women with relevant skills and experience to work with local government and institutions both formally and informally. The active participation of rural women in local institutional bodies (e.g. municipal council) emerged as essential to support and enhance the impact of women-led innovations in a specific rural area. The participation

of women in informal networks, as well as in farmer and entrepreneur associations, organisations and cooperatives also turned out to be extremely important to amplify women's voices in policy discussions, highlighting their specific needs.

Rural infrastructure improvement, with a focus on expanding and adapting local and school public transportation to meet the needs of local communities. Lack of access to adequate transportation and quality educational services is a major barrier to women's relocation and active involvement in rural life.

Box 12 Insight from Policy Brief IT03 Local Support to Women Innovators

The FLIARA Project found more than one project making use (usually for a fee) of public spaces or public land and demonstrating the relevance of this type of policy in encouraging female innovation and ensuring new services at local level. Municipalities should facilitate access to these assets under favourable conditions for women proposing entrepreneurial or social projects. These public areas or spaces are little used or not used at all by public administrations, who have to bear the cost of maintaining them. Making them available for activities promoted by women is therefore doubly beneficial, both in terms of reducing public costs and in terms of supporting the local economy and/or creating new services for citizens.

In Italy, for example, the project of Salento Km0 expanded in 2015 when a Laboratory was opened in a public space provided by a local Municipality, and where events, workshops and dinners dedicated to the enhancement of local products are organized, as well as a weekly farmers' market. A young woman developed her innovative idea of extracting birch sap by obtaining a concession for a birch forest owned by the municipality. She guarantees the cleaning and maintenance of the forest at the same time.
Another woman manages an alpine hut owned by the local municipality. It is open all year round, thus guaranteeing a meeting point for the local community; providing a restaurant and a bar, as well as a place where children and adults of all ages can meet, play games, share stories, and read books.

An interesting experience is that of the Cooperativa Agricola Germinale, which also runs a small restaurant in a public space. A "Bottega dei servizi" (funded by the Piedmont Region and FinPiemonte Spa) has been opened in the same space. It is a multifunctional shop where it is possible to buy basic necessities and access various services (e.g. home deliveries, co-working space, sports equipment rental, etc.).

The RYSSBY Library project in Sweden is a prime example of a Civil Society-Public Partnership that successfully ensured the maintenance of services at the local level. The municipality made an agreement with 14 local associations and handed over the management. The library has become a "local living room" used by the village associations to host cultural events.

8.3 CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

Start applying the method of gender mainstreaming by testing for every policy initiative whether the gender dimension has been addressed appropriately. Use the method of gender mainstreaming to do so. By applying this method to the domain of agriculture and rural areas, further knowledge in gender inclusive policies will develop.

For example, the return of women with international experience to rural Romania is a powerful driver of sustainable innovation. These women bring valuable skills, global perspectives, and a strong commitment to local development. Yet, without the right conditions, their potential remains underutilized.

To harness this transformative force, the **following actions are needed**:

- Implement national reintegration programs tailored to women returning to rural areas or who are rural newcomers, including mentorship, peer exchanges, and skill recognition.
- Expand access to non-repayable start-up grants for sustainable rural initiatives led by women, with minimal bureaucracy.
- Invest in local infrastructure and governance inclusion, ensuring returnee women help shape community development.
- Build and support women-led networks that connect returnees with local women to exchange knowledge and co-create resilient solutions.

Local authorities should support women-led innovative projects.

- Local authorities should made available public spaces and/or public land for innovative project developed by women.
- Local authorities should promote public/civil society partnerships to enhance local services, also involving women farmers' and rural women's associations.
- Policymakers should fund multiservice shop to guarantee more local services also in rural remote areas.
- By investing in these strategies, the contribution of women's innovations in agriculture and rural areas can improve the quality of life of rural communities.

The range of policy actions outlined here aim to target barriers impacting women's economic empowerment that can be achieved through **rural and farm innovation**.

- Fund and develop integrated women-specific rural and farm entrepreneurship programmes that address business and innovation issues as well as wider barriers facing women. More widely embedding a rural and gender equality lens into innovation and entrepreneurship strategies is also important to a wider and more fundamental policy shift.
- Making gender-responsive funding available to support community-led initiatives is important so that women-led and centred initiatives can be developed in response to local, place-based needs and opportunities.
- Actions are needed that improve the visibility of rural and farm women-led innovation, as well as directly tackle the perpetuating of traditional gender roles and stereotypes in rural communities and wider society.
- Ensure strong and targeted supports are available to women in more vulnerable and marginalised situations to assist breaking down barriers that impact their economic empowerment through rural and farm innovation.

8.4 POLICY BRIEFS FOR FURTHER READING

EU02 Apply Gender Mainstreaming in Farming and Rural Areas
EU03 How women-led innovations can contribute to EU Rural Vision 2040
FI01 How women-led innovations can contribute to EU Rural Vision 2040?
IE06 Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan and Gender Equality
IE07 The Gender Gap in Generational Renewal
IE08 Strengthening the Voice of Rural and Farm Women in Decision-Making Spaces

IE09 Balancing Women-led Innovation, Rural and Farm Family-life: The Need for Improved Policy Support
IT03 Local Support to Women Innovators
NL01 Promoting a Diversity of Inclusive and Sustainable Agricultural Practices
NL04 Incorporating Gender Policy KPI in CAP, CSP & LEADER
NL05 Addressing Underrepresentation of Rural Women and Rural Entrepreneurship in the Emancipation National Policy
RO01 Unlocking the potential of rural women through inclusive CAP measures
RO02 Building gender-sensitive capacity for rural development governance
RO03 Supporting Women's Return to Rural Areas and Promoting Female Entrepreneurship
RO05 Promoting gender equality in Romania's rural communities by supporting innovative women driving sustainable development

9 SOME TAKEAWAYS FOR ACTION

Policy needs and issues[4].

1. **Address social and cultural conditions** impacting women-led rural and farm innovation through:

- Innovative policy measures need to work to address gender stereotypes, traditional gender norms and patriarchal attitudes.
- Measures need to tackle improving the visibility and recognition of existing women-led innovation.
- Policies need to effectively address the challenge of balancing all of life's demands, such as parental leave, enabling innovators to take holiday leave and benefit from remote business and work opportunities.

2. **Address barriers in the policy support system itself** that hinder women leading rural and farm innovation benefiting as best possible from existing supports through:

- Greater attention is given to the policy life cycle, looking at issues in policy design that impact effective delivery and uptake of support measures.
- Policy governance also receives greater attention, and spaces are strengthened that enable women's improved participation in the decisions that impact women-led rural and farm innovation.

3. **Strengthen the conditions for women-led rural and farm innovation** and entrepreneurship through improved supports:

- Women-led rural and farm innovation needs to be supported to flourish through a diverse range of supports that address women's needs such as improved access to finance, networks, knowledge and skills development opportunities
- Within the support system, specific needs also need to be addressed, such as targeted supports to different stages of the innovation journey and the needs of particular groups of women.

4. **Strengthen rural and farm economy renewal and sustainability** with women-led innovation as a lever:

- Women-led rural and farm innovation appears to embed an untapped opportunity for wider benefits to enhance the rural and farm economy. This calls for certain areas to receive improved supports, such as social, cultural, environmental and digital rural and farm innovation.
- Alongside this, there is a need for more policies that are integrated, place-based and locally led.

[4] Derived from Aisling Murtagh, Anastasia Oprea, Maura Farrell, Louise Weir (2024) D 4.3 Benchmarking Initial Report, FLIARA, draft to be published at https://zenodo.org/communities/fliara/ and https://doi.org/10.3030/101084234

10 ABOUT FLIARA

FLIARA is a Horizon Europe Research and Innovation actions with 15 partners from 10 EU member states[5]. It is built around several work packages in which specific tasks have been performed.

The project started with developing key concepts, reviewing existing literature, developing an assessment framework and the assessment of current policy and legal frameworks to support policy benchmarking. This formed a solid base for the rest of the project.

The project partners with local stakeholders in 9 rural regions have executed foresight and trend analysis to envision the role of women in innovations demanded for sustainable farm and rural futures. Based on an inventory of sustainability problems, project partners with local stakeholders developed visions to go beyond these problems. In a next step the FLIARA team with the stakeholders identified innovations that are needed to reach these visions and consequently the contribution of women to these innovations. Based on surveys and workshops possibilities and obstacles to these innovations have become clear. The outcome showed that many solutions are needed to promote these innovations and that most of these measures are more social measures (See: Annex 1 Visions for future) and that only a minority can be seen as hard measures as more funding or different regulations.

The project partners also learned from successful women innovators. Based on the assessment framework the FLIARA team selected 200 women innovators who contributed to a range of sustainability issues. The team interviewed these women and has written 20 case study reports based on the interviews. Based on the reports many insights and lessons have been drawn which are also the basis for this booklet. All innovators were portrayed in a fact sheet showcasing their innovations to a wider audience.

Out of the 200 innovators, the FLIARA team selected 20 FLIARA ambassadors (2 per country involved), who have been participating in a Community of Practice network and for which four workshops have been organised in different macro regions within Europe. During these meetings ambassadors have presented their innovation journeys and a series of workshops have been organised to address different issues of promoting female led innovation in rural areas and agriculture. The participants in these workshops included also many regional stakeholders, innovators and policymakers.

This booklet is part of a policy design and assessment work package that next to policy briefs and policy booklet, included participatory scenario development, benchmarking

[5] Funded by the European Union through the Horizon Europe programme, Grant Agreement nº. 101084234. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

and a final policy workshop discussing key policy insights developed throughout the project.

A lot of emphasis in the project has been on communicating the results of the project to a wider audience through the website (www.fiara.eu) and social media as well as by webinars and onsite meetings. All delivered reports will be uploaded to Zenodo[6] and will also become available at CORDIS[7], the oldest permanent website of the European Commission.

[6] At https://zenodo.org/communities/fliara/
[7] At https://doi.org/10.3030/101084234

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 VISIONS FOR FUTURE

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Summary

Rural areas across Europe suffer from many kinds of sustainability problems in demographic, economic, environmental and socio-cultural domains. FLIARA foresight activities were harnessed to address these problems through increased contributions by women to rural sustainability innovations. We found out that even if the portfolio of problems varied across different types of rural areas (rural areas close to city, rural villages, remote rural areas), the innovations that were needed to address the problems did not deviate a lot between the different types of areas. The same applied to measures to increase women's contributions to these innovations. We found out that women have extensive possibilities in contributing to environmental and social innovations, but extensive obstacles in contributing to economic–technological and, especially, political innovations. Top-5 measures included co-creation and cooperation platforms, provision of information, provision of education, adoption of equality and promotion of vision-based policies and actions. For this matter, no 'silver bullet' seemed to exist but a specific measures for specific needs or a mix of measures to be applied. While many recent EU visions and strategies on agriculture, food and rural areas provide strong support for the evidence-based proposals of FLIARA foresight activities, our results may assist in focusing the actions to most promising topics that observe the gender as well as the specific sustainability issues and rural contexts.

Key words: foresight, gender, innovation, rural, sustainability, vision

1. INTRODUCTION

All the choices made in the present materialise in the future. Therefore, it is important to try to assess to which kinds of future states current developments might lead us and image specific futures states to be reached for from the present. Design and assessment of alternative futures to serve choices in the present is the reason for the existence of futures science and foresight.

Apart from this, many rural areas across Europe suffer from many kinds of sustainability problems: environmental degradation, selective loss of population, urban sprawl, regional inequalities and many more. Many of these problems have turned out to be very persistent and difficult if not impossible to resolve. FLIARA foresight activities (FLIARA 2025) took the diversity of these sustainability problems as a starting point, since rural policies ultimately try to address rural problems. After the inventory of sustainability problems, visions were crafted to remove these problems. As soon as the visions were at the table, innovations could be designed to realise the visions. Logically, these innovations should contribute to resolving rural sustainability problems. Finally, we asked

what could done to increase women's contributions to these innovations as they could provide some novel edges and approaches that have not been noticed before (Figure 4). This process was implemented in a similar way in nine EU countries covering northern, western, eastern and southern parts of Europe as well as rural areas close to city, rural villages and remote rural areas. This approach made it possible to observe the diversity of contexts and add relevance of the findings. Altogether, 577 stakeholders with different backgrounds contributed to the findings through interviews, workshops and small surveys.

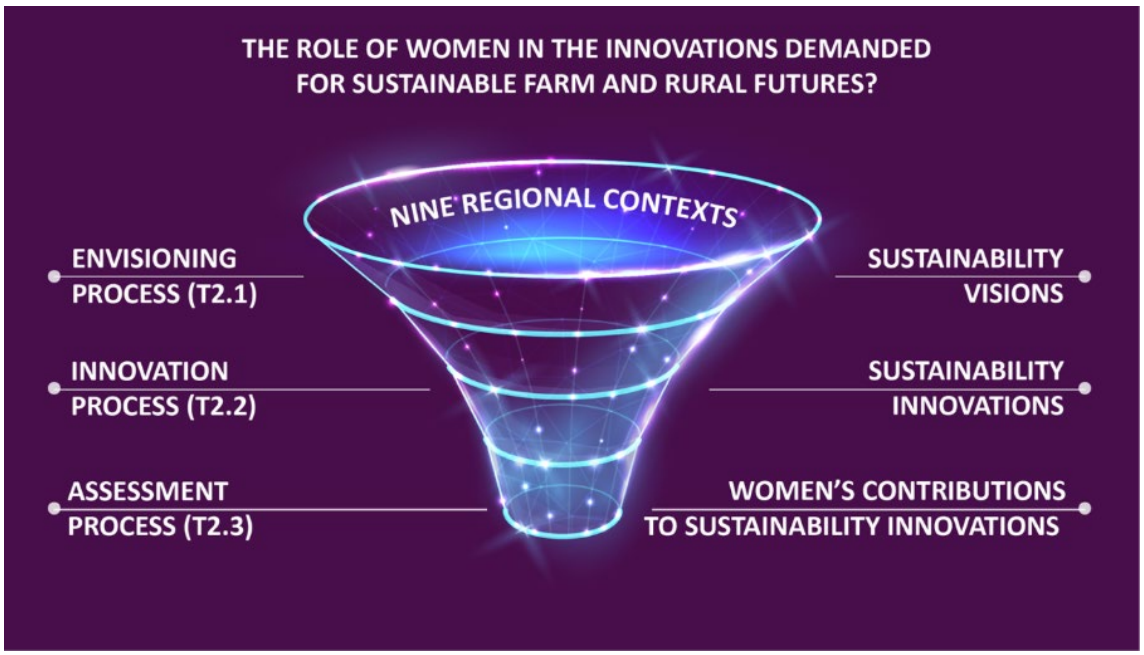


Figure 4 FLIARA foresight process: tasks and outputs

2. CHALLENGES AND IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

Starting with the challenges, the top-5 sustainability problems prevailing in the rural regions were related to the lack of infrastructure and services, lack of sustainability wisdom, lack of economic diversification, lack of social capital and selective population decline (Figure 5). None of the problems was dominant as the percentage shares of the top-5 problems varied between 8–12% of 322 problems that were identified in the process.

The most burning problems were different in different types of rural areas. For example, alienation of people from food production was the most common problem in rural areas close to city (15%), lack of sustainability wisdom in rural villages (20%) and lack of economic diversification in remote rural areas (20%). Many of the rural sustainability problems were networked wicked problems that manifested vicious circle of development.

Altogether 109 visions were created that would remove the sustainability problems if realised through innovations. The visions included a large variety of topics and did not converge around few key issues as, for example, top-5 topics covered only 22% of all

topics and the remaining 55 topics covered 78%. At a higher level of abstraction, about 46% of vision topics featured ways out of the negative structural spiral in rural areas, 36% features ways to defeat social problems, 11% addressed specifically environmental problems and 8% envisioned alternatives to inappropriate, inadequate or biased interventions by the society. Visions were needed to bridge the current problems and futures-oriented solutions: sustainability innovations.

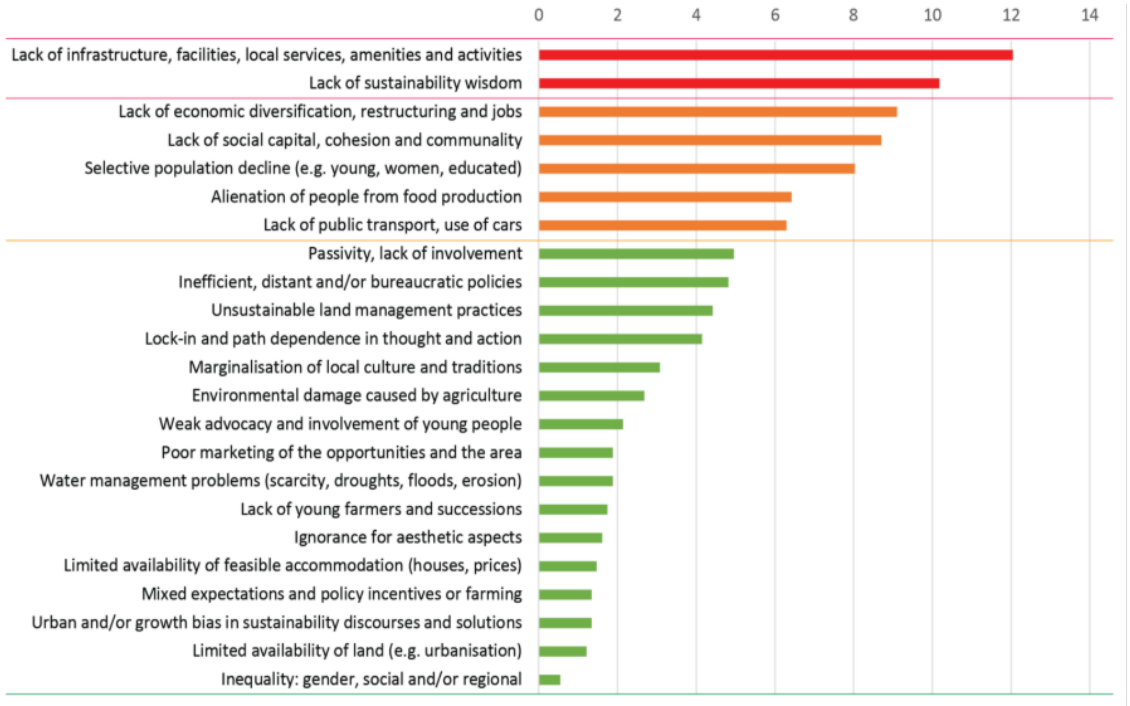


Figure 5 Sustainability problems prevailing in the rural areas, %.

As many as 747 innovations were proposed to realise the visions and ultimately address the rural sustainability problems. Top-5 topics of these innovations covered new ways to organise local development, adoption of sustainable practices and lifestyles, novel organisation of communality, sustainable farming models and new ways to involve people (Figure 6). The innovations and the problems had logical connections, e.g. adoption of sustainable practices and lifestyles to address the lack of sustainability wisdom and novel organisation of communality to address the lack of social capital. Again, a diversity of innovations rather than a silver bullet was needed as the shares of top-5 innovations were only 7–11% of all innovations. Looking at the different types of rural areas, the profiles of sustainability innovations were more similar than the profiles of sustainability problems. So, support for the suggested types of innovations may help all types of rural areas in resolving sustainability problems.

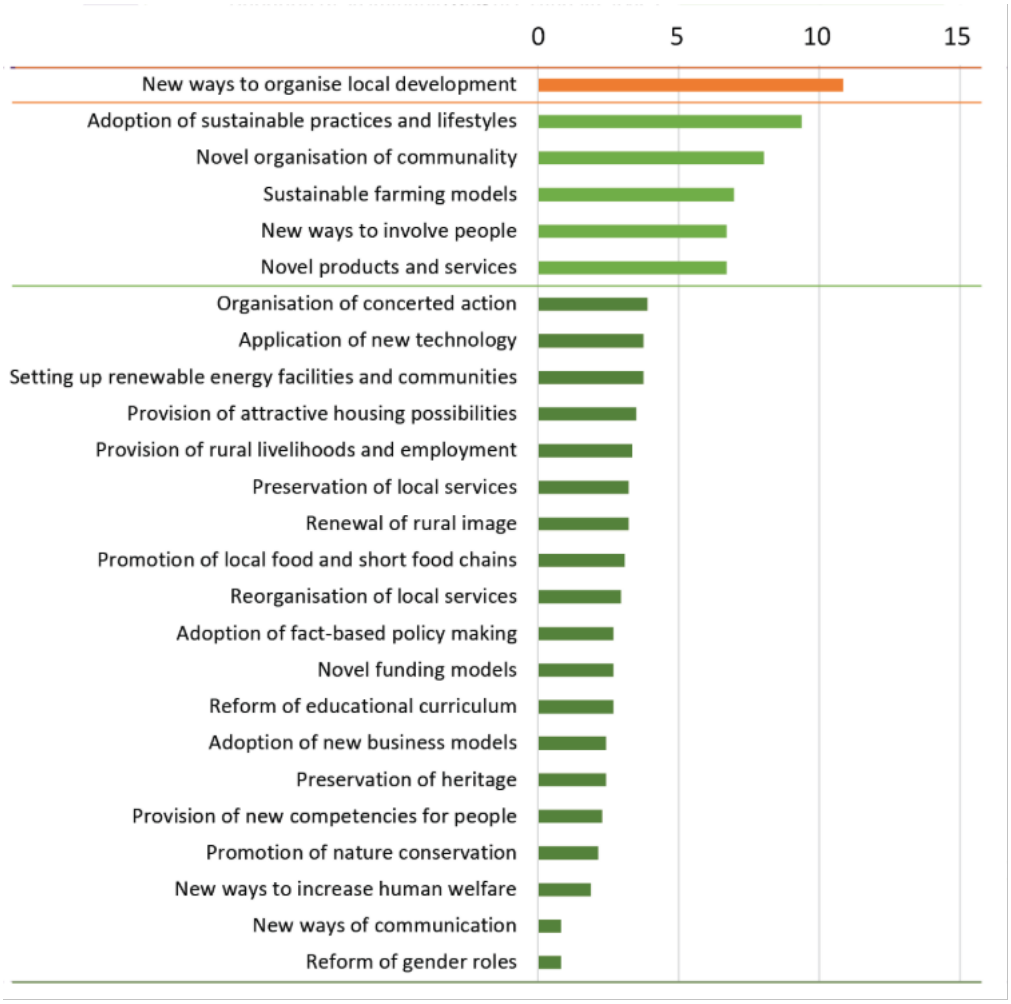


Figure 6 Innovations to address the rural sustainability problems, %.

3. FLIARA EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS

As evident, many kinds of innovations are needed to overcome the sustainability challenges. What special could women offer for this enterprise and how their efforts could be supported? Looking at our co-created evidence, we found that women have possibilities for contribution especially in environmental and social innovations. Based on the stakeholder assessment, this derives from their strengths: women have extensive networks, they have good educational background, they appreciate soft and social values, they have good ground level knowledge, and they have a positive attitude for change. Nevertheless, we also found out that women have extensive obstacles in contributing to economic–technological and, especially, political innovations. The reasons for this setting are numerous: lack of demand for genuinely novel practices, lack of equity, lack of capital and lack of access to specific networks needed in these domains. Possibilities and obstacles did not differ significantly between different types of rural areas. All these aspects should be observed upon the design and delivery of strategies, policies and projects to overcome rural sustainability problems with a gender sensitive approach.

Finally, we can present a set of measures to promote women's contributions to the rural sustainability innovations. The stakeholders came up with 333 proposals and these were categorised into 18 measures (Figure 7). Top-5 measures included co-creation and cooperation platforms, provision of information, provision of education, adoption of equality and promotion of vision-based policies and actions. Again, the shares of these measures varied between 6% and 16% of all proposed measures. For this matter also, no 'silver bullet' exists but a specific measures for specific needs or a mix of measures to be applied. What was remarkable was the high rank of equality-related measures (genders and social groups), since inequality was neither among the most common problems nor among the most common target of innovations.

Taking a still higher level of abstraction, about 80% of the proposed measures are social in character (e.g. cooperation, education, empowerment, involvement, support networks) and only 20% economic or administrative in character (e.g. infrastructure, finance, simplification of bureaucracy). Application of social measures most often asks for bottom-up rather than top-down approach, and for this reason local policies and actions are at the core in promoting women's contributions to rural sustainability innovations targeted to remove rural sustainability problems.

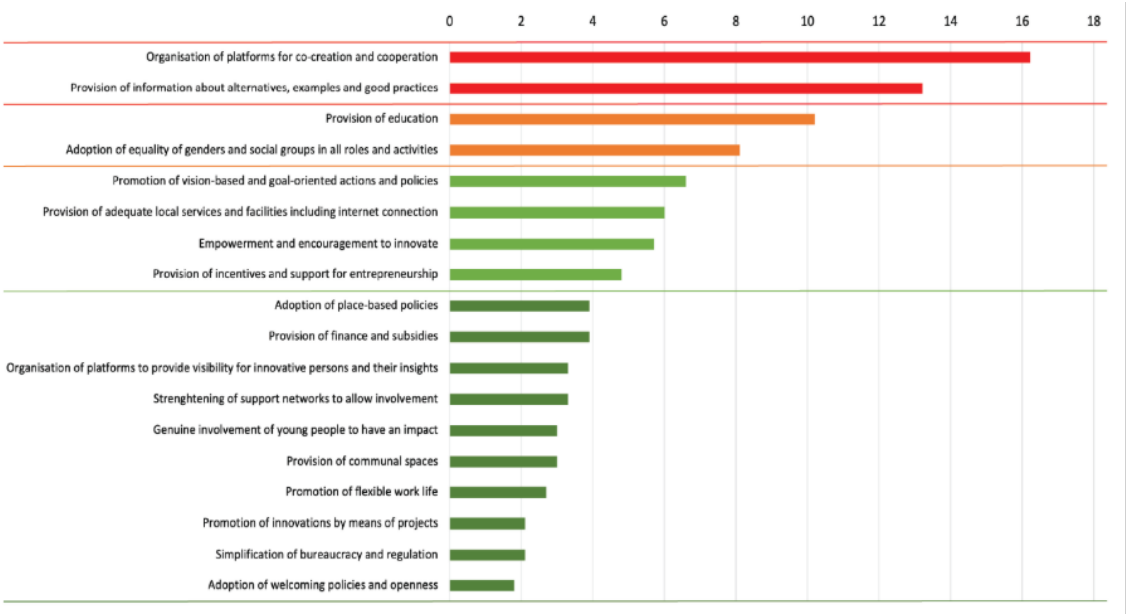


Figure 7 Measures to increase women's contributions to rural sustainability innovations, %.

Ranking of the measures did not differ significantly between different types of rural areas. Keeping the rather high level of abstraction with four categories of measures, networks were the most important category of proposed measures in all types of rural areas – and most promising in rural villages (Figure 8). Remote rural areas were more in need of incentives and knowledge focused measures than the other types of rural areas. As the differences were not striking, the most promising measures can be applied in all kinds of rural areas when striving for increased contribution by women to rural sustainability innovations.

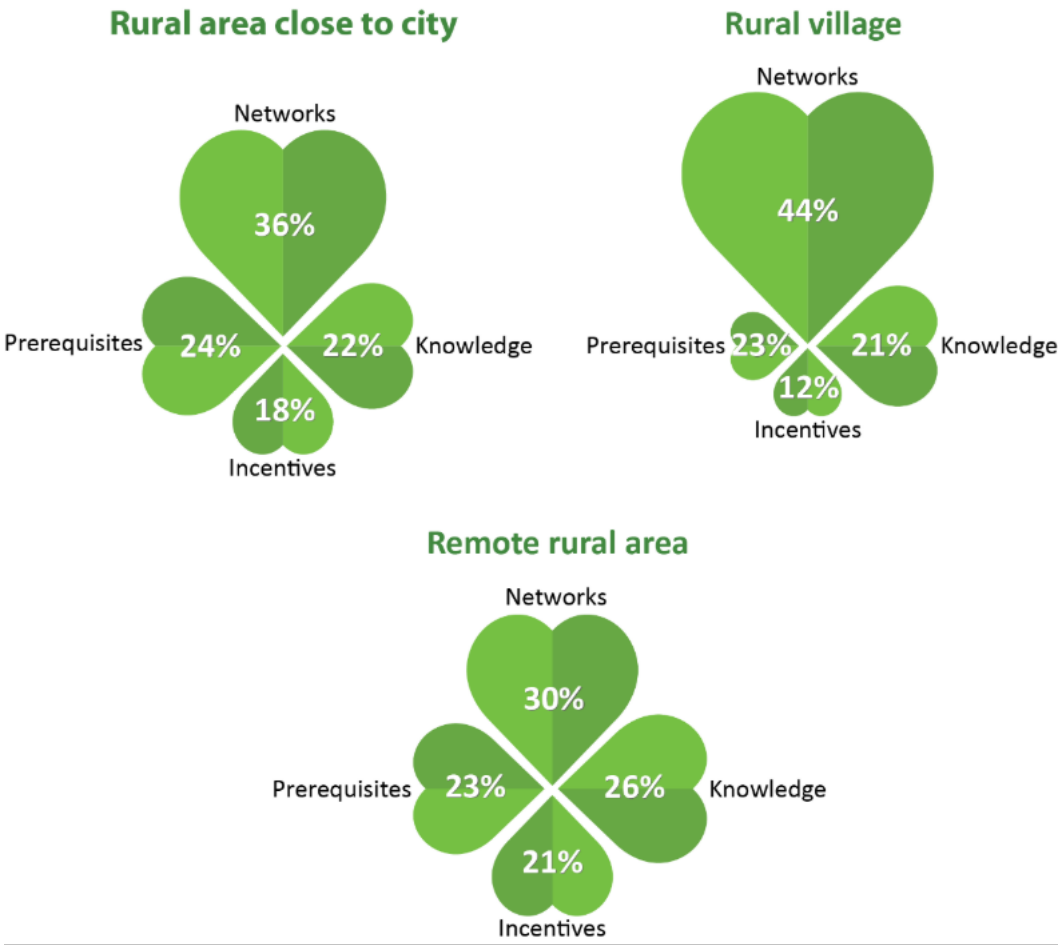


Figure 8 Measures to increase women's contributions to rural sustainability innovations by type of the rural area, %.

4. CONNECTION TO EU POLICIES

Several if not all EU, national and regional policies observe the rural sustainability challenges. However, not many of them observe gender specific aspects. Further on, many measures that are provided by the top-down policies are economic or administrative in character. We found out that this approach is not the most effective approach in trying to involve and encourage women to innovate.

For example, the long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas (EC 2021) recognises the diversity of Europe's rural areas (p. 2) as well as the numerous sustainability problems (p. 4–6) including gender gaps but remains rather general an unfocused when it comes to contents of the vision. However, many topics that were found important in the FLIARA foresight process are found also in the Rural Vision as, for example, 'place-based an integrated policy solutions' (p. 10), encouragement of 'strongly social innovations' (p. 11) and support for 'entrepreneurial mind-sets' (p. 13). FLIARA finding may assist in turning the Rural Vision into local action targeted to address specific sustainability challenges and observing the impact of local context. Equality aspects that came up in FLIARA measures are observed in the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (EC 2020a).

Farm to Fork Strategy (EC 2020b), Strategic Dialogue (EC 2024) and Vision for Agriculture and Food (EC 2025) all discussed the futures of farming and food. All of the discussed sustainability issues emphasised the role of innovations in the quest for sustainability transitions. While they provide strong support for the evidence-based proposals of FLIARA foresight activities, our results may assist in focusing the actions to most promising topics that observe the gender as well as the specific sustainability issues and rural contexts.

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ANNEX 2 SELECTION OF FLIARA OUTCOMES FOR FURTHER READING

Farrell, Maura, Simo Sarkki, Lorraine Holloway, Louise Weir, Hannu Heikkinen, Élise Lépy, Jasmiini Fransala, Niamh Nolan, Niamh McGuinness, Susanne von Muenchhausen, Marlene Santacruz, Elena Herrera, Michelle Perello, Giovanna Vingelli, Tara Farrell, Silvia Garces Ortiz, Anne Kinsella, Anastasia Oprea, Laura Incze, Sara Mikolič, Tuomas Kuhmonen, Willem Korthals Altes, Milada Šťastná, Antonín Vaishar, Jan Zlock. (2024). D1.1 FLIARA Conceptual Framework. FLIARA. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14045102

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Roos, Annie, Maura Farrell, Niamh McGuinness, Niamh Nolan, Louise Weir, Silvia Sivini, & Helene Ahl. (2024). D3.2: Inventory of Female-Led Innovations. FLIARA. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14045348

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New outcomes will be published at https://zenodo.org/communities/fliara and https://doi.org/10.3030/101084234

See also: https://fliara.eu/toolkit/

ANNEX 3 OVERVIEW OF FLIARA POLICY BRIEFS

CZ01 Include more gender education in School Curricula (author: Antonín Vaishar, contributors: Milada Šťastná, Jan Zloch)
CZ02 Create a platform for sharing experiences and examples of good practices (author: Antonín Vaishar, contributors: Milada Šťastná, Jan Zloch)
CZ03 Support of Flexible Work (author: Antonín Vaishar, contributors: Milada Šťastná, Jan Zloch)
CZ04 Reduce to pay gaps between hard and soft professions (author: Antonín Vaishar, contributors: Milada Šťastná, Jan Zloch)
CZ05 Strengthening Care for Pre-school Children (author: Antonín Vaishar, contributors: Milada Šťastná, Jan Zloch)
CZ06 Improving care for lonely seniors (author: Antonín Vaishar, contributors: Milada Šťastná, Jan Zloch)
DE01 Connecting Women: A Driver for Agricultural Innovation (authors: Felicia van Tulder, Susanne von Münchhausen, contributor: Anna Häring)
DE02 Empowering Rural Women through Tailored Measures (authors: Felicia van Tulder, Susanne von Münchhausen, contributor: Anna Häring)
DE03 Learning how to Engage with Stakeholders (authors: Felicia van Tulder, Susanne von Münchhausen, contributor: Anna Häring)
DE04 Maternity Leave Reform (authors: Felicia van Tulder, Susanne von Münchhausen, contributor: Anna Häring)
ES01 Financial gaps and opportunities for rural women-led innovation projects (authors: Michelle Perello, Martina Mangia, Víctor Martínez)
ES02 Family & Work Conciliation Policies for Women in Rural Areas (authors: Michelle Perello, Martina Mangia, Víctor Martínez)
ES03 Strengthening the Commercialisation of Women-Led Rural Products and Services through Support Networks (authors: Michelle Perello, Martina Mangia, Víctor Martínez)
EU01 Spotlighting Rural Women in Sustainable Innovation (authors: Willem Korthals Altes, Gerdy Verschuure-Stuip, contributor: Vitnarae Kang)
EU02 Apply Gender Mainstreaming in Farming and Rural Areas (authors: Willem Korthals Altes, Gerdy Verschuure-Stuip, contributor: Vitnarae Kang)
EU03 How women-led innovations can contribute to EU Rural Vision 2040 Areas (authors: Michelle Perello, Martina Mangia, Víctor Martínez)
FI01 How women-led innovations can contribute to EU Rural Vision 2040? (authors: Simo Sarkki, Hannu I. Heikkinen)
FI02 Toxic resilience and ways to overcome it (authors: Simo Sarkki, Hannu I. Heikkinen)
FI03 Special targeted support for atypical rural SMEs (authors: Simo Sarkki, Hannu I. Heikkinen)
FI04 Co-creation platforms for rural women (authors: Belyta Tembo, Tuomas Kuhmonen)
FI05 Visibility platforms supporting rural entrepreneurship and renewing rural image (authors: Belyta Tembo, Tuomas Kuhmonen)
IE01 Improve access to finance to better support women-led rural and farm innovation (authors: Aisling Murtagh, Maura Farrell, Louise Weir)
IE02 Improve skills training opportunities targeting women-led rural and farm innovation (authors: Aisling Murtagh, Tara Farrell, Maura Farrell, Louise Weir)
IE03 Women's Empowerment as a Driver of Rural and Agricultural Innovation (authors: Aisling Murtagh, Tara Farrell, Maura Farrell, Louise Weir)
IE04 Innovating from the Ground Up: Digital Policy Pathways to Support Women in Agriculture and Rural Areas (authors: Maura Farrell, Tara Farrell, Aisling Murtagh, Louise Weir)
IE05 Building a Gender Inclusive AKIS in Ireland (authors: Maura Farrell, Anne Kinsella, Aisling Murtagh, Louise Weir)
IE06 Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan and Gender Equality (authors: Aisling Murtagh, Maura Farrell, Louise Weir)
IE07 The Gender Gap in Generational Renewal (authors: Aisling Murtagh, Maura Farrell, Louise Weir, Anne Kinsella)
IE08 Strengthening the Voice of Rural and Farm Women in Decision-Making Spaces (authors: Aisling Murtagh, Tara Farrell, Maura Farrell, Louise Weir)
IE09 Balancing Women-led Innovation, Rural and Farm Family-life: The Need for Improved Policy Support (authors: Aisling Murtagh, Tara Farrell, Maura Farrell, Louise Weir)
IT01 Training for Women Innovating in Farming and Rural Areas (authors: Silvia Sivini, Irene Leonardelli, contributor: Annamaria Vitale)

IT02 Funding and Advisory Services for Women Innovators in Rural Areas (authors: Silvia Sivini, Irene Leonardelli, contributor: Annamaria Vitale)
IT03 Local Support to Women Innovators (authors: Silvia Sivini, Irene Leonardelli, contributor: Annamaria Vitale)
IT04 Improving Family and Work Balance in Rural Areas (authors: Silvia Sivini, Irene Leonardelli, contributor: Annamaria Vitale)
IT05 Reframing and Expanding AKIS in Italy to Reach Women Innovators (authors: Silvia Sivini, Irene Leonardelli, contributor: Annamaria Vitale)
IT06 Spotlighting Women in Sustainable Rural Innovation (authors: Silvia Sivini, Irene Leonardelli, contributor: Annamaria Vitale)
NL01 Promoting a Diversity of Inclusive and Sustainable Agricultural Practices (authors: Vitnarae Kang, Willem Korthals Altes, Gerdy Verschuure-Stuip)
NL02 Promoting Positive Images of Rural Farming Women and Rural Women Entrepreneurs Across All Education Curricula (authors: Vitnarae Kang, Willem Korthals Altes, Gerdy Verschuure-Stuip)
NL03 Supporting Direct-to-Consumer and Short Supply Chain Farming (authors: Vitnarae Kang, Willem Korthals Altes, Gerdy Verschuure-Stuip)
NL04 Incorporating Gender Policy KPI in CAP, CSP & LEADER (authors: Vitnarae Kang, Gerdy Verschuure-Stuip, contributor: Willem Korthals Altes)
NL05 Addressing Underrepresentation of Rural Women and Rural Entrepreneurship in the Emancipation National Policy (authors: Vitnarae Kang, Willem Korthals Altes, Gerdy Verschuure-Stuip)
RO01 Unlocking the potential of rural women through inclusive CAP measures (authors: Anastasia Oprea, Laura Incze)
RO02 Building gender-sensitive capacity for rural development governance (authors: Anastasia Oprea, Laura Incze)
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Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas

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PART B POLICY BRIEFS

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Chairwoman of the Board of Directors of the Agricultural Cooperative Unčovice, Milada Měsícová-Rašková



Policy Brief CZ01, 2025.

Include more gender education in School Curricula

"Introduction (deepening) of teaching in primary and secondary schools about equality and collaboration between men and women, with a focus on increasing the importance of family and household care"

Executive Summary

Based on the findings of the FLIARA project, one of the main barriers to greater involvement of women in rural areas is the persistent underestimation of women and the enduring influence of paternalistic views. Addressing this issue requires a strong emphasis on educational initiatives - not only in schools but also in the media, culture, and other public spheres. One key approach is to integrate gender equality topics more deeply into the curricula of primary and secondary schools. The goal is to shape future generations' perception of gender equality, fostering greater collaboration between men and women, particularly in the field of caregiving.

The Challenge

- Although women's equality is enshrined in the constitution, laws, and other regulations, true equality has yet to be fully achieved, despite gradual improvements.
- One of the main reasons for this is the persistence of patriarchal stereotypes in some families.
- Even though women now play a significant role in the family's economic life, traditional beliefs still prevail, assigning them primary responsibility for household and childcare duties.
- As a result, many women essentially work two jobs - one professionally and another at home. This significantly limits their opportunities, particularly in terms of personal development and leisure time.

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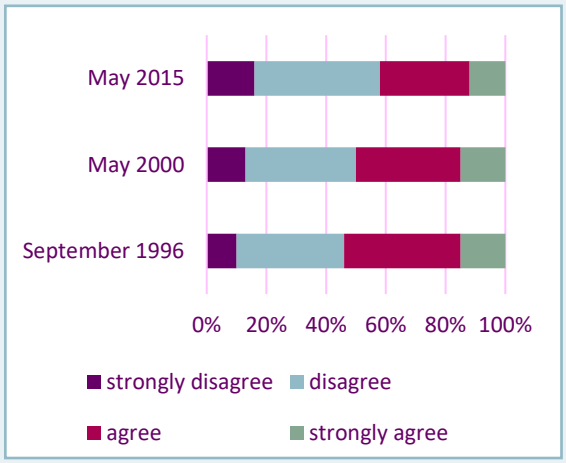
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- This issue cannot be resolved through legislation alone, as it is rooted in family dynamics beyond the reach of state intervention.
- The key solution lies in long-term education on gender equality, starting from an early age.
- This topic should be thoughtfully incorporated into various subjects, such as social studies, history, and geography.
- The focus should be on fostering cooperation between men and women rather than reinforcing competition.
- The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports focuses on gender equality rather in preventing stereotypes and disadvantages both in textbooks and in the pedagogical process. An active approach is apparently not a priority.
- The media should also play an active role, for example within the Creative Europe MEDIA programme.

Policy Solutions

- Education for gender equality and cooperation should be nominally included in the subject of citizenship education in primary schools and civic education in secondary schools.
- School founders (municipalities - LAU 1) for primary schools and regions (NUTS 3) for secondary schools will ensure the inclusion of the issue in teaching and create conditions for it.
- Teacher-training faculties will ensure the issue of gender cooperation in the preparation of future teachers.
- Methodologically, this issue should be addressed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.
- Act on Preschool, Primary, Secondary, Higher Vocational and Other Education (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.) is the legal frame.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices



Development of agreement with the statement "A man should earn money and a woman should take care of the household." STEM, 2015.

It seems that although the patriarchal idea of the roles of men and women is slightly decreasing a relatively significant proportion of respondents still hold the traditional view. According to the findings of the FLIARA project, in some cases innovative women benefit from the support of their partners, but in other cases their activity has minimally contributed to the breakdown of relationships or the inability to find a permanent partner.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Czechia still lags behind the European Union average in terms of women's status. One likely reason for this is the persistence of patriarchal family structures. The most effective way to improve this situation in the future is through education - not only in the formal school system but also as a broader effort encompassing culture, media, and other areas of public life. While change may come with a generational shift, it must be actively supported to ensure progress.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Government Council for Gender Equality will ensure that gender issues are discussed at the government level
- The Czech Women's Union will develop an initiative to implement the measures
- The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports will provide methodological guidelines
- The Radio and Television Broadcasting Council will include gender cooperation issues among its priorities

Further Reading

Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations, Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations, https:// zenodo.org/records/14045390

About FLIARA

The project is on a mission to create a more sustainable future by highlighting the role of women in agriculture and rural areas. FLIARA will boost understanding of the needs and challenges facing women leading innovative environmental and rural development practices in EU farming and rural areas.

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Mrs. Anna Čarková is president of the LAG Kyjov Slovakia on the Move

Policy Brief CZ02, 2025.

Create a platform for sharing experiences and examples of good practices

"Create a platform to mutual support the self-confidence of innovative women and expand know-how"

Executive Summary

Based on the findings of the FLIARA project, innovative women benefit greatly from mutual support and experience-sharing. To facilitate this, they establish networks that enable collaboration. Initially, these networks were local or regional, relying primarily on personal connections. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they transitioned into digital platforms, allowing communication beyond physical boundaries. It would be beneficial to create a common framework that enhances motivation, support, and the exchange of experiences and information - while still preserving valuable face-to-face interactions. Networking is one of the key prerequisites for women's success in business and other activities.

The Challenge

- In many cases, women lack sufficient self-confidence, information, and role models to start a business in rural areas. At times, they even underestimate their own abilities.
- Sharing experiences, providing mutual support, and overcoming self-doubt are key to advancing women in all areas of life.
- All respondents in our research indicated that they are part of networks, most of which they created themselves. It would be beneficial to consolidate these efforts into a unified platform that could serve as a source of information and motivation for other women, while also inspiring the media to highlight successful women and the challenges they have overcome.
- The platform could feature best practices, guidance on navigating personal and professional challenges, and practical resources.
- It should primarily function online, with opportunities for regular in-person meetings.

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Policy Solutions

- The Czech Women's Union will develop an initiative to create a platform and invite other interested professional and regional institutions to cooperate.
- A body of interested institutions and organizations will be established, which will determine the organizational structure, rules (including financial) and implementation team.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

In almost all cases, active women establish communication networks to support one another and share experiences and information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these networks shifted from in-person interactions to the digital sphere, allowing them to expand both geographically and in scope while maintaining relevant subgroups.

The Czech Women's Union positions itself as a non-governmental, women's, and volunteer organization connected to the international women's movement. It organizes seminars, workshops, and conferences, develops and implements projects aligned with its mission, and engages in publishing activities. The creation of the proposed platform would seamlessly align with its work. While this initiative would require relatively low financial investment, it would demand significant dedication from those involved.

An example would be the emerging platform Future is Female, which features successful women in various fields and positions or the Women4Business platform, founded by the Chamber of Commerce of the Czech Republic to support women in business and management.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Women represent an underutilized resource in the Czech countryside. In many cases, all that is needed to activate their potential is greater motivation, which can be fostered through examples of best practices and mutual support.

CALL TO ACTION:

- The Czech Women's Union invites other women's organizations to cooperate. Existing platforms will collaborate and will also target rural women, whose ability to physically contact central and regional authorities is limited.
- A body will be created (as part of an organization or independent) to create a concept, organizational structure, financial model and launch the activity.
- Stakeholders will participate in the initiative according to their capabilities, especially by using existing networks
- For this initiative, the ambassadors of the FLIARA project could be used, and/or additional ambassadors will be found.

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Further Reading

https://zenodo.org/records/14045414

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MSc. Iva Zadražilová

Policy Brief CZ03, 2025.

Support of Flexible Work

"Further development of options for reconciling household care with work activities through part-time work, working from home, shared jobs, etc."

Executive Summary

Women would be more likely to return to the labour market sooner if they could better balance work and caregiving responsibilities. While several measures have been approved or are in development under the Labor Code, they remain underutilized. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work, yet many employers may still hesitate, fearing a lack of oversight or increased organizational complexity with alternative work arrangements such as job sharing. A much broader implementation of existing legislative measures is needed, particularly to support highly skilled parents in effectively combining their professional and family responsibilities.

The Challenge

- Motherhood and childcare present a significant barrier to women's career advancement.
- The long duration of parental leave in Czechia (paid maternity leave of 28 weeks, followed by parental leave with state financial contribution for either parent or alternately until the child is 3 years old.) is not always viewed positively.
- Since fathers tend to have higher salaries, family strategies mostly focus on parental leave for women.
- Employers often fear that mothers may not be able to fully dedicate themselves to their work responsibilities.
- In Czechia, only about half of mothers with children under the age of four are employed, despite the fact that most would like to work.
- A potential solution could be to find ways to support mothers in staying in the labor market while addressing employers' concerns.

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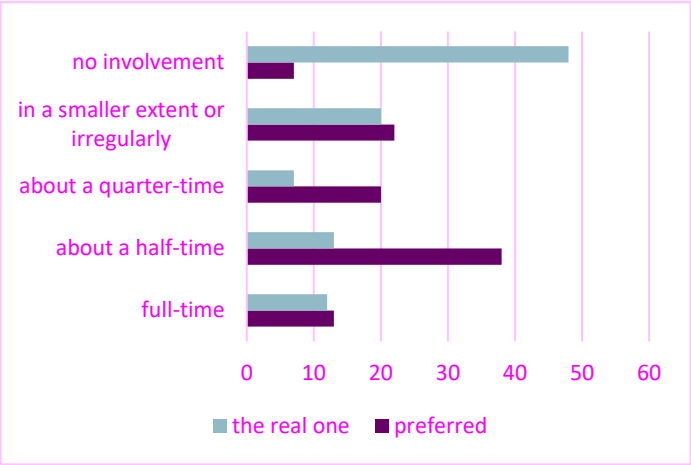
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- It is particularly important that highly qualified parents have the opportunity to balance caregiving and work, enabling them to continue their careers without compromising their family responsibilities.
- For companies, this would provide an opportunity to retain a qualified and motivated workforce.
- It would be beneficial to continue implementing the measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, where operational circumstances allow, such as the option to work from home, the possibility of short-time work, flexible working hours to accommodate childcare needs, and the introduction of job sharing.
- These measures, most of which already exist in legislation, should be more actively put into practice.
- State and public organizations, as well as companies, should set an example.
- These measures should be implemented alongside adequate availability of preschool facilities, tax benefits for employers, and the replacement of tax breaks for non-working mothers with tax deductions for children under three years of age.

Policy Solutions

- It is necessary to intensify monitoring of the use of flexible work in the current version of the Labor Code No. 262/2006 Coll. to keep parents in the labor market.
- Further follow-up legislative measures in the tax sphere need to be prepared.
- At the same time, it is necessary to intensify measures in the sphere of care (kindergartens, alternative forms of childcare)

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices



Preferred and actual involvement of mothers of children under 4 years of age in the work process [%]. Mundoo report, 2024

Data shows that a significant proportion of women would like to return to work sooner if employers created suitable conditions for them. This would certainly benefit employers, who would thus retain qualified workers. According to the findings of the FLIARA project, a number of innovative women left their original qualified professions for this very reason and started their own businesses in the countryside, where they can organize their working hours according to their own needs and those of their families.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

The Labor Code provides relatively broad possibilities for adjusting working hours to parental responsibilities and interests. These possibilities are not always used, perhaps due to inertia or concerns that relaxing working hours would lead to a decrease in labor productivity. However, in the long run, these forms are also beneficial for employers: they retain quality employees and their qualifications. In cases of high educated people, part-time work involves only part of the working hours (and costs of the employer), but the entire creativity of the workers.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to prepare draft legislative measures
- Government Council for Gender Equality to intensify monitoring of the use of flexible working hours to retain women in the labour market
- Employers in their own interest will support mothers and eliminate the surviving ideas about their unfulfilling work
- Municipalities will intensify measures in the field of childcare for working parents. Taking into account the demographial development, these measures should be formulated in such a way that they can be transformed into care for the elderly after the need of childcare has ended.

Further Reading

Assessment of Rural and Farming Policy and Legal Frameworks in relation to Women-led Innovation; https://zenodo.org/records/14045163

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Image courtesy of Lucie Bošinova, Farma Bošina. Czech Republic

Policy Brief CZ04, 2025.

Reduce pay gaps between hard and soft professions

Executive Summary

The gender pay gap in Czechia persists, and there are several reasons for this. One of them may be that male-dominated (technical) professions are valued more highly than female-dominated (social and humanistic) professions. A potential solution could be to re-evaluate the salary scales in the public sector.

The Challenge

- The lowest average incomes are in the so-called soft sectors and soft activities, where a large proportion of jobs are occupied by women.
- These are the lowest-paid jobs in administration, tourism and culture followed with agriculture.
- Lower salaries also mean lower unemployment benefits, lower sickness benefits, and lower pensions for senior women
- Wage policy in the state and public sector is based on the qualification requirements (mostly education level and length of praxis) of the position held.
- Although the qualifications of women, including rural women, are currently on average higher than those of men (in municipalities under 2,000 inhabitants, only 48% of women elder than 15 years have lower than complete secondary education in comparison with 56% of men), it seems that women occupy positions for which lower qualifications are prescribed.
- This fact may also be the cause of women's lower incomes, although the reason cannot be lower qualifications.
- The soft activities will gain in importance in terms of future development in relation to the transition to the post-industrial society

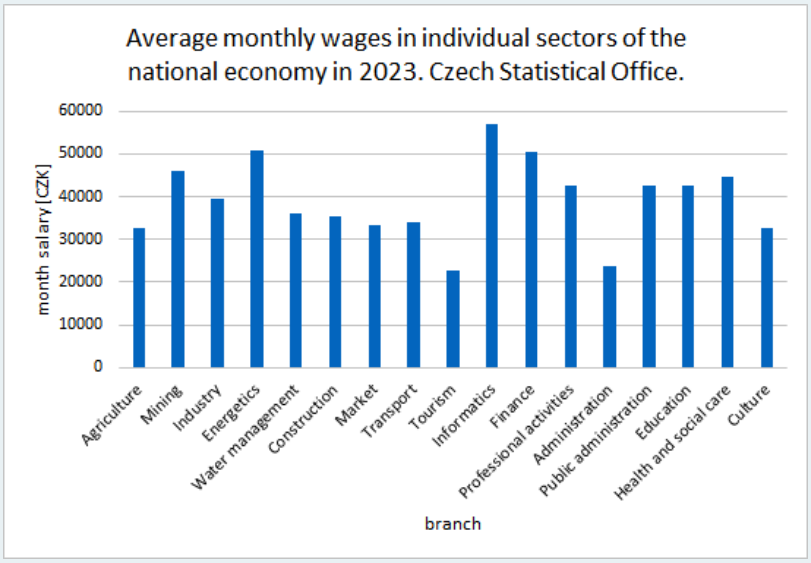
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Policy Solutions

- It would be appropriate to reassess the qualification requirements of individual job positions with an emphasis on soft activities, which could be more appreciated, as their social importance is increasing.
- If this were to happen in the public sector, the private sector would also have to gradually adapt.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices



Conclusion & Call to Action

The current gender pay gap is partly due to the perception that technical fields should be paid more than humanities, even though the qualification requirements in softer fields are sometimes higher. This division is increasingly unjustifiable, as physically demanding work in technical fields is declining. These disparities should be gradually addressed, starting in the public sector through wage scales, and eventually extending to the private sector.

CALL TO ACTION:

- The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs will review wage tariffs in the public sector.
- Subsequently, stakeholders in the private sector will also consider their rules for evaluating employees.

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Further Reading

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Image courtesy of M.Sc. Alžbeta Nagyová, Ph.D.. Farma Bezdínek, Czech Republic

Policy Brief CZ05, 2025.

Strengthening Care for Pre-school Children

Executive Summary

Establishing additional kindergartens, supporting other forms of childcare, solving the problem of vacant paediatricians positions.

The Challenge

- As a result of underestimating demographic trends, parents' interest in returning to work earlier, and the increased immigration of Ukrainian mothers with young children, an acute shortage of places in preschools has arisen - especially in some territories. Tens of thousands of places in kindergartens are missing which does not allow parents to return to work early.
- Other forms of childcare are underdeveloped because they have so far been hindered by hygiene and other regulations.
- In addition to ensuring uninterrupted careers for women and men, an earlier return of parents to work would bring an economic effect in the form of benefits and collected taxes.
- Additional problem in rural preschool care is also the lack of pediatrician positions.
- Both problems are regionally differentiated. While kindergartens are lacking mainly around large cities, pediatricians are lacking in remote areas.
- The ill-considered administrative reform after 1989 has resulted in 22% of municipalities having fewer than 200 inhabitants and therefore a minimal budget and a low number of qualified people. Therefore, it is not realistic to comply with government regulations.

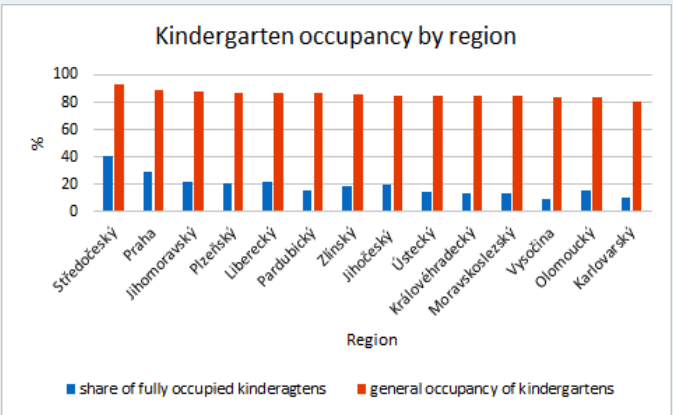
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Policy Solutions

- Intensive construction of preschool facilities makes sense especially in the territory of large cities and their surroundings.
- Taking into account demographic prognoses, these facilities should be flexible with the possibility of future reconstruction into homes for the elderly.
- The care of preschool children needs to be addressed immediately through other forms, for example, children's groups under Act No. 247/2014 Coll
- However, regions and municipalities should fundamentally follow demographic analyses and solve problems in advance.
- There is a shortage of pediatricians in rural areas, and half of those doctors who work are over the age of 60. More attention needs to be paid to the proposed measures of the Czech Pediatric Society.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices



It is clear that the problem lies in the uneven regional distribution of kindergartens and children. However, municipalities and their associations must cope with this problem.

In the last 5 years, 300 pediatric general practitioners' offices have closed, and a third of those currently in operation are over 65 years old. Young medical graduates have little interest in separate positions in more remote locations due to high responsibility, bureaucratic barriers, and limited cultural and social life.

These circumstances also make life difficult for active rural residents, especially women because, according to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 98% of parental allowance is drawn by women.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

The situation requires a quick solution that will not only free up people (mostly women) to work in the market, but also improve services in rural areas.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Govern and Municipalities must analyze the need for kindergarten places at least five years in advance and establish an appropriate strategy. According to Act 247/2014 Coll., the obligation to provide preschool care for children from the age of three years has been transferred to municipalities.
- In the case of very small municipalities, solutions must be sought through cooperation, pooling resources and people (e.g. within of voluntary associations of municipalities). Children's groups (between 6 months and 6 years of then age of children) that do not include the educational function, can also be used.
- According to the Association of General Practitioners for Children and Adolescents, the solution could lie in setting rules for the education of young doctors

Further Reading

https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of M M.Sc. Martina Bílová, Tvarožná Lhota. Czech Republic

Policy Brief CZ06, 2025.

Improving care for lonely seniors

"Support for lonely senior women in the areas of dignified living, housing, services, and social contacts"

Executive Summary

Women in Czechia live on average six years longer than men, resulting in a growing proportion of elderly women living alone, which has significant social implications. For innovative women, this situation represents the need for assurance that they will be cared for after leaving active business. This issue also affects innovative women who are responsible for both childcare and caregiving for elderly parents. Additionally, it represents a significant public and private business sector that requires innovative approaches from service providers (many of whom are women). Elderly care includes all activities that aim to ensure the physical, psychological and social well-being of an ageing person. This care can take place in the home, within nursing services or in facilities such as nursing homes. The key aim of care is to maintain the dignity, self-sufficiency and quality of life of the elderly for as long as possible. The focus is not only on basic care, such as retirement homes, but also on comprehensive rehabilitation, as well as cultural, educational, and recreational activities.

The Challenge

- As the population ages, the number of seniors is rapidly increasing. At the same time, multi-generational housing and therefore direct family care for the elderly are gradually disappearing.
- In 2023, there were 35,700 beds in houses for seniors and 60,200 unsatisfied requests
- Because the probability of survival is significantly higher for women, most of them are single women, widows, and also women who have been divorced or never married
- Previous state policy has focused mainly on the amount of pensions, which are usually low for these women due to their lower salaries in the past.
- However, in addition to material security, these women primarily need the opportunity for social life and the interest of society

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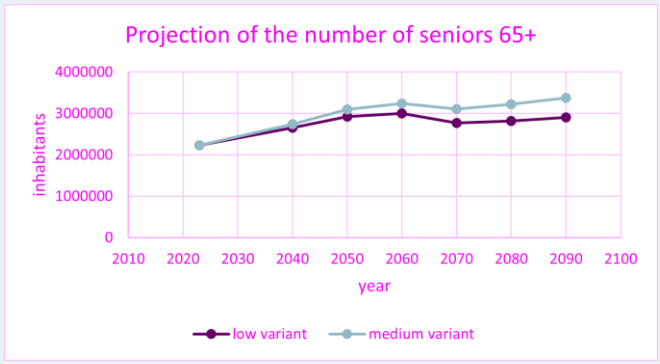
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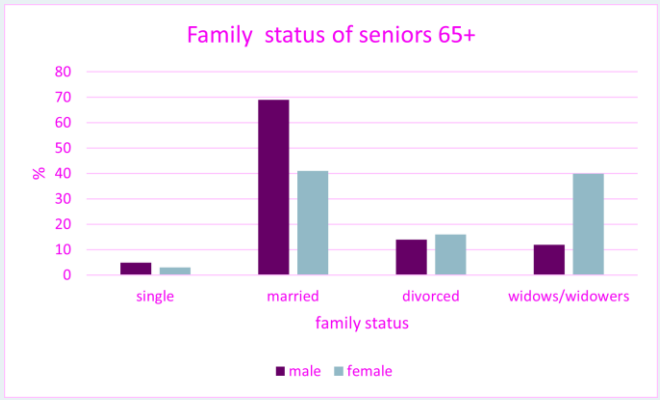
- In addition to social importance, care for seniors could be an important economic sector in rural areas that could offer innovative opportunities to other women.

Policy Solutions

- The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs will further develop and implement measures to support healthy and active ageing.
- Regions, municipalities and their associations will strive for the availability and quality of services for seniors
- Municipalities will support volunteering and associations in relation to ageing at the community level
- Care for the elderly is regulated by the Act on Social Services 108/2006 Coll.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices





It is clear that the number of seniors over 65 will continue to be high in the future. Moreover, the proportion of older seniors will increase. It is also clear that lonely women statistically represent 59% of female seniors (the corresponding proportion for men is only 31%).

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Due to the irreversible trend of aging, the number of seniors will increase rapidly. This development needs to be addressed both for social reasons and because it is a promising economic sector for the future.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Municipalities (association of municipalities, local action groups) will assess the situation of seniors and adopt a concept for working with seniors
- Non-governmental organizations will address the issue of the social status of lonely senior women
- Entrepreneurs, including agricultural holdings, will develop an optimal range of services for seniors, which municipalities will support, for example, by providing advantageous premises
- The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs will prepare an update of the Strategic Framework for the Preparation for Societal Ageing
- Universities will continually develop concepts of lifelong learning for seniors
- The Ministry of Health will develop geriatric care facilities with an emphasis on prevention in rural regions

Further Reading

https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

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Image courtesy of Linda Kelly, Biolandhof Kelly. Germany

Policy Brief DE01, 2025.

Connecting Women: A Driver for Agricultural Innovation

"Networking is a driver for women-led innovation in agriculture. Let's support this."

Executive Summary

Women play a key role in the sustainable transition of agriculture and in fostering the development of innovative, resilient rural communities. The FLIARA case studies in Germany show that women innovators rely on working/life, economic and learning networks when implementing their innovations in agriculture. Networks are seedbeds for co-creation by diverse stakeholders and women-led innovation. This Policy Brief highlights the need to enhance women's networking opportunities to unlock the full potential of networking for agricultural innovation.

The Challenges and Opportunity

- The FLIARA case studies in Germany show that women innovators in agriculture rely on local, regional and national working/life, economic and learning networks when implementing their innovations. Some have proactively established their own events and networks, demonstrating the central importance of these connections to their innovation journeys.
- If supported, activities pertaining to working/life, economic and learning networks could lead to more efficient and widespread innovation across rural areas.
- Effective networks require consistent coordination and ongoing engagement to maintain their relevance and impact as innovation platforms.

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- While temporary project-based networks can address specific challenges, investing in long-term platforms for exchange is the most effective way to foster innovative solutions to emerging challenges.
- The FLIARA study indicates that supporting working/life, economic and learning networks, particularly through activities such as conferences, trainings, or IT platforms, is a promising approach to enhance women-led innovation. This enables knowledge exchange, space for co-innovation, dissemination of innovative solutions as well as organised soft skill training or informal access to peers' lessons learned.

Policy Solutions

To best facilitate women-led innovations in rural areas, it is essential that:

- Regional and local rural or economic development programmes as well as social schemes of public or private organisations include options for the support of existing and the creation of new networks at local, regional and national level.
- Funding goes to networks that either cater strictly to women (e.g., female business founders) or ensure women's participation.

The following pathways can be considered:

- Allocating funds for a network coordinator position, as this aids in sustaining the network.
- Implementing simple funding schemes, such as vouchers connected to advisory services, can facilitate peer exchange on topics like direct marketing.
- Actively promoting networks, e.g., at trade events, and in media engagements. Honouring networking initiatives with awards further boosts recognition and motivates wider participation.
- Highlighting networks in farmers' and women's associations, and implementing information campaigns on agricultural and rural development to increase visibility.

Supporting Evidence & Good Practices

The **FLIARA project's Community of Practice (CoP)** brings together women rural innovators from across Europe. Feedback from participants of in-person events underscores the value of exchange and networking activities offered. For optimal inclusion, FLIARA also offers a CoP LinkedIn space and regular online events and webinars to cater to women's schedules.

A Thünen Institute study shows the lack of networks in Germany is a hindrance to women-led start-ups in rural areas. It also finds that women would like to exchange more with other women when founding agribusinesses. Furthermore, a Gender Solution study finds women in agri-food feel most empowered, secure and heard in entrepreneurial support formats tailored to them.

In Germany, the following initiatives currently facilitate women's networking in farming:

- The German Farmers' Association (DBV) offers, via the **'Kompass-program',** opportunities to build networks through events and parliamentary meetings
- The German Agricultural Association (DLG) runs the **Female Agri Fellows network,** connecting women leaders in agribusiness.
- The Rural Women's Association (DLV) has federal and regional Chapters that organise events to highlight women in agriculture
- The **Organic Women Network** (BioFrauenNetzwerk) fosters collaboration and visibility of women across the organic farm sector.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Evidence from the FLIARA Project shows that networking at all geographic levels boosts women innovators in agriculture and rural areas. The women particularly value these activities for the ongoing informal support, exchange of practical knowledge, and sense of community they offer. The impact of networking extends even to niche sectors, speeding up innovation, and amplifying the reach of women-led initiatives, making such activities highly deserving of support.

Even modest investments by decision makers in supporting network facilitation can create benefits that grow as more members get involved. Sustained support for women's networking around innovation is vital: it not only strengthens individual and collective capacity but also contributes to the long-term sustainable development of agriculture and rural communities.

Further Reading

FLIARA Deliverable 3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas - German Case Study Report - Section 4.3 Social Ecosystem (p. 84), July 2024 https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

FLIARA – The Role of Ambassadors and Multi-Actor Approach, March 2025 https://fliara.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-Role-of-Ambassadors-and-Multi-Actor-Approach-Anastasia-Oprea.pdf

Thünen Institute – Study on German farming women's living conditions, 2023 https://www.studie-frauen-landwirtschaft.de/

Gender Solution – Results of a Study on Empowering Women Innovators in Agrifood, March 2025 https://fliara.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Empowering-5Women-Innovators-in-Agrifood-Aleksandra-Nizynska.pdf

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Image courtesy of Anja Frey, Bruderkalb. Germany

Policy Brief DE02, 2025.

Empowering Rural Women through Tailored Measures

"Funding programmes targeted specifically at women in rural areas can contribute to their economic empowerment but also have positive social, economic and environmental effects for the area of implementation. Hence, it is crucial for thriving rural areas."

Executive Summary

Women play a key role in the sustainable transition of agriculture and in fostering the development of innovative, resilient rural communities. The FLIARA study shows that limited access to targeted funding and tailored entrepreneurial training remains a major obstacle for women innovators. Customising financial support and skill development programs to meet women's needs and the specific realities of rural areas can greatly strengthen rural communities. Such support measures are currently an exception across Europe and Germany. This Policy Brief calls on German state-level policymakers to promote gender equality as part of their CAP strategic plans and establish funding programmes fit for women.

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The Challenge and Opportunity

- When economic opportunities in rural areas are limited, particularly for women, more women tend to leave these areas.
- Women face difficulties balancing care work with income-generating activities near their homes.
- FLIARA finds women-led innovation in rural areas contributes to all four dimensions of sustainability. Yet, access to funding is a significant hurdle to rural and agricultural women-led innovation.
- Acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge can be demanding yet are essential for these innovations.
- Until now only a few EU Member States implement gender equality measures as part of their CAP strategic plans.
- Across Europe and Germany rural women-targeted state support measures are scarce.
- Support programmes for women-led economic activities in rural areas can meet diverse policy goals e.g., rural development, gender equality, environmental protection and farm diversification.

Policy Solutions

To best facilitate women-led innovation in rural areas, policy makers of the German federal states may consider following pathways:

- To design funding programs that link training and coaching measures for women with funding for women-led entrepreneurial activities.
- To ensure that funded initiatives lead to income generation (e.g., via farm diversification), long-term employment and/or development opportunities for women in rural areas, thereby meeting equal opportunity mandates.[1]
- To guarantee measures benefit principally women, investment support may be made contingent on proof of female ownership and a women-led business concept.
- To set funding priorities beyond traditional gender roles, which support equitable participation by all in farming and rural entrepreneurship. [2]
- To align the measure(s) with rural and agricultural women's associations as well as equal opportunity offices at employment agencies. To tailor the program to the rural specificities of the implementation area, and regional economic, environmental and social needs.

The realisation of the **potential of women's innovative ideas** requires:

- Funding criteria that facilitate innovative ideas, because women's social, cultural and environmental initiatives are often overlooked by funding bodies.
- Easy access application processes and sufficient staff allocation to support applicants and beneficiaries.

[1] The German constitution mandates the state to promote equality of men and women. Since 2000 Gender Mainstreaming is legally mandated for all federal and state government bodies. Promoting economic equality has become a priority with the 2018 Federal Equality Strategy. This is further reinforced by federal ministries' action plans on equal opportunities on the labour market and women-led businesses, as well as state-level specific programs.

[2] Traditional gender roles continue to shape German agriculture, with stereotypical perceptions portraying men as more apt and inclined to operate machinery and handle physically demanding tasks, while women are more frequently responsible for "social tasks" like direct marketing, farm tourism and other social services. Source: Thünen Institute – Study on German farming women's living conditions https://www.studie-frauen-landwirtschaft.de/

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- Substantial co-financing options for entrepreneurial activities in case of limited upfront capital.
- Sufficient flexibility because women's entrepreneurial activities often occur in part-time and as a side-line to other activities.
- Accessibility of farm diversification grants to relatives of farm owners, as this benefits women. Leading diversification efforts enables women to generate independent income.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Results from the **FLIARA project** show that women-led innovations in agriculture and rural areas contribute to the cultural, social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability but are limited by funding and training barriers. Germany-wide study by the Thünen Institute echoes these findings.

The Federal State of Baden-Württemberg has a long running **'Innovative Measure for Women in Rural Areas' programme**, which has led to farm diversification, sustainable and exemplary businesses and beneficiaries' uptake of LEADER and farm investment supports. The programme has two strands directed at women in rural areas: funding coaching and training measures on the one hand and grants for start-up expenses of microenterprises on the other. Grants start at 2.000 and go up to 160.000 euros to facilitate women's start-up behaviour, that is, the lower risk appetite of some women. The programme is financed by state and regional business support funding, co-funded by the CAP, and is linked to farm diversification policy goals. The Federal State of Saxony also implements a support program for women-led start-ups in rural areas.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Tailored support measures for women-led business and innovation that reflect local contexts and women's specific needs can revitalise rural areas and enhance their attractiveness as places to live and work. Funding priorities that move beyond traditional gender roles in farming can give way to a more equitable distribution of farm activities, and support women-led innovation in particular. Baden-Württemberg's 'Innovative Measures for Women in Rural Areas' have proven effective over time and is well received by the beneficiaries. This Policy Brief encourages policy makers from other States and countries to implement similar funding measures.

Further Reading

More on Baden-Württemberg's IMF programme:

FLIARA Innovator Fact Sheet https://fliara.eu/innovator/innovative-masnahmen-fur-frauen/

Baden-Württemberg State Press Release on the IMF Program, 21/02/2025 https://www.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/service/presse/pressemitteilung/pid/massgeschneiderte-foerderungen-fuer-frauen-im-laendlichen-raum-1

FLIARA Deliverable 1.3: Assessment of Rural and Farming Policy and Legal Frameworks in relation to Women-led Innovation Germany assessment pp. 83-100 https://zenodo.org/records/14045163

FLIARA Deliverable 3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

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Thünen Working Paper 265: Gender Mainstreaming im GAP-Strategieplan Potenzieller Beitrag des GAP-Strategieplans zur Gleichstellung von Frauen und Männern, mit besonderem Fokus auf das Förderangebot der 2. Säule (ELER), March 2025. https://www.thuenen.de/de/thuenen-institut/infothek/schriftenreihen/thuenen-working-paper

Davier Zv, Padel S, Edebohls I, Devries U, Nieberg H. Frauen auf landwirtschaftlichen Betrieben in Deutschland - Leben und Arbeit, Herausforderungen und Wünsche: Befragungsergebnisse von über 7.000 Frauen, Thünen-Institut für Betriebswirtschaft. Thünen Working Paper 207, 2023 https://www.studie-frauen-landwirtschaft.de/ergebnisse-und-veroeffentlichungen/abschlussberichte

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Image courtesy of Britta Johannsen, Honkenswarf farm. Germany

Policy Brief DE03, 2025.

Learning how to Engage with Stakeholders

"Empowered with this skill, women in agriculture make innovation flourish."

Executive Summary

Women play a key role in the sustainable transition of agriculture and in fostering the development of innovative, resilient rural communities. The FLIARA study shows that when women cultivate their competencies in stakeholder engagement, agricultural and rural innovation blooms. To support other women in developing this capacity, it is important to integrate stakeholder engagement training into agricultural curricula and continuing education in farming and rural entrepreneurship. Placing particular emphasis on educating on political and institutional contexts, and on advocacy skills, is essential for ensuring that rural initiatives achieve broader reach and lasting impact. Such efforts will further enhance women's contributions to agricultural and rural innovation.

The Challenge and Opportunity

Engaging and persuading diverse stakeholders requires excellent communication skills and sensitivity to both their personal and professional perspectives. Anticipating these varied viewpoints

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can facilitate the establishment of businesses and drive innovation. Targeted capacity-building in stakeholder engagement boosts women's contributions to agricultural and rural innovation. Understanding political and institutional contexts is essential because it enables women to navigate decision-making processes, access resources, and advocate for policies that support their innovation goals.

Policy Solutions

To support women in developing stakeholder engagement capacities, policy makers of the German Federal States may pursue the following pathways:

- Regional and national private and public institutes can offer learning units and coaching on stakeholder engagement, advocacy, political and institutional contexts as part of agricultural educational and rural entrepreneurship programs, and farming-related training.
- The institutes should feature these offers prominently on institutional websites to enhance their visibility and accessibility.
- Make the gender dimension mandatory in vocational and other professional training and learning programs, e.g., via gender-sensitive learning components and peer-to-peer training/mentoring specifically for women.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The women innovators interviewed for the **FLIARA** study demonstrate strong abilities in sustaining relationships with collaborators, clients, (local) communities, and decision-makers to advance their initiatives. For example, one innovator invites community members and the mayor to on-site events. Further insights from the FLIARA study inform the following best practices for supporting women in developing stakeholder engagement capacities:

- Leveraging the expertise of participating women by giving ample space for peer-to-peer learning within any program.
- Using online or blended learning formats for flexibility, complemented by in-person events to foster networking and lasting relationships.

Other examples:

- The MORE project - which focuses on training opportunities and qualifications of rural EU women - provides online trainings in cooperative entrepreneurship, governance, and examples of successful women-led rural cooperatives and includes stakeholder cooperation modules and equips women to build supportive rural business ecosystems using interactive soft skills and enterprise circle methods.
- The **LIAISON Project's How To Guide 'Achieving Impact'** shows how the output of innovation groups in agriculture can have a lasting impact. LIAISON centered on facilitating successful partnerships for innovation.
- Political foundations in Germany and non-governmental and civil society organizations in other European countries offer education on civic engagement and democratic participation.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Innovation and gender equality are essential for sustainable agricultural development, with women innovators in rural Germany already demonstrating strong relational skills that advance their initiatives. To fully unlock this potential in other women, targeted capacity-building, including stakeholder engagement, advocacy training and covering political and institutional contexts, is crucial. Including this in education and training in agriculture and rural development is essential, with learning units ideally incorporating gender-sensitive components and peer learning.

Strengthening stakeholder engagement capacities yields long-term advancements in women's leadership and business development capacities. Programmes that empower female agricultural and rural entrepreneurs, create inclusive innovation ecosystems and drive sustainable transformation in agriculture.

Further Reading

FLIARA Deliverable 3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

FLIARA Deliverable 7.4: Practice Abstracts – batch 2. Practice Abstract on Political Participation (Publication expected on https://fliara.eu/deliverables/)

Interreg Europe Policy Brief "How to boost entrepreneurship in rural areas", April 2020. The brief points to several Interreg Europe projects (such as RuralGrowth and SOCENT SPAs) that explicitly emphasise building stakeholder networks and cooperation platforms, including rural shops, visitor economy businesses, and social enterprises. This approach fosters not only economic development but also broader community benefits, such as social cohesion or maintaining essential rural services. https://www.interregeurope.eu/sites/default/files/inline/Policy_Brief_-_How_to_boost_entrepreneurship_in_rural_areas.pdf

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Image courtesy of Dörte Wolfgramm-Stühmeyer, Landwirtschaftbetrieb Wolfgramm. Germany

Policy Brief DE04, 2025.

Maternity Leave Reform

"Rural entrepreneurship is stunted by insufficient coverage during maternity leave. The self-employed have a right to adequate financial compensation and health protection during maternity leave."

Executive Summary

Current legislative gaps regarding maternity leave expose self-employed women, particularly those in start-ups requiring continuous management, to considerable financial and health risks during pregnancy and early parenthood. Women play a key role in the sustainable transition of agriculture and in fostering the development of innovative, resilient rural communities. When it comes to rural women specifically, the FLIARA study finds that statutory maternity pays and leave for self-employed women are essential for them to realise their innovative ideas and reduce interruptions in entrepreneurial activities. Urgent reform of German federal maternity leave legislation is necessary to improve the quality of life and job opportunities in rural regions.

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The Challenge and Opportunity

- Currently Germany does not provide statutory maternity pay and leave for the self-employed, which hampers women to become rural innovators and realise their innovative solutions and products.
- Women that continue their activities regardless may return to work prematurely, with corresponding health risks.
- This situation undermines sustainable development of rural areas and jeopardises essential services rural communities rely on.
- A particular challenge exists for agricultural entrepreneurs, as their businesses require continuous management.
- While a farm relief system is in place for maternity protection, important gaps exist.

Providing adequate maternity leave and pay for self-employed women would unlock greater women-led innovation potential in agriculture and rural areas, fostering sustainable development and economic growth.

Policy Solutions

What's Needed in Germany

- A clear legal framework establishing maternity pay and leave for the self-employed, combined with the securement of long-term, sustainable funding.
- A potential funding source is mandatory contributions by self-employed individuals to the existing maternity protection compensation fund ("Umlagekasse U II"), which is currently financed solely through employer contributions.
- Special attention is due to conditions of self-employed in agricultural sectors, as existing measures don't always work in practice. The German farm relief system includes farm and household support during pregnancy and early motherhood.

However, gaps appear in staffing shortages, when eligibility is unclear (for non-main operators or part-time farmers), and when informal/alternative models of family farming are concerned.[1]

To remediate this situation in the farm relief system it is advisable to:

- Expand staffing and resource capacity. This is an employment opportunity for women and other persons (re-)entering the labour market.
- Broaden eligibility criteria: include part-time farmers, secondary farm operators, diversified farms and non-traditional farming.
- Simplify and streamline access for pregnancy and maternity cases, with easy extension of help when needed

[1] A 2024 survey by the agricultural magazine TopAgrar of its readers shows that 40% of respondents' farm relief applications did not yield in receiving support https://www.topagrar.com/betriebsleitung/news/das-meinen-top-agrar-leser-zu-betriebshilfe-in-schwangerschaft-und-mutterschutz-20003362.html ,https://www.topagrar.com/betriebsleitung/news/wer-schmeisst-den-hof-wenn-ich-schwanger-bin-20002976.html Access date 19 August 2025

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Supporting Evidence & Good Practices

Women interviewed as part of the **German FLIARA study** mentioned inadequate financial compensation during maternity and parental leave as a hindrance to their continued rural and agricultural entrepreneurship. Others mentioned relying on family support during pregnancy and early motherhood, and several started their innovation only after their children reached a certain age.

Trailblazing work in Germany is done by initiatives **"Maternity Leave for All!"** (which was started by a FLIARA innovator) and the **"Alliance Maternity Leave for Self-Employed"**. The latter includes lobbies of ecologically-minded farmers, wine producers, craftswomen, midwives, doctors and many others. https://mutterschutzfueralle.de/ https://mutterschutz-fuer-selbststaendige.de/das-buendnis/#wer.

Good Practices in Europe

The Maternity Leave for All! initiative lists following European examples:

- Netherlands: Maternity benefits are calculated based on the number of hours worked. This approach ensures that benefits align with the actual workload of self-employed individuals.
- Sweden: For pregnant women starting a business, maternity benefits are based on a comparable, industry-standard income. This method provides financial stability during the early stages of entrepreneurship.
- Austria: Self-employed women can choose between receiving a weekly allowance ("Wochengeld") of approximately €420 per week or funding for hiring business assistance during maternity leave. **This flexible model is of particular relevance for rural entrepreneurs**.

Conclusion & Call to Action

To ensure women's economic participation in rural areas it is essential **adequate maternity pay and leave are accessible to all professions**. This will safeguard health and professional activities before and after childbirth and foster sustainable development of rural areas. This requires an urgent implementation of the parental leave reforms, which include maternity leave for the self-employed, set out in the 2025 German coalition agreement.

Further Reading

FLIARA Deliverable 3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations – German Case Study Report https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

Factsheet on the FLIARA innovator that started the 'Maternity Leave for All!' initiative https://fliara.eu/innovator/johanna-roh/
Position Paper of the 'Maternity Leave for All!' Initiative of October 2025 https://mutterschutz-fuer-selbststaendige.de/wp-content/uploads/BMfS_Foderungspapier_Oktober-2025.pdf

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About FLIARA

The project is on a mission to create a more sustainable future by highlighting the role of women in agriculture and rural areas. FLIARA will boost understanding of the needs and challenges facing women leading innovative environmental and rural development practices in EU farming and rural areas.

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Image courtesy of Rocío and María Vera, Camporal. Spain.

Policy Brief ES01, 2025.

Financial gaps and opportunities for rural women-led innovation projects

Executive Summary

Women in rural areas are key drivers of innovation and sustainability, yet they face persistent barriers in accessing the financial resources needed to grow and sustain their initiatives. Evidence from across the EU highlights that rural women are often excluded from formal funding systems due to structural, cultural, and administrative constraints. This financial gap limits their potential to contribute to inclusive economic growth, social cohesion, and the EU's long-term rural development goals.

Despite the availability of European funds such as the ERDF, ESF+, and EAFRD, rural women frequently encounter difficulties in navigating complex application procedures, meeting eligibility criteria, or securing co-financing. Current funding mechanisms rarely consider the specific needs of women-led innovation in rural territories.

This policy brief calls for the creation of dedicated funding instruments, simplified access procedures, and locally grounded support structures to improve financial inclusion. Solutions such as cascade funding schemes, microloans, and targeted grant lines can enhance rural women's ability to innovate, lead, and contribute to the vision of stronger, more resilient rural communities set out in the EU Rural Vision 2040.

The Challenge

Women innovators in rural areas possess immense potential to drive local development, tackle pressing challenges, and contribute to economic growth. However, financial barriers often stifle their ability to transform ideas into impactful ventures. Addressing this gap is essential to fostering gender equity, promoting sustainable rural development, and unlocking untapped innovation. EU

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funding is needed to address this gap either in form of direct funding (or cascade funding) or through specific lines under indirect funds (ERDF, ESF+ or EARDF) to address the following specific challenges:

- Limited Access to Capital: Rural women innovators often lack access to formal credit systems due to insufficient collateral, credit history, or financial literacy.
- Social and Cultural Constraints: Gender norms in many rural regions restrict women's entrepreneurial activities, leaving them underrepresented in innovation ecosystems.
- Disparities in Policy Focus: Rural women are often overlooked in national innovation strategies, exacerbating gender and regional inequalities.

Policy Solutions

- Supporting the establishment of financial products and services that are specifically tailored to the needs of rural and women-led businesses. These might include microloans, grants for specific types of businesses, or funding pools dedicated to sustainable rural innovations.
- Simplifying the application processes for public grants and loans procedure to make it easier for entrepreneurs to access the necessary funds. Clear guidelines and support structures, such as local advisory services, could assist applicants throughout the process.
- Establishing support programmes specifically tailored to the needs of rural and women-led businesses to improve access to technical support and funding or incentivizing the submission of proposals from women.

Practical Tips

- Dedicated funding programmes could be launched at EU level through piloting cascade funding schemes. This type of schemes delegates the efforts of managing the calls for proposals and the delivery of funding to intermediate organizations based in the territory and in direct contact with final beneficiaries.
- At regional level, dedicated instruments could be foreseen linked to Smart Specialization Strategies which include the agro-food as priority sector.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

EMPOWOMEN – Cascade funding supporting women entrepreneurs in deep tech

EmpoWomen is a European Union-funded initiative under Horizon Europe, addressing the underrepresentation of women in deep tech sectors, particularly in widening countries. Despite growing interest in gender equality in entrepreneurship, only 15% of deep-tech startups are founded by women, and less than 10% of patents are filed by women innovators.

By providing €1,125,000 in cascade funding, as well as acceleration programs, mentorship, and investor connections, EmpoWomen is actively supporting women-led startups to break through systemic barriers. More information at www.empowen.eu

Spanish funding programmes

In Spain, several initiatives provide financial support and resources to women entrepreneurs in rural areas. Notable programs include:

1. Programa de Apoyo Empresarial a las Mujeres (PAEM)

The PAEM program, promoted by the Instituto de las Mujeres and the Cámara de Comercio de España, with co-financing from the European Social Fund, aims to support women with business ideas or plans to modernize and expand existing enterprises. It offers microcredits of up to €30,000 without requiring third-party guarantees, along with business information, personalized advice, and training. Consult the following link for further information: www.inmujeres.gob.es.

2. Programa Desafío Mujer Rural

Launched by the Instituto de las Mujeres and co-financed by the European Social Fund, this program seeks to stimulate female entrepreneurship in rural areas to bridge the gender gap in employment and entrepreneurship. It provides technical training, personalized advice, and access to the Rural Women's Entrepreneurship Portal, facilitating product commercialization and information on available aids.

3. Proyecto Mentoras Rurales 'Crecemos Juntas'

Developed by the Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación (MAPA) in collaboration with Caixabank, this project connects rural women entrepreneurs with experienced mentors. It offers personalized guidance and advice, organizes workshops, networking events, and training sessions to support the growth and consolidation of businesses led by rural women. These programs exemplify Spain's commitment to empowering rural women entrepreneurs through dedicated funding and support structures. https://www.mapa.gob.es/es/desarrollo-rural/temas/igualdad_genero_y_des_sostenible/crecemos-juntas/

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Conclusion & Call to Action

This policy brief highlights the need to facilitate access to funding to women entrepreneurs and innovators in rural areas and calls for the establishment of dedicated funding and loans programmes. EU policy makers are called to establish cascade funding schemes for rural women while national and regional policy makers are invited to establish funding or lending programmes linked to smart specialization strategies or entrepreneurship and innovation supporting programmes.

Further Reading

www.cascadefunding.eu

https://www.guiafc.es/en/guia-de-oportunidades-de-financiacion-para-las-zonas-rurales-de-la-union-europea-ruraltoolkit/

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Image courtesy of Patricia Robaina, Ecofinca Selva Doramas. Spain.

Policy Brief ES02, 2025.

Family & Work Conciliation Policies for Women in Rural Areas

"Empowering rural women through work-life balance policies boosts innovation, well-being and gender equality in local communities."

Executive Summary

Women in rural areas are central to sustainability and innovation, yet their roles are constrained by unequal caregiving burdens and inflexible work structures. The Spanish case study conducted within the FLIARA project (**Deliverable D3.3 – Case Study Report on Farming Women-Led Innovations in Spain**) reveals persistent gaps in family-work conciliation policies that limit rural women's opportunities to lead. Strengthening care services, flexible employment, and gender-responsive funding mechanisms can reduce these barriers and support women as innovators, entrepreneurs, and caregivers.

These findings align with the broader conceptual insights of **Deliverable D1.1 – Conceptual and Analytical Framework**, which frames care responsibilities as a structural dimension of women's agency and rural innovation. Furthermore, the practical strategies outlined in **Deliverable D1.4 – Initial Guidelines for Case Study Assessment and Selection** offer guidance for designing support programmes that reflect the lived realities of rural women.

Policymakers must adopt conciliation-focused measures that combine care infrastructure, flexible work models, and support for women-led rural innovation.

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The Challenge

- Women innovators in rural Spain balance farm leadership with caregiving, often without adequate support services such as childcare or eldercare.
- Women reported challenges in being recognised as decision-makers on farms and navigating male-dominated agricultural spaces.
- Farming requires high availability and often lacks formal structures like job-sharing, part-time options, or paid family leave.
- Infrastructure and service deficits: Poor access to broadband, transport, and local services further constraints women's ability to innovate and combine work and family life effectively.

Policy Solutions

Create local childcare and eldercare services

- Establish affordable and accessible care services in rural areas.
- Prioritise flexible opening hours to match rural work rhythms.
- Involve local communities in service design and management.

Encourage flexible work arrangements in rural sectors

- Promote part-time roles, job-sharing, and remote management tools.
- Support training on digital tools such as GPS livestock monitoring or online marketing.
- Incentivise employers and cooperatives to introduce flexibility.

Adapt funding criteria to women's realities

- Simplify application procedures and reduce bureaucracy.
- Make eligibility criteria more inclusive of informal or part-time projects.
- Ensure funding bodies understand the impact of care responsibilities on project timelines.

Strengthen support networks for women innovators

- Connect women through local, regional, and national platforms.
- Encourage peer-to-peer mentoring and shared learning experiences.
- Involve networks in policy design and programme evaluation.

Raise awareness on gender roles and shared responsibility

- Develop local campaigns promoting equal care distribution.
- Integrate family-work conciliation into agricultural education and extension programmes.
- Engage men in discussions on household roles and cultural change.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

FLIARA Spain Case Study (D3.3) & International Research: Highlight the urgent need for stronger work-life balance policies for rural women. The FLIARA Conceptual Framework (D1.1) identifies care, time, and social norms as key factors impacting their innovation. The FLIARA Initial Guidelines (D1.4) offer strategies for inclusive policy design.

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FLIARA Spain Case Study (D3.3): Shows rural women struggle with work-family balance, are underrepresented in leadership, and do most unpaid care work. Despite this, they lead innovative projects like organic farming and local food businesses, adopting sustainable practices and creating jobs, particularly for women. Tools like GPS tracking and online platforms aid in flexible management, but care services are lacking.

International Data (ILO, FAO, UNDP, World Bank, FRA): Confirms these challenges globally, showing a lack of flexible work and protections, disproportionate unpaid care work, and the positive impact of family-friendly policies. Digital care services show promise for inclusion.

Rural women are already innovating; systemic support is needed for sustainability.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Women in rural areas are already contributing to innovation, sustainability, and local development. However, without structural support to balance work and family responsibilities, their efforts remain undervalued and under-supported.

Access to childcare, flexible work, and fair funding mechanisms is not just about inclusion—it is about unlocking the full potential of rural communities. Investing in work-life conciliation means investing in gender equality, economic resilience, and social cohesion.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Policymakers should ensure that family-work conciliation is a core pillar of rural development strategies at EU, national, and regional levels.
- Funding bodies must adapt procedures and criteria to reflect the real needs of women balancing care and innovation.
- Local authorities and service providers should co-create flexible, affordable care solutions with rural communities.
- Networks and cooperatives should support peer learning, visibility, and leadership opportunities for rural women.
- All stakeholders must work to shift cultural norms around care and promote shared responsibilities.

Recognizing and supporting the multiple roles of rural women can foster vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable rural futures.

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Further Reading

Empowering Women-Led Innovations: Key Players In Realising The Long-Term Vision For Rural Areas

FLIARA D3.3: Case Study Report – Farming Women-Led Innovations in Spain

FLIARA D1.1 Conceptual and Analytical Framework

FLIARA D1.4 Initial Guidelines for Case Study Assessment and Selection

International Labour Organization (ILO) (2019). Childcare and Early Childhood Education: Policy Issues for Rural Women. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/economic-and-social-development/rural-development/WCMS_723991/lang--en/index.htm

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Cadena SER (2024). Arraigo, mercado laboral y conciliación: principales preocupaciones de las mujeres rurales en la Región de Murcia. https://cadenaser.com/murcia/2024/10/12/arraigo-mercado-laboral-y-conciliacion-principales-preocupaciones-de-las-mujeres-rurales-en-la-region-de-murcia-radio-murcia/

About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of Beatriz and Natalia Naroy Monzón, Ganadería Naroy. Spain.

Policy Brief ES03, 2025.

Strengthening the Commercialisation of Women-Led Rural Products and Services through Support Networks

"Empowering rural women in Spain by connecting innovation, visibility, and market access."

Executive Summary

In Spain's rural areas, women are generating high-quality, locally rooted products and services across agriculture, tourism, crafts, education, and culture. These initiatives not only support environmental sustainability and social cohesion but also represent powerful engines of economic resilience. Yet many remain invisible or commercially fragile due to weak market access, limited support structures, and a lack of coordinated promotion.

Evidence from the FLIARA project's Spanish case study (Deliverable D3.3) confirms that rural women often operate alone, selling through informal or digital channels, with limited access to commercial infrastructure, branding, or business development tools. While national programmes like Desafío Mujer Rural and PAEM offer relevant resources, these are often underutilised or not integrated into a coherent, gender-responsive commercial ecosystem.

This policy brief proposes the development of a support network specifically aimed at commercialising women-led rural products and services. This would connect existing resources, offer tailored support, and promote visibility, collaboration, and access to strategic markets—contributing directly to the EU Rural Vision 2040 objectives of stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas.

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The Challenge

- Fragmented and informal market presence: Many women entrepreneurs sell their products locally or online in small volumes, without stable channels or scale-up opportunities. Women also do not dispose of communication and marketing skills needed to commercialize their products or services.
- Limited access to support tailored to rural, gendered needs: General business programmes often do not consider the realities of micro-scale, care-constrained, or seasonal female entrepreneurship.
- Lack of structured branding and promotion tools: Few opportunities exist for women to co-brand, certify, or jointly promote their products under a shared rural women identity.
- Underrepresentation in cooperatives and value chains: Women remain marginal in many agricultural and craft cooperatives and often lack support for joining or founding such networks.

Policy Solutions

Establish regional support networks for rural women's commercialisation

- Coordinate existing programmes (e.g. *Desafío Mujer Rural*, *PAEM*, *AMFAR*) into regional ecosystems with common objectives, communication tools, and shared logistics.
- Support access to branding, packaging, distribution, and consultancy services for rural women-led initiatives.
- Encourage the development of joint platforms (physical or digital) to showcase and sell products under collective identities (e.g. *Hecho por Mujeres Rurales – Made by Rural Women*).

Promote collaborative business models and cooperative innovation

- Fund and mentor the creation of inclusive cooperatives, especially in sectors where women are underrepresented (e.g. agri-tourism, food processing, artisan crafts).
- Support horizontal learning and interregional collaboration between women entrepreneurs through exchange programmes and mentoring.
- Provide legal and administrative assistance to facilitate cooperative formation in rural contexts.

Leverage public procurement and territorial branding

- Create local quotas and simplified procedures to include women-led businesses in public procurement (e.g. school meals, hospital food, regional fairs).
- Encourage inclusion of women-led products and services in tourism routes, quality labels, and regional development branding efforts—especially under shared identifiers such as *Hecho por Mujeres Rurales* (*Made by Rural Women*).
- Include women-led enterprises in Smart Villages strategies and Local Action Group (LAG) activities.

Boost digital and commercial skills through targeted capacity building

- Fund training programmes in digital commerce, storytelling, marketing, and pricing strategies.
- Promote women's participation in national and international fairs and virtual marketplaces.
- Provide continuous advisory services and peer mentoring via local support centres.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

FLIARA Spain Case Studies (D3.3): Highlight that while rural Spanish women create diverse sustainable products, they struggle with commercial success due to reliance on informal promotion and seasonal markets, lacking institutional scaling and visibility support. Innovation is often limited by time, tools, and network coordination.

FLIARA Conceptual Framework (D1.1): Supports this by identifying visibility and market access as crucial for women's innovation. The Initial Guidelines (D1.4) offer recommendations for supporting women's entrepreneurial paths.

Existing Initiatives: Several initiatives offer a foundation for a stronger network:

Desafío Mujer Rural (MAPA): National program with training, business support, and a digital promotion platform.

PAEM (Chambers of Commerce): Business support program with widespread access points.

Ganaderas en Red: Grassroots network for female livestock farmers offering mutual support and advocacy.

Red de Mujeres del Mundo Rural de Álava: Local intergenerational network promoting women's economic empowerment.

Lánzate Rural: Project focused on building rural women's entrepreneurial skills through training and mentoring.

Despite existing efforts, rural women's innovative potential is hindered by limited market access and support for scaling. A more cohesive network building on existing initiatives is needed.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Supporting the commercialisation of women-led products and services is not only about economic empowerment—it is about recognising the full value of women's contributions to rural sustainability, culture, and community resilience.

A dedicated support network for rural women's commercialisation can strengthen regional economies, reinforce social cohesion, and advance Spain's commitment to gender equality and rural development in line with the EU Rural Vision 2040.

CALL TO ACTION:

- National and regional policymakers should create integrated support systems that connect existing programmes and fill gaps in visibility, training, and branding.
- Local authorities and development agencies must facilitate women's access to markets, infrastructure, and public procurement opportunities.
- Civil society and rural networks should lead co-creation efforts, ensure inclusive governance, and amplify women's voices in commercial strategy.
- EU and national funding instruments should prioritise collaborative, women-led models as key drivers of innovation and sustainable rural development.

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Further Reading

FLIARA Project – D3.3 Case Study Report – Farming Women-Led Innovations in Spain

FLIARA Project – D1.1 Conceptual and Analytical Framework

FLIARA Project – D1.4 Initial Guidelines for Case Study Assessment and Selection

Programa Desafío Mujer Rural – MAPA

PAEM – Cámaras de Comercio

Ganaderas en Red

Lánzate Rural

Red de Mujeres del Mundo Rural de Álava

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FLIARA Ambassadors during the 3rd FLIARA CoP

Policy Brief EU01, 2025.

Spotlighting Rural Women in Sustainable Innovation

"Spotlighting rural women engaged in sustainable innovation strengthens networks, fosters experience exchange, and empowers them to unlock their potential"

Executive Summary

Rural women play a crucial role in sustainable agricultural innovation, yet their contributions often go unrecognized. This policy brief highlights a proven method to spotlight these women, strengthen their networks, and enhance visibility. By selecting key female innovators, documenting their experiences, and fostering a supportive community, this approach promotes knowledge exchange and leadership. Lessons from the FLIARA project demonstrate that regional and national initiatives can be equally effective, with informal networking preferred. Policymakers should support tailored programs that empower female innovators, facilitate peer learning, and ensure accessibility through localized engagement strategies.

The Challenge

- Women working in farming in rural areas are often not seen beyond a limited group of insiders.
- Although many women have extensive networks there are also issue in relation to networks between women active in innovative work.
- There is a lack of female role-models in farming and rural areas. So this is important: "If You See It, You Can Be It."

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Policy Solutions

Select women that take key role in sustainability innovations in farming and rural areas.

- Consider multiple dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental, cultural.
- Use an assessment framework (see Initial Case Study Assessment and Selection Framework for an example).
- Make a good choice on the geographical area to like to address. This can be regional, national, etc. All choices are good, but it is good to make a choice.

Talk with these women on their innovation journeys

- Ensure their participation is based on informed consent.
- Use a semi-structured interview approach to cover all relevant topics while allowing women to share their experiences in their own narrative.
- Capture photographs as part of the documentation.

Make a one-page profile of the women's innovative activities.

- Use a standard layout that includes text and visuals.
- Obtain consent from the women using a designated form.
- Publish the profiles on a website and social media.

Select ambassadors among the women considering

- Availability for workshops
- Strong communication skills
- Diverse representation of women and innovation journeys
- Buddies assigned as primary contacts for ambassadors

Organize community of practice events with ambassadors and others.

- Discuss innovations
- Focus on solutions and learning experiences rather than just problems
- Capture video clips and photos for social media
- Involve policymakers and other stakeholders
- Share outcomes through various media channels

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

This approach was successfully implemented in the **HORIZON EUROPE** project **FLIARA** (Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas). The initiative engaged women from 10 EU Member States and established regional communities of practice across Europe (Atlantic, Mediterranean, Nordic, CEE). The results indicate that this model can be equally effective at national or regional levels.

However, language barriers limited participation for some highly innovative women, as English was required for communication. Additionally, the high cost of long-distance travel posed challenges, suggesting that a smaller geographical focus may be more practical and impactful. Given the diverse farming and environmental contexts across Europe, highlighting women innovating within the same region may offer greater relevance and inspiration.

Another key insight was the preference for **informal social media networking (WhatsApp)** over more structured professional platforms like **LinkedIn**, which was initially provided by the FLIARA team.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Empowering rural women in sustainable innovation strengthens agricultural resilience and fosters inclusive progress. The success of the FLIARA project highlights the effectiveness of spotlighting female innovators, facilitating networking, and engaging policymakers. Regional and national initiatives can replicate this model, ensuring accessibility and relevance.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Policymakers should fund localized programs supporting female-led innovation.
- Organizations must prioritize informal networking channels to enhance engagement.
- Stakeholders should facilitate mentorship, training, and visibility opportunities

By investing in these strategies, we can amplify women's contributions and drive meaningful, sustainable change in rural communities

Further Reading

www.fliara.eu

Innovators - FLIARA Project

Ambassadors - FLIARA Project

Initial Guidelines for Case Study Assessment and Selection https://zenodo.org/records/14045179

Silvia Sivini, Annie Roos, & Irene Leonardelli. (2024). D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations. FLIARA. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14045390

Strategic Action Plan https://zenodo.org/records/14045414

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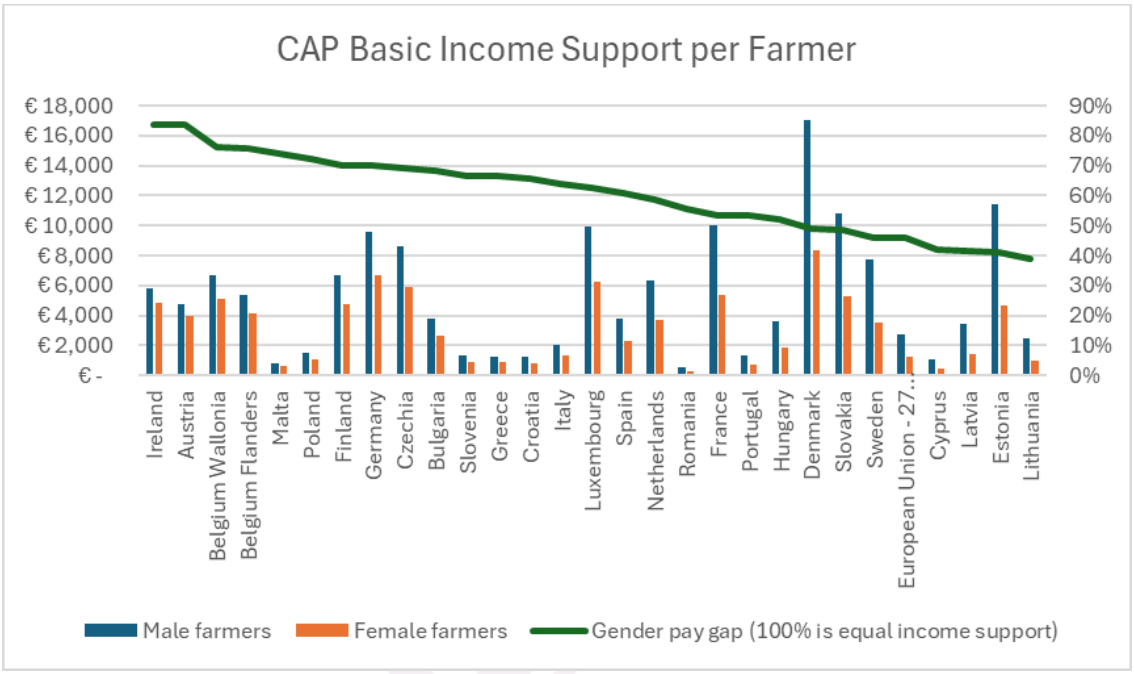
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Based on Eurostat and EC 2023

Policy Brief EU02, 2025.

Apply Gender Mainstreaming in Farming and Rural Areas

"Equality between women and men is a core principle of the Union and gender mainstreaming is an important tool in the integration of that principle into to the CAP. There should therefore be a particular focus on promoting the participation of women in the socio-economic development of rural areas, with special attention to farming, supporting women's key role. Member States should be required to assess the situation of women in farming and address challenges in their CAP Strategic Plans. Gender equality should be an integral part of the preparation, implementation and evaluation of CAP interventions. Member States should also strengthen their capacity in gender mainstreaming and in the collection of data disaggregated by gender." (EU Regulation on CAP Strategic Plans, preamble 33)

Executive Summary

Apply the method of gender mainstreaming to support (grant) mechanisms in farming and rural areas. Gender mainstreaming involves that gender will be on the agenda of all stages in all policies to be made. Applying gender mainstreaming is a principle included in the Comon Agricultural Policy of the EU:

Equality between women and men is a core principle of the Union and gender mainstreaming is an important tool in the integration of that principle into to the CAP. Currently, uptake of gender mainstreaming in the domain of farming and rural areas stays behind; using this method is instrumental to achieve more equality between women and men. Introducing this method to all policy initiatives is an important step forward.

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The Challenge

- Most grant systems support masculine styles of farming: more hectares = more grants, innovation in machinery as toys for boys
- Only a minority of farms, farmland and farming output is managed by females.
- For more feminine styles of farming (whether they are executes by males or females) there as less or no support.
- Many schemes are formally gender blind, but implicitly they post a picture of a farmer is a man on a tractor and this is was supported (there is an implicit gender bias).
- Farmers organisations that talk with authorities reflect this situation as being an 'old-boys network'
- Information does not always reach the proposed recipients of a programme.
- Gender mainstreaming, although a principle in many policy documents, is often not applied adequately.
- In the Common Agricultural Policy gender is part of the specific objectives but not of the result indicators and is so no part of every step in the policy cycle

Gender in specific objectives of CAP

> 'to promote (…) gender equality, including the participation of women in farming'
>
> [EU Regulation on CAP Strategic Plans, Article 6-1h]

Policy Solutions

- There is a lot of information and many practical tips on how to perform gender mainstreaming at the website of the European Institute for Gender Equality: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming
- Gender mainstreaming a cyclical process. In every step of the policy cycle gender should be taken into account. It is not sufficient to take gender into account in the definition of policies, but also in planning, implementation and policy evaluation gender aspects must be on the agenda.

Practical Tips

- Stereotyping: Go beyond traditional gender roles in presenting and illustrating polices
- Representation: Ascertain that interest and matters are discussed with representatives of all genders.
- Beneficiaries of policies. Consider explicitly who will be addressed by the policies and include a gender inclusive approach into the proposed beneficiaries.
- In many farms formal farm managers are male and have a formal say about important decisions. Look for ways to enhance a better gender representation in the farming sector to formal decision making powers.
- Family farming is, also in many pollical ideologies, an important backbone of European farming. Many farming families have traditional gender roles and a step towards modern European family relationships is wanting from a gender perspective.
- Farming and rural areas have often more traditional gender roles than in urban contexts and this context has often been ignored by gender emancipation policies. Do not forget the basic first steps of gender mainstreaming as they may no have been taken yet.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

- Only a minority of farms are managed by female famers (Eurostat)
- Farms managed by female farmers are in average a lot smaller than male managed farms
- Mains support system in the Common Agricultural Policy is the Basic income support for sustainability (BISS), which is primarily based on a contribution per hectare held. Based on the different in size of the farms a large gender cap in financing farms can be expected

In FLIARA is has been found that there is a large diversity between female-led farms. However, many share several of the following characteristics:

- An orientation towards multi-functionality, not only within farming, but also outside farming
- Involvement of people from the local environment in farm work and beyond
- Involvement of family members
- An orientation towards several dimensions of sustainability: economy, social, environment, culture
- More links to rural development of the area they are situated
- Engaging in short chains, more direct interaction with consumers
- More often than male-managed farms these are run by new entrants into farming
- More activities per hectare of the farm

Conclusion & Call to Action

Start applying the method of gender mainstreaming by testing for every policy initiative whether the gender dimension has been addressed appropiately. Use the method of gender mainstreaming to do so. There are a lot of practical tips and experience around on how to use this method. By applying tyhis method to the domain of agriculture and rural areas, further knowledge in gender inclusieve polcies will develop.

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Further Reading

www.fliara.eu

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About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of Santiaga Sánchez Porcel. La Ruta de Santiaga. Spain.

Policy Brief EU03, 2025.

How women-led innovations can contribute to EU Rural Vision 2040

"Women-led innovations are already shaping the sustainable, inclusive and vibrant rural futures envisioned by the EU. Their recognition and support is a strategic necessity."

Executive Summary

Women across rural Europe are key drivers of innovation, leading transformative initiatives in sustainable agriculture, rural entrepreneurship, community-based services, and cultural revitalisation. Their contributions align closely with the objectives of the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (EU Rural Vision 2040), which aims to foster Stronger, Connected, Resilient, and Prosperous rural territories by 2040.

This Vision presents a comprehensive roadmap for the revitalisation of Europe's rural areas, positioning them as attractive, inclusive, and dynamic places to live and work. Supported by a Rural Action Plan, it outlines concrete flagship initiatives and support mechanisms in areas such as digitalisation, climate resilience, participatory governance, and local economic diversification.

Yet, despite their central role, women's contributions often remain undervalued or invisible, hindered by persistent barriers in access to resources, decision-making spaces, and institutional support. Projects such as FLIARA demonstrate that gender-sensitive, structured approaches are effective in identifying, amplifying, and scaling women-led rural innovations across Europe. These approaches offer concrete, adaptable models that can inform and strengthen broader rural policy frameworks.

Policymakers are urged to embed gender equity into the heart of rural development strategies, recognising women not only as beneficiaries but as active agents of sustainable transformation.

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The Challenge

- Women innovators in rural areas remain underrepresented in policy frameworks and rural development programmes.
- Structural barriers such as limited access to land, finance, training, and recognition hinder the full potential of women-led initiatives.
- Informal innovation often thrives in rural contexts but remains largely unrecognised by formal systems, lacking the institutional frameworks needed to support its expansion and integration into mainstream rural development strategies.
- Gender is still insufficiently addressed in most national rural innovation strategies and EU rural instruments.

Policy Solutions

Select and support women leading sustainability innovations in rural areas

- Identify women innovators across diverse rural typologies (remote, peri-urban, depopulated, etc.) and sectors (agriculture, circular economy, social services, cultural heritage).
- Apply intersectional and sustainability criteria such as those tested in EU-funded projects like FLIARA.
- Use participatory methods, such as narrative interviews and consent-based profiling, to empower women to share their innovation journeys.

Demonstrate their relevance to the EU Rural Vision 2040

- Map women-led innovations against the Vision's four pillars:
  - **Stronger**: Local economic diversification, short value chains, intergenerational farming.
  - **Connected**: Use of digital tools for marketing, knowledge exchange, and e-commerce.
  - **Resilient**: Agroecological practices, water-saving technologies, and renewable energy.
  - **Prosperous**: Creation of local jobs, community services, and social cohesion.
- Recognise these contributions in local, national, and EU-level rural development plans.

Create inclusive innovation ecosystems

- Ensure that women innovators are actively included in CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) networks, AKIS (Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System), Smart Villages and digital hubs.
- Provide accessible and flexible funding instruments, adapted to small-scale and early-stage innovations.
- Facilitate partnerships with local authorities, research institutions, and civil society to scale impact.

Promote visibility, exchange, and peer learning

- Publish innovation profiles using standardised templates, integrating storytelling and visual elements.

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- Select ambassadors with communication skills and diverse innovation pathways to lead by example.
- Organise community of practice events and mentorship schemes that prioritise experience-sharing and informal learning.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The EU Rural Vision 2040, supported by its dedicated Rural Action Plan, provides a roadmap for future-ready rural areas based on four core pillars: Stronger, Connected, Resilient, and Prosperous. The Vision aligns with broader EU policy frameworks such as the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy, and the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, reinforcing the need for inclusive and sustainable rural transformation.

Findings from the FLIARA project confirm that women-led innovations are tangible drivers of this agenda. They foster ecological transition, enhance social cohesion, and revitalise local economies. However, such innovations often develop without institutional support, relying instead on personal resilience, family networks, and informal collaborations.

One example is the **FLIARA Conceptual and Analytical Framework (D1.1),** which demonstrates that rural innovation must be understood through a gendered and territorial lens. It presents a multidimensional approach to sustainability and highlights the systemic barriers women face in rural ecosystems.

Similarly, the **FLIARA Initial Guidelines (D1.4)** operationalise this framework, offering a structured method to identify, assess and showcase women-led innovations. These include:

- A selection matrix covering sustainability dimensions and territorial typologies.
- Semi-structured interview protocols that enable women to narrate their trajectories.
- Tools for visibility (e.g. innovation profiles, ambassador networks, social media strategies).

Other initiatives—such as the EIP-AGRI focus groups on gender and innovation, Horizon Europe projects on rural inclusion, or national-level Living Labs—can also serve as references for adapting and institutionalising support for women-led rural innovation.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Women-led innovation is a strategic asset for achieving the EU Rural Vision 2040. Their initiatives offer tested, locally embedded models for a greener, fairer, and more resilient rural Europe.

CALL TO ACTION:

- **EU and national policymakers** must mainstream gender into rural innovation strategies and instruments.
- **Local authorities and CAP networks** should create tailored support for women-led initiatives, particularly in under-served territories.
- **Research and innovation actors** must co-create knowledge with rural women and prioritise inclusive innovation ecosystems.
- **Civil society organisations** should enable peer networks, mentorship, and visibility platforms for women innovators.

Investing in women-led innovation is essential to realising the ambitions of the EU Rural Vision 2040.

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Further Reading

FLIARA Project Website

D1.1 Conceptual and Analytical Framework

D1.4 Initial Guidelines for Case Study Assessment and Selection

D4.1 Strategic Action Plan

FLIARA Innovators and Ambassadors

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Image courtesy of Rita Porkka, Naturest Ltd. Finland.

Policy Brief FI01, 2025.

How women-led innovations can contribute to EU Rural Vision 2040?

"European Rural Vision 2040 can make a difference in rural Europe. However, gender aspects of the vision could be further strengthened."

Executive Summary

The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas is a European Commission initiative to develop a common European vision for 2040. However, it does not include explicit gender aspect in it. This policy brief aims to justify and provide suggestions to include gender aspects, particularly linked to women-led innovations to the EU Rural Vision 2040 and related action plan. We identify 20 proposals on how EU Rural Vision 2040 can enhance women-led innovations and gender equality in European rural areas.

The Challenge

- The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas is a European Commission initiative to develop a common European vision for 2040. It includes a comprehensive rural action plan to help rural communities and businesses reach their full potential in the coming decades.
- The EU Rural Vision 2040 has four areas of action titled 1) stronger, 2) connected, 3) resilient and 4) prosperous rural areas by 2040.
- However, the EU rural Vision 2040 does not address gender issues explicitly. This policy brief seeks to propose ways by which women-led innovations are linked to the four areas of action.

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Policy Solutions

Stronger: rural areas can become stronger through enhancing inclusivity and empowerment

- Firstly, the concept of performativity (Judith Butler) stresses that gender is not a natural identity, but instead is an ongoing or continuous state shaped by societal norms and expectations. The potential of performativity to induce change can be viewed as a bottom-up practice, where individual women, female collectives and female innovators initiate change by showing that things can be done differently.

- A feminist governance framework encompasses institutions (e.g., gender equality bodies) and policy-making tools (e.g., gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting) within political institutions to promote policy making that takes gender into account. For example, EU's LEADER programme and Local Action Groups (LAGs) can give priority to projects that have a strong gender focus, provide funding and support to women entrepreneurs and innovators, and promote networking and collaboration among women in rural areas.
- Make a good choice on the geographical area to like to address. This can be regional, national, etc. All choices are good, but it is good to make a choice.

Connected: developing inclusive rural innovation ecosystems

- While digitalization and infrastructure are considered as central means to enhance connectivity in European rural areas, also more targeted policies are also needed to secure entrepreneurial social spaces of innovation for women in rural areas (i.e. innovation ecosystems).
- Practical means for establishing and strengthening such innovation ecosystems include
  - networks of ambassadors for women-led innovations, e.g. such as created within FLIARA,
  - initiatives such as the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) and the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), and
  - knowledge sharing for example by the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) initiative, which has specific gender dimension in it.

Resilience: by advancing women empowerment

- EU Rural Vision 2040 mentions social resilience, but without a focus on gender. Yet, resilience is also connected to collective action by and for women.
- Cornwall (2016) notes that *"when women are able to come together and organise themselves to make demands, build constituencies and alliances, they are more likely both to succeed in making changes for other women and also experience for themselves the empowering effects of mobilisation"* (p.352).
- Collective female agency enhances resilience by fostering innovation through acquiring and sharing knowledge and developing social capital between local rural women and external support agencies.

Prosperity: women-led innovations contribute to growth

- Women-led innovations can potentially contribute to economic growth in rural areas through entrepreneurship and the development of economic practices.
- We advocate extending the concept of prosperity to consider sustainability and gender equality. This can take place by reimagining what sustainability means and by mainstreaming women-led innovations across rural areas.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices.

We have identified set of proposals for each of the four areas of action above. Yet, our FLIARA paper (Farrell et al. 2024) also identified common proposals working for more that one area of action. Figure 1 identifies 20 proposals on how EU Rural Vision 2040 can enhance women-led innovations and gender equality in European rural areas.

Common measures contributing to more than one of the four areas of action include:

- Considering and doing women-led innovations as practical means of reimagining rural sustainability;
- Justifying affirmative policies supporting women-led innovations;
- Transforming equality agendas into concrete policies;
- Doing feminist governance;
- Challenging and changing status quo; and
- Supporting collective female agency.
- Fading away biased innovation ecosystems

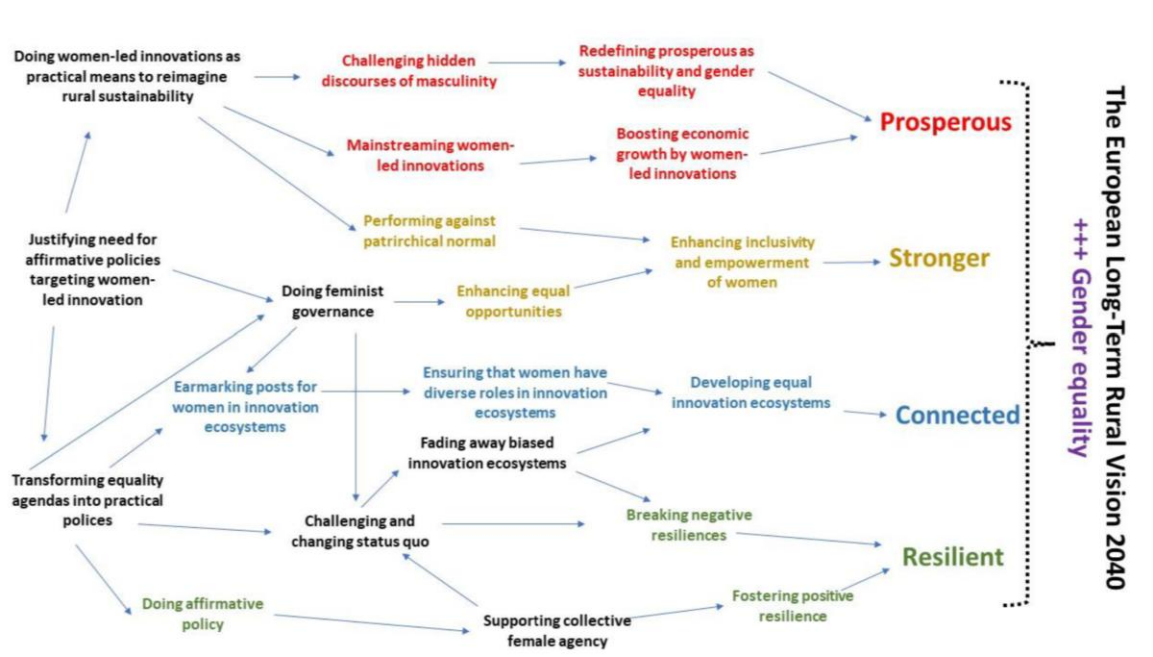


Figure 1. Copied from Farrell et al. (2024). Interconnected proposals to enhance gender equality through EU Rural Vision. Black proposals are relevant for more than one area of action.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

This policy brief has provided ways and justifications to enhance gender dimension in EU Rural Vision 2040 and related action plan. Women-led innovations should not only be targeted by policy to enhance gender equality, but also to contribute overall development of European rural areas towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous futures.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Policymakers should move from gender blind policy making towards recognition of gender equality as important, but yet to be achieved objective. Gender blind policy may reify existing challenges for gender equality.
- Women-led innovation offer a constructive showcase on successful female action.
- The EU Rural Vision 2040 includes 10 shared goals. Women-led innovation link to several of those goals including:
  - "V. Inclusive communities"
  - "VIII. Entrepreneurial, innovative and skilled people"
  - "X. Places of diversity"
- It is crucial to recognize that women-led innovations are not just instrumental to the movement towards gender equality, but can also contribute to economic growth, prosperous rural communities, resilience and connectivity through viable businesses.

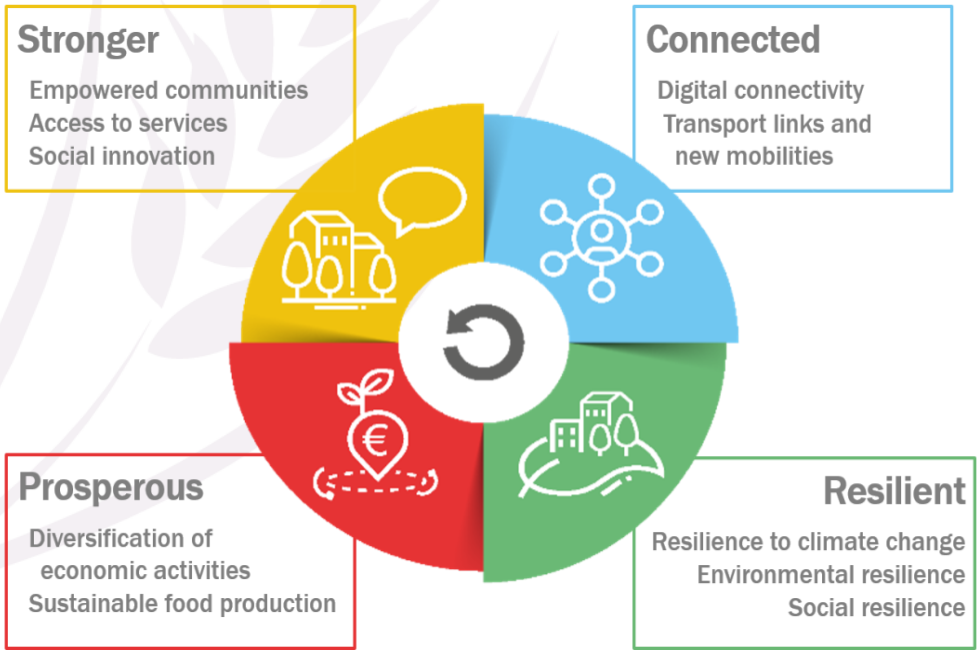


Figure 2. Four action areas of European Rural Vision 2040. At: https://rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-vision_en

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Further Reading

Maura Farrell, Simo Sarkki, Jasmiini Fransala, Aisling Murtagh, Louise Weir, Helene Ahl, Élise Lépy and Hannu I. Heikkinen. "Empowering Women-Led Innovations: Key Players In Realising The Long-Term Vision For Rural Areas". European Countryside Sciendo, 16, no. 4 (2024): 563-588. https://doi.org/10.2478/euco-2024-0029

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Image courtesy of Soila Nyman, Aira Kurikka, Kati Haipus, Eija Marjomaa, Lea Keränen, Yrttiaika. Finland.

Policy Brief FI02, 2025.

Toxic resilience and ways to overcome it

"Toxic resilience refers to gendered roles, norms, stereotypes and biased or gender-blind policies that undermine women's agency in persistent way. Such toxic resilience is often deeply rooted in rural cultures".

Executive Summary

Resilience is often considered as desirable characteristics of a system or an individual. However, when situations that are unfavourable are persistent against change, we can talk about dark sides of resilience. We combine concepts of resilience and toxic masculinity and introduce concept of toxic resilience that refers to persisting gendered inequalities and their underlying causes in rural areas. Toxic resilience works at the levels of norms and stereotypes, policy, and everyday practice and roles. We offer three proposals on how women-led innovation can link to dismantling and questioning toxic resilience.

The Challenge

- Toxic masculinity refers to those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are socially destructive, such as misogyny, homophobia, and violent domination. Such hegemonic masculinity can be considered as resilient blocking change towards more equal and non-destructive societal norms, roles, stereotypes and daily practices. When such hegemony is persisting and even self-reinforcing, we can speak about toxic resilience.

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Policy Solutions

Support collective female agency

- Collective female agency can be linked to communities of practice (e.g. those initiated by FLIARA), and also other kind of feminist coalitions based on caring for each other.
- Also shared subordinate experiences may motivate collective action. Women-led innovations are not apolitical, and include often collective aspect even if practiced by individuals or firms.
- The collective agency comes into for even if women-led innovations are not directly challenging patriarchal values, they often exemplify empowering roles for women thus indirectly challenging gender power structures.
- women to share their experiences in their own narrative.
- Capture photographs as part of the documentation.

Doing gender in everyday practices

- Doing gender in everyday practices links to recognition that unequal gender roles are not essentialist and pregiven but socially constructed and reified in action.
- One form of toxic resilience is the persistence of such roles and stereotypes and considering these as readily determined and unchanging facts.
- Hence doing gender in everyday practices, also through women-led innovations can show alternatives and also that break narrowly thought roles and stereotypes linked to gender.

Plan and implement affirmative policies

- Affirmative policy could offer tailored support for rural women innovators.
- Affirmative action means that certain groups that are in disadvantaged position get special attention and more opportunities from the policy side than groups that are not in disadvantaged position.
- Gender is one basis for affirmative policy. However, for example, Nordic gender-neutral policy ideal hinders targeting affirmative actions exclusively for supporting women's participation in rural economic activities. This does not recognize existing and persisting inequalities.
- Until gender equality is achieved, women innovators should be targeted by affirmative policies that level the playing field.

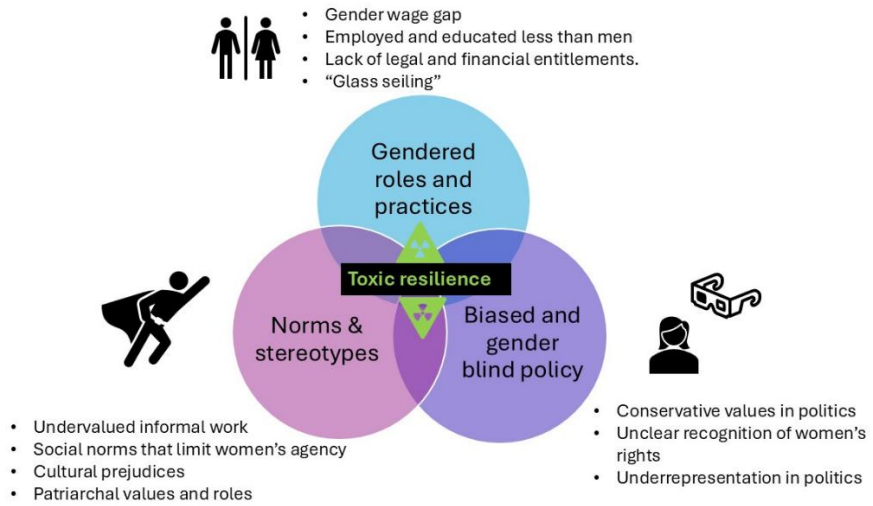


Figure 1. Components of toxic resilience

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The concept of toxic resilience emerged during FLIARA work on developing framework for the whole project. We started to screen existing challenges for rural women following STEEP (social, technological, Economic, Enviornemntal, Policy) categories. The framework document includes extensive list of such challenges, that were used to build the figure 1 in this policy brief.

The best practices will be identified elsewhere in FLIARA products. Firstly, good practice and proposals for affirmative policies will be identified in WP 5 Policy booklet. Secondly, the FLIARA case studies within WP 3 identified tens of successful practices by rural women innovators and their innovation journeys showcasing women agency. Thirdly, the work in FLIARA WP 2 consider future options to enhance gender equality and sustainability in rural areas, which can consider alternative pathways and alternative end points for toxic resilience.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Toxic resilience can hinder goal of gender equality at the individual and societal levels. While resilience is often positive it has also dark sides, especially if interpreted as persistence and bounce-back resilience after disturbances back to the previously existing “normal”. The concept of toxic resilience can address and question the still occasionally persisting patriarchal norms, stereotypes, and roles. To overcome toxic resilience actions by policy makers and women innovators can play crucial roles.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Policy makers should not design gender blind policies, because they do not recognize underpinning reasons for gender inequalities, but instead design and implement gender sensitive affirmative policies. This is especially important in rural areas where biased norms and stereotypes are often stronger than in urban areas.
- Rural women innovators can help to break the toxic resilience by showing example of doing gender in non-stereotypical way.
- Collective female agency should be supported in each societal level from individuals to organizations, local decision-making forums and European policies. Collective female agency can be strong driver for gender equality, but also sustainability more widely, for example, in European rural areas.

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Further Reading

FLIARA Deliverable 1.1 on framework: https://zenodo.org/records/14045102

Maura Farrell, Simo Sarkki, Jasmiini Fransala, Aisling Murtagh, Louise Weir, Helene Ahl, Élise Lépy and Hannu I. Heikkinen. "Empowering Women-Led Innovations: Key Players In Realising The Long-Term Vision For Rural Areas". European Countryside Sciendo, 16, no. 4 (2024): 563-588. https://doi.org/10.2478/euco-2024-0029.

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Image courtesy of: Sanna Kallunki, Ruska Laukka. Finland

Policy Brief FI03, 2025.

Special targeted support for atypical rural SMEs

"Horse business is not a target for public subsidies. There is also a grey area between a farm and a horse farm"

"The activities are so innovative there were no existing guidelines on how to implement it in practice" •

"Still normal that woman takes care of small children, time away from developing the business, balancing between family and work challenging"

Executive Summary

In the FLIARA interviews and Community of Practice -events (CoP), female entrepreneurs from farming and rural sector emphasized that women are often engaged in SME operations that are relatively small scale and/or do not represent average rural operations, that are better recognized in regulations or CAP subsidy options. Such are, for example, horse stable farms, gathering based enterprises (berries, mushrooms, herbs) or nature and farming based tourism and wellbeing enterprises. This kind of exceptional small-scale rural and farming economies easily fall in between in different economic subsidy schemes and regulations, which are aimed at more traditional operations. For example, horse business is not in the core of food production but rather horse-based services and therefore horse farms also receive less CAP subsidies than many other animal farms even if they contribute to biodiversity and vitality of the rural areas.

In addition, these kinds of exceptional rural SME economies are often seasonal and bound to natural harvest seasons or annually and seasonally varying weather conditions, and because of this, their needs of additional or seasonal workforce is hard to anticipate. These kinds of often small-scale rural operations would benefit flexible and simplified hiring procedures of fixed term seasonal and short-term temporary work force.

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The Challenge

- Women led rural enterprises represent often quite atypical business ideas compared to traditional farming operations that are better covered by subsidies and regulations.
- Women led rural businesses are often small, sole or family based, enterprises
- Women led rural businesses are often bound to natural seasons (e.g. wild herbs or berries) or weather conditions (e.g. out-door tourism, wellbeing or therapy programs) and need of workforce is hard to anticipate.

Policy Solutions

CAP and rural policy schemes should be revised

- CAP and rural policies should cover better alternative utilization of farms and animals for non-traditional business schemes, such as green care activities, recreation and tourism.
- CAP and rural policies should recognise better atypical, but also smaller scale or part-time rural enterprises.

Simplify hiring procedures for temporary employees

- Small-scale, and often season and weather bound, rural operations should have flexible and simplified hiring procedures for fixed term or short-term temporary work force.
- Due to, for example, family arrangements, also rural female seasonal workforce would benefit easier short term or part-time, even ad hoc, employment opportunities when mutual widow appears with entrepreneurs for temporary employment.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

In the FLIARA interviews in Finland, but also in interviews in other partner countries and in the Community of Practice -events (CoP), female entrepreneurs from farming and rural sector emphasized that women are often engaged in atypical SME operations that are not well recognized and supported in rural policies. The need for renewing agricultural and rural policy schemes is evident if aim is to support women empowerment in rural areas and economies.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Women have had and still have essential, remarkable and innovative role in rural economies and culture in general. However, releasing the full and exceptional potentials of rural women for future necessitates revising rural policies to take into account different needs and starting points of innovative female rural enterprises compared to traditional male dominated rural economies. Empowering rural women in sustainable innovations strengthens agricultural and rural overall resilience and fosters inclusive and gender blanced progress.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Policymakers should widen the scope of subsidized rural economies to atypical farm related economies compared to traditional farming operations.
- Policymakers should recognize better the need for flexibility in hiring a seasonal, temporary and part-time workforce.

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- Policymakers should recognize better the needs of small and often sole, or family scale rural operations which often drop out, for example subsidy schemes due to too small size of operations.

By revising the rural policy strategies to cover better exceptional and innovative women led rural solutions, we can amplify women's contributions for future and support meaningful and sustainable change in rural communities.

Further Reading

Innovators - FLIARA Project

Ambassadors - FLIARA Project

https://en.isokummun.com/

https://palosaarenporotila.fi/

FARM ESCAPE – ESCAPE ROOM EXPERIENCE IN THE RANCH - Farm Escape

Ruska Laukka - Suomenhevospalvelut Kuusamossa

Yrttiaika

About FLIARA

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FLIARA measures to promote women' s contributions to sustainability innovations

Policy Brief FI04, 2025.

Co-creation platforms for rural women

"Women have a strong desire for collaboration, volunteering and mutual assistance"

"Greater cooperation between people and encouragement leads to change"

"Support for intergenerational cooperation is needed for vital and healthy rural areas"

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Executive Summary

Co-creation platforms offer support and facilitate exchange of information on alternatives, examples and good practices. In interviews and workshops, many women shared their desire for peer-to-peer support and collaboration between businesses.

A wide network would invigorate the self-esteem and morale of rural women. This stems from the difficult landscape for small businesses as expenses rise and many areas experience a decline in residents.

A national co-creation platform could consist of smaller local platforms working towards building successful collaborations and growing the bandwidth of small businesses.

The Challenge

- Small businesses have limited resources.
- Women-led enterprises may have difficulties in accessing specific networks e.g. in policy and economic-technological domains.
- Virtual networks or physical hubs for networking are rare in many rural areas despite that they are needed.

Policy Solutions

- Establish community engagement programmes.
- Connect schools with local action groups.
- Create connections between urban and rural areas.
- Create cooperation hubs.
- Strong involvement from municipality.

Practical Tips

Use women's strengths to facilitate platforms for cooperation:

- Appreciation of soft and social values
- Extensive educational background
- Organisation skills

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

FLIARA foresight activities included several steps to identify measures for promoting women's contributions to farm and rural sustainability innovations. The stakeholders proposed 333 measures for this end. These were analysed and categorised into 18 measures. The most efficient measures to increase women's contribution to sustainability innovations in the stakeholder view included organisations of platforms for co-creation and cooperation and provision of information about alternatives, examples and good practices.

Some differences could be observed within different rural contexts. Rural areas close to city needed adequate local services and facilities. Greatest need for cooperation platforms was found in rural villages. Rural villages can benefit most from information about alternatives, examples and good practices. (Source: FLIARA Deliverable 2.4)

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Networks are extremely important for any sustainability innovations, since hardly any single entrepreneur or innovator has all the ingredients of success at hand: finance, competences, facilities, access to markets, labour, advertising etc. Even if women were observed to have extensive networks as their special strength, they lacked access to specific kinds of networks. Provision of low threshold platforms for building networks can resolve many challenges that rural female innovators are facing in their work. Policy makers at different levels of action should facilitate, finance and organise establishment of these kinds of platforms.

Further Reading

https://zenodo.org/records/14045295/

https://fliara.eu/

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Image courtesy of Satu Palosaari, Palosaari reindeer and fishing farm Ltd. Finland.

Policy Brief No. FI05, 2025.

Visibility platforms supporting rural entrepreneurship and renewing rural image

"Policy makers usually look for visibility of activities they promote"

"Through social events you can increase visibility and build trust"

Executive Summary

Many rural areas suffer from a decrease of residents, especially young women. This has led to a rural image of a nonvital and deserted countryside. This rural image often paints rural women as traditional and one dimensional. For many rural areas this is an issue that needs addressing.

A visibility platform would bring rural women to the national spotlight. This platform would showcase different types of rural livelihoods and lifestyles as a continuous effort instead of campaigns, which have been fruitful but fall short in the long-term.

Visibility could be added by commercial campaigns, school visits and journalism.

The Challenge

- Initiatives in rural areas are not considered as important.
- Rural initiatives lack visibility with policy makers.
- Lack of funding of visibility campaigns.

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Policy Solutions

- Establish a community of rural leaders who bring visibility to rural areas.
- Increase market access and recognition.
- Involve more women in policy making.
- Increase visibility of the value of agricultural production and products.
- Promote adoption of working examples.

Practical Tips

- Establish networking events, conferences and platforms.
- Driven, open and innovative characters are needed.
- Success stories encourage others.
- Focus on reaching the right audience.
- Write and publish stories about local history and history makers.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

In foresight workshops, stakeholders found a number of sustainability issues in rural areas across Europe. Further research produced numerous sustainability innovations to address these problems. Stakeholders found 333 measures for women to contribute to sustainability innovations that would solve rural issues such as lack of novel practices, equality, capital and networks.

Organisation of platforms to provide visibility for innovative people and their insights was a popular measure. Visibility platforms drive forward fact-based policy making, involving people, new ways to organise local development and communality, as well as concerted action. This measure was more needed in remote rural areas in than other rural contexts. (Source: FLIARA Deliverable 2.4).

Conclusion & Call to Action

Farming and other rural livelihoods need more positive visibility to emphasise the importance of local food production and sustainability practices. A lot of work is being done, but the results should be more accessible and available for others to take up.

Further Reading

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Image courtesy of Moira Hart, Wexford Lavender Farm. Ireland.

Policy Brief IE01, 2025.

Improve access to finance to better support women-led rural and farm innovation

Access to finance at the right level and at the right time in the development of women-led rural and farm innovation is part of the key to success.

Executive Summary

Access to finance to start and develop an innovation remains a significant barrier limiting the potential for women-led innovation in rural and farming contexts. The challenge of accessing finance was highlighted by many women that took part in the FLIARA research in Ireland. Addressing this barrier is complex, as access to finance involves many interconnected aspects. This calls for policy action at a variety of levels, from more direct support to better monitoring of the issue.

The Challenge

There is greater room for women to play a leading role in reinventing farms and revitalising the rural economy. Access to finance is a key barrier inhibiting realising this important potential.

- Women-led rural and farm innovation comes in many forms, from livelihood focused businesses to innovations focused on a social mission. This calls for policy innovation and specific tailored finance supports to capitalise on the distinctive nature of women-led farm and rural entrepreneurship.
- Available finance can be difficult to access for a variety of reasons. There is a need to address issues that impact demand and uptake of both private and public finance.
- Existing public funding provides an important source of finance, however, there are still barriers impacting women leading rural and farm innovations engaging in the funding system, such as finding match funding, the bureaucratic nature of the application process and the time it takes to apply and receive funding.

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Policy Solutions

Stronger public grant support and interest free finance for women-led rural and farm innovation in areas such as:

- Grants for farm diversification, such as a dedicated programme that has a focus on women-led innovation within it.
- Rural innovation grants that directly aim to better harness untapped opportunities in rural areas as well as the role of women-led innovation in reinventing the rural economy towards a more sustainable future.
- More place-based finance for innovation, capitalising on specific local untapped opportunities to develop sustainability innovations, targeting women as one priority group.

Improve finance supports designed around more incremental business growth.

- Women-led innovation comes in many forms, where for some financial supports like accelerator grants can provide a correct fit. However, sometimes, as the FLIARA rural case study in Ireland showed, growth can be slow and more long-term, meaning it takes time before wider economic impacts are seen, such as new job creation.
- This calls for access to finance that responds to the demands of more incremental business growth and provides room for a different development pace.

Improve finance supports for different stages of business development (e.g. idea development, start-up, scale-up).

- Financial needs can change. Some rural women innovators note low start-up costs, but after this, finance was needed to facilitate business development after an initial start-up phase. That said, some of the FLIARA farm case study evidence highlights how early stages of innovation development can demand significant access to finance such as for access to land or to build business infrastructure.
- Depending on the nature and stage of the women-led innovation, financial need can differ greatly, calling for a variety of innovative finance supports, such as grants, microfinance, state-backed interest-free loans, and tax reliefs.

Break down pre-conceptions and information barriers impacting women accessing existing public and private financial sources.

- Pre-conceptions about banks attitude towards providing finance, as well as uncertainty about being able to re-pay loans, creates barriers that hindered women from taking this source of finance into consideration.
- The need for funding agencies to better understand small, farm and rural business also emerged. In this way, negative experiences of engaging with funders emerged in case studies and resulted in discouraging women from engaging with funding supports in the future.

Better understanding and addressing the shortcomings of existing public grants.

- While access to finance was an issue, it also emerged in the FLIARA research that existing public grants provided important financial support, such as through LEADER and Local Enterprise Offices.
- A frustration with the grant process is clear, however with, for example, some women expressing that their time is better spent focusing on their business rather than applying for grant support that can take a long time to receive, in some cases.
- Where match funding is needed this can be difficult to raise, as FLIARA farm case study evidence highlights.
- Conditions attached to grants can exclude some women leading innovations from being eligible.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

It is clear from FLIARA case study evidence that women-led innovation supports livelihoods in farming and rural areas. Women-led indigenous innovative businesses are often well embedded in the local rural area and community. There can also be a desire to give back to the community and foster local business collaborations. The women-led innovations studied as part of FLIARA in Ireland have important local impact.

FLIARA case study evidence also highlights how economic motivations, such as growing a large financially successful business from the innovation was something women could be cautious about and was not a primary driving factor for women leading innovation in some cases. Rather just growing to a stage where they had a micro yet viable enterprise and one that addressed local social needs or environmental issues could be a more central motivation. Women leading farm innovations may not aspire to develop a large business with high turnover but develop a business that complements the existing family farm, its scale and their own work-life balance choices. Due to the micro, and small nature of many of the innovative enterprises that were part of the FLIARA case studies impact was not necessarily strong on economic metrics such as turnover or job creation. However, these impacts can also emerge but take time. Starting an innovation may not commence with a business plan where a series of steps are followed but take a more organic pathway. Development to different steps may take a longer path, and establishing financial sustainability is built over time. It is important that the public and private finance system appreciate this and is designed to support this type of innovation.

More broadly, the case studies highlight the need for improved access to finance. FLIARA rural case study evidence identifies examples of women leading innovations that describe using their own resources (home office space, savings) in place of finance such as loans and grants. FLIARA case study evidence from Ireland provides indications that women can opt to self-finance to avoid risking loan debt. The case study evidence for example highlights prior business connections and engagement with banks was important to accessing loan finance giving confidence to approach the bank. However, this relationship was not often described.

We also need to better understand the gender dimension of access to public grants and private finance in rural and farming contexts. A gender gap in access to finance to support innovation and entrepreneurship is perceived. What data is available can overlook a rural versus urban breakdown. For example, Microfinance Ireland publish a gender breakdown of approved applications for its Microenterprise Loan Fund Scheme. This showed that in 2024, 33% of approved applications were from women. This gives us some insight however does not show the rural dimension. In addition, generally this type of data is not easy to identify. There are potentially lessons to learn from other sectors with gender imbalances. For example, gender balance in science is an issue and Science Foundation Ireland publish a Gender Dashboard showing gender disaggregated data for its funding programmes.

FLIARA's report 'D4.3: Benchmarking Initial Report' identified a number of promising measures from Italy supporting women leading rural and farm innovation gain access to finance:

- Supporting women based in mountain municipalities of Italy, the 'Innovative Mountain Women's Enterprise Scheme' provides grant support to finance investment in women-led business projects with high technological and innovative content.
- 'More Enterprise - Youth and Women Entrepreneurship in Agriculture' is a scheme provided by the Institute of Services for the Agricultural Food Market in Italy that supports women, as well as young people, intending to take over a farm or have done so in the previous two years. It does this by providing interest free finance support for business expansion and improving competitiveness.

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- The creation and development of innovative start-ups are supported through ‘Smart and Start Italia’ through financing projects between €100,000 and €1.5 million with interest-free, guaranteed financing that covers up to 90% of eligible expenses for women only start-ups (80% covered when not women-led).

Conclusion & Call to Action

The nature of women-led rural and farm innovation can create demand for particular types of finance supports. Future policy action is important to ensure there is a tailored supply of finance that fits with the nature of women-led innovation.

CALL TO ACTION

- Better recognition of the different scales and types of women-led businesses in the rural and farm economy and design finance supports accordingly.
- Improve public grant support and interest-free finance for women-led rural and farm innovation, as well as design supports to target different stages of business development.
- Address barriers impacting women accessing existing public and private finance sources, such as the administrative burden attached to grant support and pre-conceptions about banks.
- Improve understanding and monitor how women-led innovation gains access to finance, including better gender data on public funding and private finance for supporting enterprise in rural and farming contexts.

Further Reading

Farrell, M., Weir, L. and Murtagh, A. 2024. Farming Women-led Innovations in Ireland: Case Study Report 1 and 2 in Sivini, S., Roos, A., and Leonardelli, I. eds. FLIARA Deliverable 3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations., pp. 93-136. Available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

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Image courtesy of Helena Golden, Willow Woman, Ireland

Policy Brief IE02, 2025.

Improve skills training opportunities targeting women-led rural and farm innovation

Future policy supports should tailor skills training opportunities and availability better to the needs of women-led rural and farm innovation.

Executive Summary

The FLIARA project looked at women-led innovation as a journey that does not occur at one point and is a process over time. Innovating and developing an enterprise can take a series of steps. The FLIARA case study evidence from Ireland tells us that different stages and steps can call for different skills and competencies. This calls for education and skills training to be designed with this core idea in mind. This can then better support women interested and already involved in rural and farm innovation and entrepreneurship to develop sustainable businesses.

The Challenge

Addressing skills gaps appears to be one important part of the key to unlocking increased levels of women starting rural and farm innovations.

- To empower women as innovators and leaders in rural and farm-based innovative enterprises, training programmes must reflect their realities. They must be flexible, inclusive, practically applicable, and future-focused.
- Possessing essential skills and expertise can support taking first steps where women decide and prepare to develop an innovation.

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Policy Solutions

Direct targeting of enterprise and innovation training towards rural and farm women.

- This could enable those with the potential to become rural and farm innovators gain that missing piece of the puzzle to get them started on their innovation journey.
- Better embedding training that builds innovation skills and competencies in national rural development and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) measures is one way forward.
- This could involve mandating the integration of women-targeted training within national CAP Strategic Plans and rural development funding streams, ensuring they are not seen as optional but essential.
- Ensure flexible delivery of training, such as through online, hybrid, and community-based options. This is essential to help overcome transport, caregiving and time barriers.

Strengthen training infrastructure and improve access to upskilling options.

- Strengthen local training infrastructure and support partnerships between women's organisations, farming bodies, and education providers to create accessible, community-based training hubs in rural areas.
- Develop micro-credential and recognition of prior learning (RPL) systems that validate on-farm, intergenerational, or self-taught knowledge often held by rural women, allowing them to access further education or funding opportunities.
- Create and expand training initiatives that focus on key gaps and novel areas such as: digital literacy, e-commerce, financial skills, precision agriculture technologies, data management, and social media marketing, all tailored to the needs of rural and farm women.

Increase the availability of mentoring and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

- The need to build confidence and leadership skills as well as more widely assist women overcome 'the imposter syndrome' is crucial.
- A peer-based mentoring approach appears a promising way forward. This is also critical from a digital perspective to build confidence in using new tools and technologies.

Increase the availability of more flexible funding so that women can access support towards the cost of training specific to their needs and business innovation.

- Innovation skills vouchers for women could help to support the costs of training. This could be flexible to allow covering costs of short courses to longer more in-depth training.
- This should also include covering the costs of remote and online learning to ensure a wide range of options are opened. Rural areas have fewer higher education institutions present which means women innovating in rural and farming contexts can have limited local options at this level.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The women involved in the FLIARA case study research are those that have successfully navigated a path towards rural and farm innovation. Having the necessary skills and access to training to up-skill emerged as an important success factor, particularly in the innovation's early-stage development. The availability of courses through different agencies and organisations is noted as an important support.

The role of mentoring and peer -to-peer learning through networking also emerged as a part of the success factors that enabled women leading rural and farm innovation to continue to develop their

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competencies. Mentoring was not often identified as part of the early steps on the innovation journey. However, innovators felt they could have benefited from this to develop their innovation.

The need to build confidence and leadership skills also emerged with many women involved in innovation, feeling what is known as 'the imposter syndrome'. As women became more experienced in innovation this appeared to reduce, showing the importance of addressing this to assist emerging and early-stage women-led rural and farm innovation reach its potential.

Women-led innovation is found in diverse areas from food business to tourism and social enterprise. This calls for a very different skills base depending on the innovation area. The need for specialist skills and updating of skills particularly emerged as women moved into a more established phase of their innovation development. Women at a more advanced stage of innovation and business development pointed to improving business finance skills as gaps, such as building skills related to tax issues, marketing and wider financial business acumen.

FLIARA's report 'D4.3: Benchmarking Initial Report' identified a number of promising measures supporting women leading rural and farm innovation to build their skills and competencies:

- A potential promising practice from Ireland's case studies was 'ACORNS - Accelerating the Creation of Rural Nascent Start-ups'. This peer-led support network programme connects early-stage rural female entrepreneurs with 'lead entrepreneurs' to learn together and grow a business to accelerate their establishment and development. The capacity of this programme could be increased in Ireland so that it can reach more women.
- Ireland's case studies also identified the promising example of 'Skillnets', which is a programme that supports upskilling in partnership with industry in specific economic sectors. There are dedicated Rural Enterprise, Rural Food and Organics Skillnets currently providing training. More targeting of existing Skillnets to the needs of women-leading rural and farm innovation or a new dedicated Skillnet to address their specific needs could be future ways forward.
- Specific, targeted women-led rural entrepreneurship training programmes were identified in some countries. In Spain, entrepreneurship and innovation is focused on in the Rural Women Advancement Programme that supports women through training and mentoring. Implemented in several Member States, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology's EU co-funded programme Empowering Women in Agrifood supports early-stage women-led business develop their entrepreneurial path.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Improving access to adult and further education opportunities related to entrepreneurship and innovation for women in rural and farming contexts appears part of the key to unlocking increased opportunities. This includes women interested in starting-up an innovation as well as enabling women already on their innovation journey to further develop a sustainable business. There is also a need to understand this issue better and the gender balance of current uptake of adult and further education opportunities related to entrepreneurship and innovation.

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Call to action

- More direct targeting of innovation and business training supports for women in rural areas and farming.
- Increase the capacity of existing programmes so they reach greater numbers of women in rural and farming contexts.
- Ensure there is access to sufficient opportunities to enable women that have established their rural or farm innovation address arising skill needs and gaps.
- Understand the gender balance of access to entrepreneurship and innovation related training and adapt programmes to enable more balanced access as necessary.
- Prioritise gender-responsive skills training within CAP and rural development and innovation strategies.
- Invest in accessible, flexible training models that meet the realities of rural women's lives.
- Recognise informal expertise and provide accreditation pathways.
- Invest in rural connectivity and digital infrastructure as a foundation for inclusive access to up-skilling opportunities and growth.

Further Reading

Farrell, M., Weir, L. and Murtagh, A. 2024. Farming Women-led Innovations in Ireland: Case Study Report 1 and 2 in Sivini, S., Roos, A., and Leonardelli, I. eds. FLIARA Deliverable 3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations., pp. 93-136. Available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

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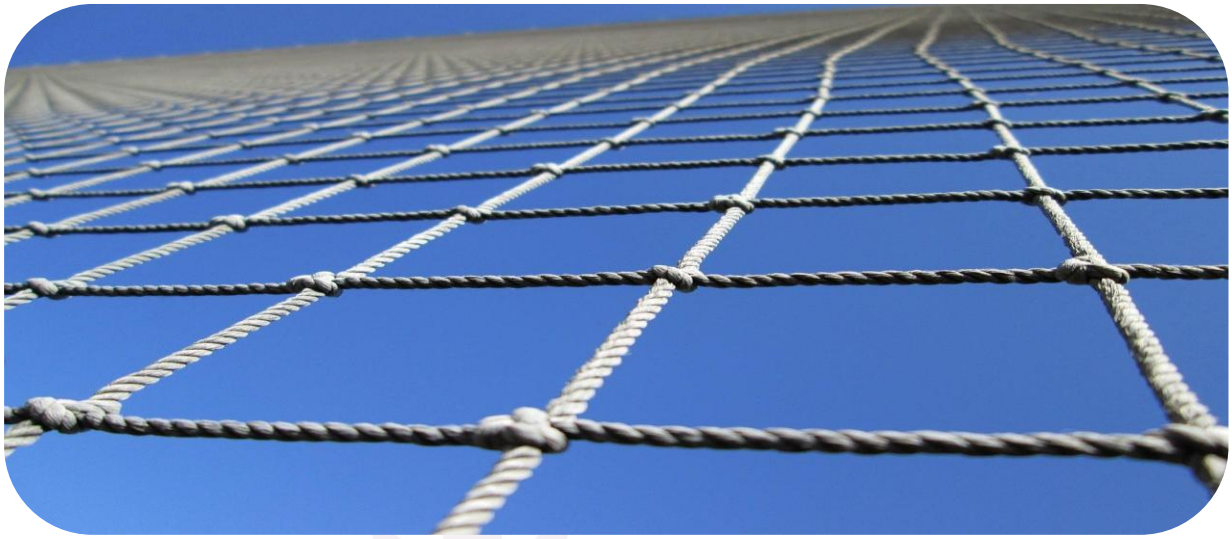


Image by PublicDomainPictures from Pixabay

Policy Brief IE03, 2025.

Women's Empowerment as a Driver of Rural and Agricultural Innovation

Greater policy focus on issues of women's empowerment and breaking down barriers impacting equality between men and women is a key part of the policy mix to better support women-led rural and farm innovation.

Executive Summary

Women that successfully navigate a path towards rural and farm innovation still must break down barriers. Empowering these women to overcome barriers that hold them back, such as 'imposter syndrome', lack of supportive networks, local attitudes and expectations is a key part of the policy challenge to better supporting women-led rural and farm innovation. For women in more vulnerable and marginalised circumstances, limitations on their empowerment are even greater, leading to a call for integrated supports that address the range of unique barriers to innovation faced by them.

The Challenge

Women-led innovation is a source of economic empowerment for women in rural areas and farming. However, wider social and cultural issues impact women's empowerment.

- Gender based discrimination, traditional social norms and stereotypes can impact women becoming involved in innovation and during the development of their innovation.
- Women in rural areas and farming are key drivers of innovation, sustainability and community resilience. Yet they remain underrepresented, therefore require greater visibility within farm and rural innovation ecosystems.
- Addressing this imbalance is not only a matter of gender equality but of rural economic and social development.

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Policy Solutions

Greater support for bottom-up community-led initiatives that address issues impacting rural and farm women's empowerment.

- Gender-responsive funding supporting improved gender equality would empower communities and women to develop initiatives that address the needs of local rural and farm women innovators.
- This is important so that women-led and centred initiatives are developed in response to local need. These should be accompanied by simplified application processes and grant-writing workshops.

Develop innovative interventions that can support a move away from reproducing traditional gender roles around farming and rural innovation.

- Potentially this could include initiatives that target the secondary or third level education sectors to highlight opportunities for women in farming and rural innovation, as well as success stories to encourage women in these types of careers.
- Better recognition for rural and farm women's innovative achievements, such as through local or national awards.
- Tackle the issue of women feeling 'imposter syndrome' and improve women's self-perception and sense of belonging in the spaces of rural and farm innovation. One potential route to assist change could be matching experienced and starting innovators to provide lived experience and peer to peer support.
- Finding ways to reach those that hold more traditional views or unconscious bias is important. This can be tricky but too often the message can more easily reach those who are already on board with the challenge and opportunity that improving gender equality holds.

Target support specifically towards women in more vulnerable and marginalised circumstances.

- Specific targeted supports appear needed otherwise supports may only reach those who are pre-disposed to success because they may not be impacted by wider socio-economic disadvantages.

Develop integrated entrepreneurial support hubs for rural and farm women

- Develop 'one-stop' hubs designed with a gender lens that provide business mentoring, digital training, childcare support and peer networking. These hubs would signpost other critical services, such as domestic violence, counselling and family support.

Establish inter-agency models to address barriers

- Promote coordinated local systems (e.g. combining legal, financial, educational, and farming supports) that address the unique barriers faced by rural women, particularly those affected by isolation or gender-based violence.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

While Ireland's FLIARA case study evidence highlights change happening around traditional cultural norms and gender roles, alongside this the persistence of more traditional ideas was also identified. For example, this could include negative local attitudes to women farmers, such as one woman feeling her farming was perceived as just a hobby and that she was not a serious farmer. Women involved in rural and farm innovation can also possess a lack of confidence and be impacted by the phenomenon of 'imposter syndrome'. The case studies highlight how this can

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decrease in time. As women gain experience and success their comfort and confidence tended to grow. Women starting out on their innovation journey, therefore, may need greater support to overcome the 'imposter syndrome'. The FLIARA case study evidence from Ireland also points to the wider value of recognising achievements, such as through awards and media recognition. This can then also spill over to influence local attitude change. Increasing actions in this area should benefit further change.

Women can also be drivers of initiatives that develop in response to local needs. Motivations for women-led farm and rural innovation were often fuelled by tackling social, environmental and cultural concerns and issues. For example, one case study highlighted how a rural innovator had identified the need locally to bring women together and had established a network for women in agriculture. This brought benefits such as helping support each other and build confidence. Building capacities to do this through funding supports is therefore important to unlock an untapped capacity for rural and farm women innovators to become drivers of rural revitalisation and resilience.

FLIARA case studies focused on women that had successfully navigated a path towards rural and farm innovation. One standout source of support in both rural and farm contexts was at a personal level where family and close social networks emerged as part of the favourable conditions supporting innovation. Family support came in different forms such as providing innovators with advice, support and resources (e.g. land, loans). Potentially rural and farm women living in vulnerable or marginalised situations that do not have a similar support system would be disadvantaged in starting and developing innovations.

Longford Women's Link: An integrated model of service delivery

- This award-winning model integrates social enterprise, gender-based violence supports and rural innovation to address complex barriers faced by women. It connects services across agencies, ensuring women are not left behind in rural development efforts.

FLIARA's report 'D4.3: Benchmarking Initial Report' also identified a number of promising measures:

- Specific programmes to support more women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) careers are identified in a number of countries, including Ireland (e.g. THRIVE, EXPLORE Engineering Alliance). These programmes provide potential models for further assessment and to learn from. This could provide lessons for policy actions to empower more women to develop careers in rural and farm innovation.
- To support more community-led initiatives that address local needs specific targeted calls for LEADER funding could be rolled out targeting women and addressing gender equality issues. The D4.3 report notes that in both Ireland and Italy calls for LEADER funding specifically targeting women are allowed for in their LEADER Programmes. It is important to ensure this is applied more widely in practice where local rural development needs require action on innovation and gender equality issues.
- A potential promising practice also from Ireland's case studies was 'ACORNS - Accelerating the Creation of Rural Nascent Start-ups'. This peer-led support network programme connects early-stage rural female entrepreneurs with 'lead entrepreneurs' to learn together and grow a business to accelerate their establishment and development. The capacity of this programme could be increased in Ireland so that it can reach more women.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

The range of policy actions outlined here aim to target barriers impacting women's economic empowerment through rural and farm innovation. The case for attention to different policy domains is made in this policy brief, from entrepreneurship supports to community-led initiatives that address specific local needs.

Call to action

- Fund and develop integrated women-specific rural and farm entrepreneurship programmes that address business and innovation issues as well as wider barriers facing women. More widely embedding a rural and gender equality lens into innovation and entrepreneurship strategies is also important to a wider and more fundamental policy shift.
- Making gender-responsive funding available to support community-led initiatives is important so that women-led and centred initiatives can be developed in response to local, place-based needs and opportunities.
- Actions are needed that improve the visibility of rural and farm women-led innovation as well as directly tackle the perpetuating of traditional gender roles and stereotypes in our communities and wider society.
- Ensure strong and targeted supports are available to women in more vulnerable and marginalised situations to assist breaking down barriers that impact their economic empowerment through rural and farm innovation.

Further Reading

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Image courtesy of Miriam and Rachel Hastings, Hasting Influencers, Ireland

Policy Brief IE04, 2025.

Innovating from the Ground Up

Digital Policy Pathways to Support Women in Agriculture and Rural Areas*: *Leveraging digitalisation to empower farm and rural women can be achieved on a number of levels.

Executive Summary

Digital technological advancements have the potential to advance farming and enhance rural regions. To ensure this materialises, it is crucial that future policies leverage the transformative power of digital technologies to empower and support women-led innovations in rural and agricultural communities. More specifically, digitalisation, including infrastructural development, access to digital tools, support platforms and training in digital literacy can enable rural and farm women to harness technology for personal, professional and economic empowerment. Digitalisation can effectively bridge gender gaps by allowing access to key resources, including agricultural advisory services, digital technologies in farming, business training and markets and finance. In doing so, it can significantly enhance rural women's livelihoods and in turn rural communities.

The Challenge

Despite a National Broadband Plan in Ireland, Census data from 2022 shows a stark divide **in high-speed broadband coverage** in Ireland, with urban areas having near complete access, but rural areas, particularly those more socially deprived, experiencing limited or no coverage. Average coverage was approximately 42% in socially disadvantaged rural areas and 50% in the more affluent rural area (Dempsey and Hoy, 2024).

- In many cases the traditional gender roles in farming and rural business, may influence women's participation in technology adoption. Women may be less likely to engage in new

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technologies if they are viewed as male dominated, or if they do not feel encouraged to adopt a new technology.

- Innovations carried out by women on farms and in rural businesses can **require technology to enhance efficiency** (e.g. machinery, software packages), but investment to support these technical needs is lacking and can be a considerable challenge for many women.
- A **lack of training** in key areas of technology and AI use is a challenge for women on farms and in rural areas. These range from machinery use to software implementations in business. Training if available can often be generalised, or not accessible for women with caregiving responsibilities.
- Many **digital and farm machinery tools** are predominantly designed for male use; therefore, women can be discouraged from using them. If a gendered or lighter option is available it can often be more expensive, creating a barrier for women.
- The CAP Strategic Plans across the EU aim to establish **Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) Coordination Groups** to enhance the flow of knowledge related to new technologies and innovations. However, women's participation in these groups remains significantly limited, which marginalises them from accessing this crucial source of knowledge and innovation.

Policy Solutions

Challenging Gender stereotypes around digitalisation

- Fund or support **campaigns of visibility** around women's use of digitalisation in rural business or leading on-farm innovations. Use media, case studies, awards and speaking opportunities to highlight women engaged in digitalisation and their success in doing so.
- **Mobilise local champions and influencers** who can advocate for women utilising digital options in their business and on their farm. Such role models can create an awareness around the issue, changing attitudes and empowering young girls and other potential innovators.

Improving Digital Infrastructure:

- Starting with access to **highspeed broadband and good mobile phone** connections could make considerable difference for rural women innovators. The National Broadband Plan, although a considerable improvement is still not providing high speed internet to thousands of rural farms and regions. If highspeed fibre broadband is not an option then satellite options could be considered.

Affordable Access to Devices:

- **Dedicated subsidies, grants or partnerships with tech companies** could help women starting or scaling up a small to medium on farm or off-farm rural business and make smartphones, computers and other digital devices more affordable and accessible. This also goes for on-farm machinery, new equipment, equipment or software which is too expensive but could potentially launch a business or farm diversification.
- Use programmes such as **LEADER and the CAP Strategic Plan** to provide funding calls specifically for women to access digital devices or improved infrastructure.

Access to Digital Platforms for Market Linkages and Networking

- Networks, supply chains and cooperatives can all assist in creating market linkages for women entrepreneurs in farming, food production and rural businesses. These can become powerful tools for women to connect to markets, share knowledge, market information and business skills. These range from WhatsApp and Facebook groups to Agri-extension apps

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and online marketplaces. Finance and training could be key to opening up this digital market for women.

Artificial Intelligence for Women:

- As we begin to experiment with **Artificial Intelligence**, this world has the potential to create an amazing impact for rural women in farming and business. The power of AI could have potential ranging from on-farm issues to smart tools and weather predictions. It could assist in business administration, accessing foreign languages and international markets. The possibilities here are endless. But training and access for rural and farm women is essential and can come in the form of training grants or microloans for women using AI to community-based training programmes, or specific programmes. Tax breaks or funding to companies that build in AI tools and training or partner with rural women's cooperatives.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Technology emerged as a vital driver of progress and innovation among rural women in business and farming, as highlighted across all the FLIARA interviews carried out in Ireland. Reliable broadband was consistently identified as the most crucial tool, with many women citing the National Broadband Scheme as a turning point, although connectivity gaps still exist in some areas. The COVID-19 pandemic marked a shift, with women turning to the internet for sales, marketing, education, and business continuity. Many now view broadband not as a luxury, but as a foundational business need. Beyond connectivity, women adopted a range of technologies, from farm machinery and accounting software to video production and social media, to streamline operations and expand their reach.

Several women reported using technology to overcome physical barriers in agriculture, broaden market access, and deliver training online, often gaining international audiences. While some initially struggled with digital skills, many taught themselves through YouTube or online searches, highlighting the importance of accessible learning. Mentorship, particularly through women's business networks, also played a critical role in building confidence with technology. Video conferencing platforms like Zoom enabled live and recorded training sessions, while continuous learning, including international training helped women stay ahead in their sectors. Overall, technology and digitalisation not only supported their innovations but fundamentally reshaped how these women operate, grow, and sustain their businesses.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Digitalisation holds transformative potential for rural women in business and in farming, empowering them with access to wider markets, financial services, and vital information that was once beyond their reach. By bridging the digital divide, we not only enable these women to grow their enterprises but also uplift entire communities through inclusive economic development. As digital tools become more accessible and user-friendly, rural women can step into leadership roles, drive innovation, and contribute significantly to sustainable growth. Therefore, investing in digital literacy and infrastructure for rural women is not just a technological advancement, it is a crucial step toward gender equality and economic resilience.

Call to Action

- Improve digital infrastructure for rural women engaged in farming and rural business.
- Support digital literacy programmes.

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- Prioritise digital inclusion in rural development agendas and pay particular emphasis to AI technology.
- Promote mentorship and training initiatives that connect rural women entrepreneurs with digital tools and e-commerce platforms.

Further Reading

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Image courtesy of Rita Maunsell, WAWETS, Ireland

Policy Brief IE05, 2025.

Building a Gender Inclusive AKIS in Ireland

Ireland's Agricultural Knowledge Innovation System (AKIS): Open for Business for Women Innovators in Agriculture and Rural Areas?

Executive Summary

An agricultural knowledge innovation system (AKIS) is imperative in each EU Member State to enhance agricultural innovative practices. AKIS supports the cross-cutting CAP objective to modernise agriculture and rural areas by promoting knowledge, innovation and digitalisation in agriculture and rural areas (EU CAP Network, no date). AKIS is the combined organisation and interactions between persons, organisations and institutions that produce and use knowledge and innovation for agriculture, forestry, rural development, and other related areas. Partnership is essential for a well-functioning AKIS, with all stakeholders having a role and a voice. This policy brief aims to raise an awareness of the importance of including women in AKIS and provides key recommendations on how this can be realised.

The Challenge

- Farmers have different knowledge needs and attitudes to innovation. This is influenced for example by a range of factors, such as farm size, farm system and farmer age. Gender is also a factor that needs strong attention in this mix.
- The distinct nature of women-led farm and rural innovation needs an appropriate AKIS to support it. While the distinct needs of different farmers, including women, are important to shape AKIS, it is also crucial not to create silos.
- As each country augments their AKIS system, what becomes imperative is the consideration and inclusion of women innovators both on farms and in the broader rural areas. Within an Irish context, the FLIARA project evidence shows issues with awareness and relevance of AKIS for women leading innovations, which is counterproductive for the overall enhancement of innovative practices on farms and in rural regions.

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Policy Solutions

Gender equality analysis of Ireland's AKIS actors and interventions

- We need up to date information on gender equality issues in the AKIS. This should then feed into design of targeted efforts and adapted wider interventions to ensure women's improved participation in and benefit from the AKIS.
- For example, in relation to farm advisory services collection and analysis of key data, such as the gender balance of farm advisors and access to advisory services, is important. Wider analysis of the delivery of advisory services is also called for to explore how flexibility and a bottom-up approach is applied to match the needs and work-life realities of women in farming.
- More broadly, assessing the gender balance within AKIS actors (e.g. boards of organisations, researchers, supply chain actors) is important because a well-functioning AKIS should have gender balance among the actors involved. The under representation of women in governance spaces can be dealt with through affirmative action, such as requiring gender balance on boards (For more see Ireland Policy Brief: Strengthening the voice of rural and farm women in decision-making spaces, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).
- Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 included the specific AKIS related action providing for Women Only Knowledge Transfer Groups depending on local need. The women-only knowledge transfer group and wider knowledge transfer programme should be subject to dedicated gender impact evaluation, to ensure it has relevance and is what is wanted by women.

Expand and tailor AKIS services to the needs of women-led farm innovation

- We should adopt good practice and needs based approaches to improving how AKIS serves women in farming. Our FLIARA colleagues in Slovenia, Sweden and Italy also highlight how the needs of innovative women in farming are not adequately served by the AKIS.
- Slovenia calls for specialised advisors trained to support women within a dedicated regional advisory network. The need to broaden the scope of advisory services to include support for diverse business models (e.g. traditional supplementary on-farm activities as well as socially oriented, sustainable and community-based ventures) is also called for (For more see Slovenia Policy Brief: Empowering Rural Women Through Targeted Advisory Services, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).
- In Sweden the need for AKIS to reach a broader group of farmers, food producers, and entrepreneurs is raised. FLIARA case study evidence from Sweden also found a lack of support for environmental, social and economic innovations in small-scale organic farming, food production and businesses (For more see Sweden Policy Brief: Diversifying AKIS in Sweden, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).
- In Italy it is found that women leading environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable farm and rural innovations often remain outside the reach of the AKIS (For more see Italy Policy Brief: Reframing and expanding AKIS in Italy to reach women innovators, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).
- Given how networks emerged in Ireland's case study evidence as important to how women in farm innovation gain knowledge, this would suggest that strengthening network-based knowledge transfer and exchange spaces is important. This could include expanding models such as peer-to-peer learning, mentoring, practice-based learning and wider support networks in the AKIS.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

A European reflection paper on AKIS in transition notes how farmers have different attitudes to innovation. Women are noted as often being one of the drivers of farm innovation, having an outward looking attitude and initiating routes to diversify farm incomes. This report also noted a bias in extension services towards conventional, specialised, male farmers and that not all farmers (i.e. women, organic, diversified, part-time) have equal access to extension services (EU SCAR, 2012).

FLIARA case study evidence found a low awareness of AKIS among women leading innovations. Most of the women interviewed as part of the FLIARA women-led farm innovation case studies were not familiar with the AKIS concept. Case study evidence also shows the need for careful attention to design of AKIS interventions to avoid reinforcing gendered divisions in farming and innovation. One example was the case of Women Only Knowledge Transfer Groups that can be described as a double-edged sword. Women raised concern that Women Only Knowledge Transfer Groups could isolate women, creating divides among different genders in farming and potentially have a silo effect. They were seen to potentially contribute to reinforcing the narrative around women in farming being the exception. Rather it should be encouraged to become part of the norm. However alternatively and more positively Women Only Knowledge Transfer Groups were also seen as a space for women to come together and learn through sharing common experiences.

FLIARA case study evidence also shows that networks are key to how women innovator's gain necessary knowledge to support their farm innovation. There is an ongoing need for networking both in early and more established stages. What was also clear was that networking is important in diverse areas, from their own specific areas of farm business to wider technical knowledge. Networking with both men and women also emerged as important.

EIP-AGRI Operational Group's provide a vehicle to bring together a range of people in agriculture, forestry and rural areas with diverse expertise so that they can work together to co-create innovative solutions. The CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 provides for calls for EIP proposals aimed at supporting greater gender balance in farming (CAP Network, 2024). Examples of wider EIP-AGRI Operational Group's from the previous CAP programme show the promise of this model in relation to knowledge sharing and creation. For example, MOPS was an EIP-AGRI Operational Group that operated from 2018 to 2021, composed of a group of small-scale organic farmers, the Irish Organic Association, researchers and agronomists. MOPS focused on optimising the horticultural production of the farmers involved, enhancing farm economic viability and natural resource use. It also had spin-off benefits for farmers, creating a forum for ongoing connections and knowledge sharing, as well as influencing attitude change and new innovations on farm (Farrell et al. 2022).

Dedicated training for women on key issues is also critical as part of the AKIS. For example, delivered by Mountbellew Agricultural College the first round of the Teagasc QQI Level 5 Farm Safety and Assurance module was targeted specifically to women working in farming (Teagasc, 2022).

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Part of the challenge of including women in an Irish AKIS lies in the over-riding issue of women's work, farming and entrepreneurial skills having been overshadowed and undervalued within the broader scope of farming and rural entrepreneurship. Women are also heavily under-represented in farming. This means there is a knock-on gender imbalance in women farmers in the AKIS. The range of areas of potential action in AKIS and hence complexity of the issue are evidenced by the diverse range of actors in Ireland's AKIS, as illustrated by CAP Network Ireland's mapping of the system (see CAP Network Ireland, no date). But we are in a time of change, for example, with a new Teagasc Advisory Strategy being piloted in two of its advisory regions in 2025. The new approach being tested includes farmers still having a designated advisor, but they can be referred to another advisor for more specialised advice (Teagasc, 2025). AKIS more widely has potential to better support women-led rural and farm innovation. FLIARA evidence, from its Irish case studies (Farrell et al. 2024a; 2024b) to wider future foresight research (Kuhmonen and Tembo, 2023), strongly shows the current and future potential of women-led innovation in farming. We need to better include women in the AKIS to build on the untapped potential. This can help to overcome barriers and build on opportunities through knowledge exchange and transfer.

Call to action

- AKIS should be more visible to women and what AKIS offers be promoted, such as access to networks, training, new ideas and knowledge.
- Women only groups and networks, such as for knowledge transfer and exchange, can play an important role in some specific areas, such as machinery training (for example), but must not create silos in the AKIS.
- Better understanding of how Ireland's AKIS serves different agricultural sectors, scales of farming as well as types of farm innovation (e.g. social, technological, environmental) would yield evidence to shape a more inclusive AKIS for women as well as all types of farmers.
- We also need better knowledge of key issues to build evidence-based policy responses. This could be supported by carrying out gender equality analysis of Ireland's AKIS actors and interventions. This evidence can then be used to expand and tailor AKIS services to the needs of women-led farm innovation.

Further Reading

FLIARA Policy Briefs

Find the following Policy Briefs published in D5.1 Policy Booklet and Policy Briefs (Kang et al. eds., 2025):

- Ireland: Strengthening the voice of rural and farm women in decision-making spaces
- Ireland: Innovating from the Ground Up: Digital Policy Pathways to Support Women in Agriculture and Rural Areas
- Slovenia: Empowering Rural Women Through Targeted Advisory Services
- Sweden: Diversifying AKIS in Sweden
- Italy: Reframing and expanding AKIS in Italy to reach women innovators

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About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of Teresa Roche, Kylemore Farmhouse Cheese, Ireland

Policy Brief IE06, 2025.

Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan and Gender Equality

The place of women in Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-27 and recommendations for the future

Executive Summary

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023-2027 saw for the first time a direct focus on women in farming and rural areas. In its objectives, specific Objective 8 references enhancing the position of women in farming and accelerating the social inclusion of rural women. FLIARA analysis did not identify a strong and direct focus on supporting women-led innovation in CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs). Despite specific Objective 8, greater attention to these issues appears needed in Member States (Murtagh et al. 2024). However, Ireland's CSP 2023-2027 was one CSP that did include measures focused on addressing the issue of improving women's participation in farming. In this policy brief, based on the evidence and learnings emerging from the FLIARA project, we reflect on the measures taken. We also argue that this represents a first step. There is still room for future improvements to improve gender equality in relation to the position of women in farming and rural areas. We have also two separate policy briefs on AKIS and Generational Renewal (see Further Reading) where further specific CAP related issues are also assessed.

The Challenge

- Ireland has a low share of women as farm-holders, or legal owners of the family farm, with the majority being overwhelmingly male. Data from 2023 shows that 13.2% of farm holders were female while 86.8% were male. Figures differ slightly depending on the farm type, but women farm holders are at their highest in mixed field crops at 22.9% and lowest in dairying at 7.2% (CSO, 2023).

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- The numbers of smaller farms held by women is also notable. Of all 17,519 farms held by women, 34% or 5,979 of these were under 10 hectares (CSO, 2023).
- CSO (2020) data shows that 75,113 of the 278,600 farm workers in Ireland were women, representing 27% of the total workforce. This indicates that over 58,000 women are active in Irish farming without recognition or official holder status.
- The SWOT analysis carried out for Ireland's CSP 2023-2027 identified the low share of women in farming as a weakness and highlighted a perception of farming as a male occupation. It also pointed to increasing opportunities for women in agriculture as an opportunity. More broadly, a wider benefit of women's increased participation in farming highlighted was women tend to be more likely to drive change and consider alternative farm enterprise options (DAFM, no date).

Policy Solutions

Include specific selection criteria relating to women in a greater range of CAP interventions in both Pillar I and Pillar II or equivalent policy frameworks in the planned National and Regional Partnership Plans 2028-2034

- One example of how women are prioritised for support in Ireland's CSP 2023-2027 is through the On-Farm Capital Investment Scheme (TAMS III). This provides grants to farmers to support increased farm efficiency and competitiveness. A higher grant rate (60%) is available to women.
- However, Spain's CSP goes a lot further. Gender balance is included through specific criteria, such as giving priority to women-led projects in a large number of interventions. This is seen in 39 of 45 interventions under CAP Pillar II in 17 regional Managing Authorities (see Best Practices).
- Under Pillar I of Spain's CSP gender balance is also given specific attention. This is through the 15% higher direct payment rate for women under the Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers who own or co-own farms (EU CAP Network, 2025).
- Some focus on women can be identified in the LEADER Programme 2023-2027 Operating Rules. Under the Enterprise Development sub-theme, it is noted that increased focus should be placed on supporting female entrepreneurs. Local Action Group (LAG) decision making bodies must aim to ensure balanced gender representation (DRCD, 2024).
- However again in the Spanish context we see stronger measures taken. Gender balance in the decision-making bodies of the LAGs is a requirement in some regions. There are also criteria used to incentivise gender balance in project applicants. Examples of criteria include women-led applications or organisations that have an equality plan are eligible for a higher percentage of co-funding (EU CAP Network, 2025).

Further improve recording of gender data for CAP interventions

- Ireland's CSP 2023-2027 has improved gender data collection. Data collected for a number of CSP interventions are split by gender. This includes TAMS and young farmers setting up support.
- Better data is essential to understanding gender differences in beneficiaries of supports and to assist the design of future interventions. Given the current context, it seems logical that gender disaggregated data should be collected and published for all CAP interventions implemented in Ireland.

Better evaluate the impact of CAP interventions on gender equality

- Robust and targeted evidence collection and analysis is crucial to underpinning and shaping evidence based future policy. Targeted, in-depth policy assessments of the impact of CAP on gender equality would yield important practical lessons. For example, the EU CAP Network features a range of gender impact evaluations of different aspects of previous

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CAP implementation, such as Rural Development Programmes in other EU countries (e.g. RegioPlus Consulting, 2022; L&R Social Research, 2021).

- Ireland's CSP 2023-2027 included specific actions targeting women and to improve gender equality, such as the provision for women-only knowledge transfer groups depending on local need and the gender balance theme part of European Innovation Partnerships (EIP). These should be subject to dedicated evaluation to assess their impact and identify areas for future improvement.
- Wider gender equality impact evaluation is also called for, such as for example of the wider EIP-AGRI programme, the LEADER programme, the Knowledge Transfer Programme and the Organic Farming Scheme. These schemes have considerable potential to impact women-led rural and farm innovation. This makes understanding their current impact and future areas for improvement very important.

Review eligibility criteria for supports with a gender equality lens

- In light of the position of women in farming, it is important to monitor and adapt the appropriateness of the criteria for scheme eligibility with a gender equality lens.
- Women need formal status on farms and farms of a certain size to qualify for the Women Farmer On-Farm Capital Investment Scheme. To qualify you must be on the DAFM Corporate Customer Management (CCM) system and be identified here as female. Or you must own or have leasehold title to the site the development is proposed. A minimum of 5 hectares declared under the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) or the Basic Income Support is also a general requirement (DAFM, 2025).
- In relation to Spain's CSP, the Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers allows for co-ownership of farms to qualify for the 15% higher direct payment rate (EU CAP Network, 2025).
- An agricultural qualification is needed to qualify for the Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers. A recognised agricultural education under the National Framework of Qualifications is required to qualify for this scheme (CAP Network Ireland, no date). While women taking agricultural qualifications has increased in recent years, this is also a potential barrier to eligibility for support for young women farmers changing their career route and without agricultural education.

Implement gender budgeting into the CSP, as well as wider agri-food and rural policy contexts

- Gender budgeting is a key tool that facilitates gender mainstreaming (see Best Practices). It allows for the integration of gender considerations into budgeting and can be used to assess existing measures or new proposals for the impact on gender equality (OECD, 2023).
- Gender budgeting is a growing practice. Ireland's current approach to gender budgeting sits alongside the wider approach of equality budgeting (DPER, 2021). Putting a legal basis in place for gender budgeting has been called for more widely. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality recommended the introduction of legislation providing a statutory framework for gender equality budgeting (Joint Committee on Gender Equality, 2022). The Programme for Government also includes a commitment to advance gender budgeting.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

FLIARA women-led innovation in farming case study evidence points to the importance of the support system that is in place for women in farming. However, the need for greater levels of support to build on the farm resources and develop their innovation is also noted. The need for supports is found in early stages of women-led farm innovation, but also the need for greater financial grant support for business development in later stages as well.

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More widely also, women did raise the issue of a bureaucratic and time burden when it comes to grant application processes generally. The slow nature of the process, i.e. the time between funding application and receipt of funds, is also noted as an issue. The challenge of raising match funding was also identified. Conditions and complex requirements attached to obtaining grants, such as LEADER and TAMS, were also raised.

A frustration with applying for support is also expressed in the farm case study evidence. What might be described as 'funding fatigue' is seen in FLIARA case studies. Case study evidence identified that some women are not applying for supports because of bureaucracy and being discouraged from previous experiences. Rather than spending time working to access the grants that are intended to support them, women innovators can feel their time is better spent on their farm business itself.

Gender budgeting: The use of gender budgeting is growing. According to a review by the OECD (2023) the method is increasingly used in OECD countries, particularly in more recent years with 23 countries introducing gender budgeting in 2022. Generally, it has a legal basis and is led by the central budget authority in the country. Different methods are used to practice gender budgeting and often many different tools are used at different stages of a budget cycle. The OECD also publishes a Gender Budgeting Index comparing how countries implement the practice across different dimensions. This provides information on potential international good practices to learn from. According to the 2022 Index, Canada, Austria, Iceland, Korea, Mexico, Spain and Sweden received advanced scores (OECD, 2023).

Spain's CSP: According to analysis from the EU CAP Network (2025) a range of Spain's Managing Authorities (MAs) of CSP 2023-2027 included gender balance in the selection criteria for the following interventions:

- Aid for investments in modernisation and/or improvement of agricultural holdings (15 MAs)
- Establishment of young farmers (14 MAs)
- LEADER (13 MAs)
- Knowledge transfer and training, and information activities (12 MAs)
- Aid for investments in the processing, marketing, and/or development of agri-food products (10 MAs)
- Aid for productive investments in agricultural holdings linked to contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation, efficient use of natural resources, and animal welfare (8 MAs)
- Advisory services (8 MAs)
- Agri-environmental commitments on agricultural land for integrated production; sustainable crops; promotion and sustainable management of pastures; beekeeping for biodiversity; and maintenance or improvement of habitats and traditional agricultural activities that preserve biodiversity (2 MAs)
- Agri-environmental management commitments in organic farming (2 MAs)
- Commitments for the conservation of genetic resources (2 MAs)
- Aid for areas with natural or other specific constraints (2 MAs)
- Payments for specific handicaps resulting from the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and the Natura 2000 Network (2 MAs)

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Ireland's CSP 2023-2027 includes actions that represent a starting point for national CAP policy towards improving women's participation in the farming sector. There is a need however to reflect on the scope of the current measures and the needs they are responding to.

Call to action

- Integrate a more systematic focus on women's position in farming and rural areas into Ireland's next Ireland's CSP.
- Include specific selection criteria relating to women in a greater range of CAP interventions in Ireland's next CSP
- Improve gender data on CAP intervention beneficiaries as well as wider gender impact evaluations of specific programmes and measures.
- Conduct a national evaluation of the impact of CAP 2023-2027 interventions on gender equality.
- Review eligibility criteria for supports with a gender equality lens and then make necessary adaptations to the appropriateness of the criteria for scheme eligibility.
- Implement gender budgeting into the CSP, as well as wider agri-food and rural policy contexts.

Further Reading

Ireland Policy Briefs

Find the following Policy Briefs published in D5.1 Policy Booklet and Policy Briefs (Kang et al. eds., 2025):

- Building a Gender Inclusive AKIS in Ireland
- The Gender Gap in Generational Renewal

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About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of Anne Marie Feighery, Feighery Farm, Ireland

Policy Brief IE07, 2025.

The Gender Gap in Generational Renewal

Tackling the gender gap is part of the wider generational renewal challenge in Irish farming to ensure its future sustainability.

Executive Summary

The gender gap represents a key aspect of the broader challenge of generational renewal in Irish farming, which is essential for ensuring the sector's long-term sustainability. Promoting women-led farm innovation and attracting more young women into farming holds significant untapped potential to enhance farm viability, support generational renewal, and strengthen the overall sustainability of rural communities. The Action Plan arising from the National Dialogue on Women in Agriculture includes a number of specific and welcome actions targeted towards young women. FLIARA evidence also points to the complexity of the issues and the need for further policy action.

The Challenge

- Official statistics show that an ageing farming population is an issue across male and female genders. However, within this trend, significant gender differences emerge. In 2022, only 1.8% (of the overall 13.2%) of female farm holders in Ireland were under 45 compared with just 13.8% (of the overall 86.8%) all male farm holders (CSO, 2024a).
- A range of barriers impact all women, including young women, who attempt to establish a sustainable farm-based livelihood. These include access to finance, skills, mentoring and achieving work-life balance. Improvements in supports are needed to improve not only generational renewal but also the farming profession's gender balance.
- In 2023, less than half of Ireland's farms had a succession plan (46.5%). For those that did, just 16.1% named a woman as the identified successor (CSO, 2024b).
- Complex issues surround farm succession and inheritance. They range from personal level considerations such as farming as a career choice to wider issues such as access to land

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as well as the attractiveness and viability of a farm livelihood. Barriers appear even stronger in the case of female succession.

Policy Solutions

Policy actions to support greater levels of female succession and farming careers:

- The Action Plan arising from the National Dialogue on Women in Agriculture includes an action to: Promote and normalise female succession, including the consideration of any changes required to policy, taxation, legislation and DAFM schemes (DAFM, 2024). This is a welcome and needed action.
- The Action Plan also includes an action to: Increase promotion of agriculture as a viable career for women and young girls in primary and post-primary schools, to be progressed through with Agri Aware and the Department of Education (DAFM, 2024).
- This is also a welcome and needed action. Consideration of gender-based fee supports would also act as an incentive to the uptake of agriculture in further and higher education. For example, a Gender Based Bursary Fund is in place for apprenticeships (Generation Apprenticeship, 2025). A similar scheme could support young women study agriculture-related courses in further and higher education settings.

Tackle traditional gender stereotypes and norms at a number of levels:

- The Action Plan arising from the National Dialogue on Women in Agriculture includes an action to: Implement the use of more inclusive language and imagery in communications to farmers and about farming (DAFM, 2024).
- This is a welcome and needed action. FLIARA farm case study evidence however points to a range of areas of action such as within the education system, the 'grassroots' level targeting the family itself, as well as wider society to change the image of farming.
- There is a potentially a greater role for the media in helping to change gender stereotypes and norms related to farming. A stimulus fund promoting creative and agricultural sector cooperation on film and broadcasting projects via a body such as Screen Ireland or the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland would support the media's greater role.

Develop a farm business programme or farm business incubator for young female farmers:

- This could provide a more holistic and dedicated support programme, such as a start-up and early-stage women-led innovation incubator.
- Such a programme could provide a range of supports from finance to mentoring, as well as link young women to wider available supports.

Address farm work-life challenges to ensure farming offers a viable livelihood across different life-stages:

- This could include government support for farm relief, but also having a focus on young women farmers requirements, such as to take time off for parental leave or broader care-giving responsibilities (see Best Practices).

Better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of how existing farm supports and wider supports assisting rural enterprise address the needs of young innovative women farmers:

- Better monitoring of the rate of uptake of national and EU farming supports by young women would provide evidence to understand the need for more targeted measures and to tailor policy responses.
- Existing grant supports such as through LEADER and Local Enterprise Offices provide important support for women-leading farm innovations, but potentially there is a need to

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understand if young women are accessing this support sufficiently and availing of the full suite of supports.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The FLIARA case study evidence from Ireland points to how potential female successors involved in their family farm can lack more formal status as landowners which leaves them in a precarious position, such as if they have businesses attached to the farm or more broadly qualifying for assistance via public supports. This can create uncertainty and impact further investment and development of their farm innovation.

Evidence from Ireland's FLIARA farm case study evidence highlights the need to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and norms around farming, particularly as these strongly influence whether young women consider farming a career choice. The evidence also identified that change is happening, signalling some progress which is encouraging, and a timely opportunity to accelerate further transformation.

The phrase: 'If you see it, you believe it and you can become it' has become an unofficial mantra of the FLIARA project. The value of media in changing gender stereotypes and norms related to farming emerged in FLIARA case study evidence. For example, one women described, "You see programmes like Ear to the Ground and Nationwide and if they can focus maybe more on young farmers, or younger girls, breeding sheep or breeding cattle, things like that help obviously. The more it's seen and the more it's publicised, it's breaking down kind of stereotypical barriers" (Interviewee 20, cited in Farrell et al. 2024a, p.19).

The need for both soft (e.g. mentoring) and hard (e.g. finance) supports targeting young women is also seen in Ireland's FLIARA farm case study evidence. Women-leading farm innovations can invest personal life savings and take out personal loans. Many young women may not have this capacity. Financial pressures are most particularly seen in early stages of women-led farm innovation. Networks appeared key to accessing information and peer support for women-leading farm innovations, which could take time and extra effort for young women to develop.

Farm relief in Finland: The publicly funded Farm Relief system in Finland supports farmers providing substitute workers or self-arranged substitutes and allows for parental leave and pregnancy leave. It covers the costs of these workers, also for holidays and illness periods. For more information see Sweden Policy Brief: Implementing a Farmer Relief Service (found in Kang et al. eds. 2025, see Further Reading).

Spain's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027: In Spain, under the Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers there is a 15% higher direct payment rate available to young women who own or co-own farms. In 14 of Spain's Managing Authorities the intervention supporting the establishment of young farmers includes gender balance in the selection criteria. More broadly, gender balance is also included in a range of other interventions in certain Managing Authorities (EU CAP Network, 2025). For more information see Policy Brief: Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan and Gender Equality (found in Kang et al. eds. 2025, see Further Reading).

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Ireland's FLIARA farm case study evidence highlights how even with strong farm business supports work-life issues such as caring commitments also need to be considered. Business supports alone fail to address the key barriers experienced by some women. Increasing the visibility of innovative women in farming to work towards changing gender stereotypes and norms is also important to help ensure young women do not overlook farming as a livelihood option and consider it as a career choice.

Call to action

- Increasing the attractiveness and realistic potential of farming as a career option for young women needs to look beyond farm business supports alone. For example, there is call for tackling traditional gender stereotypes and norms in a number of ways such as a greater role for the media in helping to change traditional gender stereotypes and norms related to farming. It is also important to address farm work-life challenges to ensure farming offers a viable livelihood.
- A holistic and dedicated support programme for young women farmers, such as a farm business training programme and innovation incubator, could provide strong and targeted supports. Evaluation of any such programme would also be crucial to learn lessons to tailor its delivery.

Further Reading

FLIARA Policy Briefs

Find the following Policy Briefs published in D5.1 Policy Booklet and Policy Briefs (Kang et al. eds., 2025):

- Ireland: Balancing women-led innovation, rural and farm family-life: The need for improved policy supports
- Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan and Gender Equality
- Sweden: Implementing a Farmer Relief Service

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About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of Martina Calvey, Achill Mountain Lamb, Ireland

Policy Brief IE08, 2025.

Strengthening the Voice of Rural and Farm Women in Decision-Making Spaces

There is a need for better representation of women in a range of governance spaces to improve decision-making and ultimately enhance gender equality.

Executive Summary

The voice of women in rural and farming contexts needs to be better represented to improve decision-making and policy formulation for women in rural and farming contexts. Women remain significantly underrepresented in political decision-making arenas across Europe at both local and national levels. This underrepresentation undermines the principles of democracy, equality, and inclusion enshrined in European Union (EU) values. This policy brief outlines the necessity for targeted actions to address this imbalance, aligns the recommendations with existing EU policies, and provides examples of data and relevant sources to substantiate the need for intervention. This situation is mirrored within an Irish context and therefore needs policy consideration.

The Challenge

- The underrepresentation of women in politics contradicts the fundamental democratic principle of equal participation. Data from the Women for Election Data Hub shows that 25% of TDs in Dáil Eireann are women. Compare this to other national parliaments such as Sweden where 46% of representatives are women (Women for Election, 2023). Data provided by See Her Elected shows 38% of Senators and 27% of Local Councillors were women in 2025.
- Farming organisations also have issues when it comes to women's under-representation. For example, the Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) Diversity Strategy shows that of its total membership, just 15% were women. This imbalance also extends to the organisation's wider operations and governance, with women comprising only 13% of its National Council

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and 20% of its Branch Officers, according to data contained in this strategy (IFA, 2019). There are many other governance and decision-making areas where women can be under-represented, such as state boards, policy monitoring committees, Local Action Groups and Public Participation Networks.

- The value gender balance can bring includes greater capacity to solve complex challenges and make better decisions because of inclusivity, as well as develop more comprehensive policies that better meet all citizen's needs.

Policy Solutions

Women's participation in local and national politics:

- Quotas are in place for national politics. The Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 requires that for national elections political parties need to select at least 30% of candidates of each gender. If they do not, they lose 50% of their State funding for the parliamentary term (DJE, 2017). Calls have been made for the introduction of quotas at local levels too. For example, See Her Elected (SHE), as part of the Gender Quotas Alliance, called for implementation of statutory gender quotas of 40% for local elections (See Her Elected, 2024). Laws on local governance and balanced participation are found in some countries (see Best Practices).
- Quotas are also only one part of the solution, as is clear from the report by Women for Election that makes a range of recommendations such as succession planning at constituency level and gender auditing after each general election (McGing, 2024). In the context of local elections, the SHE programme also points to the need for a wide range of actions (Maher, 2024).

Women's participation in the policy spaces of government:

- Policy monitoring committees should actively work on and have measures in place to ensure they have gender balance as well as ensure bodies representing women's needs in rural areas and farming are represented.
- Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 states that its Monitoring Committee will aim to increase women's representation in its membership. The Managing Authority also must ensure relevant women's organisations are represented in the Monitoring Committee. The CAP Strategic Plan also states that Local Action Groups decision making bodies should aim to secure gender balanced representation (DAFM, 2021).
- This represents progress but only includes aims. A stronger approach would encompass setting of clear, context relevant targets with participation monitored over time.
- For example, a target of 40% women's participation on state boards exists. According to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) it has 12 state boards and progress is being made, but under-representation remains (DAFM, 2022). The need for greater targeted action is also further underscored by the fact that the 40% target, originally set in 1993, is to increase to 45% (as outlined in 2014) once the initial goal is achieved (DJE, 2017).

Women's representation on boards and in leadership positions in private companies:

- Promising measures exist in this area, such as the government supported but business-led Balance for Better Business(B4BB) Review Group. It aims to support improvements in women's representation on boards and leadership teams of private companies. Its 7th annual report called for 40%+ women's representation on boards and leadership teams of these organisations. A series of recommendations exist to support this, such as plan/measure, succession planning, and recruitment strategies (B4BB, 2025).

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- The need for progress in corporate boards in a farming context has been highlighted by the Women in Agriculture Stakeholders Group (WASG). It has pointed to the need for a quota system in a number of governance contexts. WASG argues beef and dairy processors and co-ops should set a target and work towards that until at least 30% of elected officials are women (WASG, 2022). Stronger action is found in some countries, such as in the form of broad laws (see Best Practices).

Gender equality plans as a tool

- Gender equality plans, as well as diversity and wider equality plans, are an important part of the tools and strategies organisations can implement to improve gender equality. We see examples in rural and farm related public sectors (e.g. Teagasc) and stakeholder organisations (e.g. Farm Europe, IFA).
- Tools such as targets or quotas for the percentage of women in elected positions in farming organisations could, for example, be part of the aspects detailed in gender equality plans. For example, the Women in Agriculture Stakeholders Group (WASG) has advocated that farm organisations adopt a quota system to have women make up at least 30% of elected officials (WASG, 2022).
- External policy frameworks and criteria can also be a push factor driving action more broadly. For example, part of the eligibility criteria for certain organisations to apply for Horizon Europe funding is to have a gender equality plan. There is also potential room for a wider framework to ensure plans work to address key issues and reach important targets (see Best Practices).

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Ireland's women-led farm innovation case study research highlights the need for a greater involvement of women farmers and improved connection to issues on the ground in policy making process. Both Ireland's women-led farm and rural innovation case study research also found that women involved in innovation can possess a lack of confidence and be impacted by the phenomenon of 'imposter syndrome'. This can decrease with the length of time involved in innovation. The case studies highlight how once women gained experience and success their comfort and confidence grew. Pair with this the fact that the motivation for women-led farm and rural innovation was often driven by social, environmental and cultural concerns and issues. This suggests an untapped capacity for rural and farm women innovators to become more active in decision-making, but also the need to increase women's capacities by addressing the imposter syndrome issue and building confidence (Farrell et. al. 2024a; 2024b).

The SHE programme supports women in rural constituencies engaging in local democracy by providing training, mentoring and networking programmes. The programme is delivered by Longford Women's Link and supported by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. SHE's work also includes engaging with local agencies and governance structures including Longford Public Participation Network and Longford County Council, such as by producing the booklet Connecting Women to Local Government.

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FLIARA's policy assessment (see Murtagh et al. 2024b) identified laws and wider initiatives in other European contexts that could provide lessons for future action in Ireland:

- A law exists in Italy in relation to women's representation on the board of directors and auditors of listed companies, as well as non-listed companies controlled by public companies. A quota is in place. In 2011, this was 20% but has since increased to 40%. The assessment also identified that in Slovenia legislation is in progress to introduce gender quotas in private enterprises.
- In the local governance context, in relation to the councils and boards of local authorities and in regional councils, Italian law provides for the rebalancing of gender representation. More broadly, the Italian constitution also provides for the removal of any obstacle that prevents full equality of men and women in social, cultural and economic life and promotes equal access between women and men to elected positions.
- In Germany, women are supported in local politics and outstanding achievements recognised through the Helene Weber College and its Helene Weber award. The winners are said to provide role models to other women. They also have formed a self- organised network of award winners.

Lessons can also potentially be drawn from other sectors that also have faced issues related to women's participation. For example, one area is higher education and research. In this context the Athena SWAN Charter provides a globally utilised framework to support and transform gender equality in higher education and research. The charter was launched in Ireland in 2015 and includes Gold, Silver and Bronze awards for successes (HEA, no date). Potentially there are lessons to learn here to build a more comprehensive framework to support women's improved representation in the range of governance spaces that impact women in rural and farming contexts.

Conclusion & Call to Action

The under-representation of women in decision-making positions and value of achieving gender balance in this area, from government bodies to stakeholder organisations and politics more broadly, are raised in the European Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 as well as the 2025 Roadmap for Women's Rights. To address the underrepresentation of women in rural and agricultural decision-making spaces, it is critical that policymakers, institutions, and rural communities adopt decisive and effective actions to achieve gender-inclusive leadership. This policy brief discusses a range of potential actions to increase women's participation in decision making and provide greater opportunities for rural and farm women to take part in influencing the decisions that impact them.

Call to action

- Greater affirmative action is needed such as the setting of quotas and targets for women's representation in a variety of decision-making processes and spaces.

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- Increase efforts to foster inclusive policy design by ensuring women's representation at every decision-making level.
- Expand leadership and decision-making opportunities and support for women in rural settings, such as participation in the SHE programme's Introduction to Politics module, which provides information and training in relation to understanding decision-making structures and how best to become involved.
- Increase capacity for local and national advocacy to support greater representation of women in decision-making, learning from structures such as the Longford Public Participation Network in Ireland on participation of women in local democracy.
- Increase recognition of women's achievements in decision-making spaces to make role models more visible for emerging generations, such as through awards and campaigns recognising national, regional and local activities.
- Establish mentorship programmes connecting experienced women leaders with emerging women decision-makers.
- Facilitate access to networking and digital spaces where women in rural innovation can connect, share experiences, and learn from best practices and from those already engaged in decision-making fora.
- Form a multi-stakeholder working group to assess and push for policy changes at national and EU levels.

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Image courtesy of Angela Healy Irwin, Elly Bay Farm, Ireland

Policy Brief IE09, 2025.

Balancing Women-led Innovation, Rural and Farm Family-life: The Need for Improved Policy Support

Supporting a balance of work, family and wider life demands to meet the needs of women in rural and farm innovation needs policy action in a range of areas.

Executive Summary

Policy support for women-led innovation can focus directly on innovation and entrepreneurship supports. However, policies impacting the provision of childcare, the design of child-related leave schemes, as well as wider policies and initiatives that impact work-life balance, such as farm relief services, are also critically important policy issues for better supporting rural and farm women's participation and success in innovation.

The Challenge

- In general women devote more of their time to family care, such as elderly care and childcare, as well as domestic work. This has an impact on women's capacity to engage in innovation as they balance life's different demands.
- Adequate availability of pre-school childcare and after-school services is an issue across Ireland. Indications of the extent of the pre-school care issue are shown for example from Pobal figures from 2025. They showed that up to 40,000 children under age three were on creche waiting lists nationally (Early Childhood Ireland, 2025).
- Further to this, women-led innovation in rural areas and farming is not often a nine to five job. More flexible childcare options are also part of the challenge.
- The cost of childcare that is available is also an issue. This is currently on the Government agenda. For example, part of the Programme for Government commitments relate to providing affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare. This includes progressively reducing the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child through the National Childcare

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Scheme. This would require a significant increase in supports. Pobal figures show that average weekly costs nationally were €197.47 for full day care in 2023/4 (Pobal, no date).

- A number of different types of family leave schemes exist in Ireland to support childcare related time off. Data tells us that the design of these schemes and traditional gender norms play a role in who mostly takes these types of leave. Generally, the level of pay received while on leave (and some leave is unpaid) is also behind other OECD countries (see Keane et. al. 2025).
- There is also a significant gender gap in terms of pensions (Coyle, 2025). More than one in three Irish women have no retirement savings at all, according to a 2025 pensions survey. The figure for men is one in four. The explanation for the gender gap in pensions is long-standing and well-known. On average, women earn less than men, meaning that even where they are a member of a pension scheme, they are saving less into them. Wages in some sectors traditionally dominated by women are also lower and women are more likely than men to be working part-time or to take time out of the workforce to act as family carers.
- On family farms, many women contribute heavily to labour, bookkeeping, and animal care, but unless they are formally registered as farm partners or paid employees, they are not insurable for PRSI. This creates a gap in their contributory State pension eligibility.

Policy Solutions

Work towards international benchmarks in childcare and after-school care provision

- Reducing costs is essential. Other countries have significantly lower childcare costs and different models exist to support this. For example, in Slovenia an income assessed subsidy system across 10 income groups exists which can result in childcare payments varying from 0% to 77% of the full price (Murtagh et al. 2024b). In Sweden the cost of childcare is very low, also with caps on fees payable. The highest fee payable is approximately €150 per month per child. Students do not pay for childcare at all (see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).
- Children should be guaranteed a place. In the Swedish model, from age one pre-school children are guaranteed a full-time childcare place (see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).

Reduce the complexity of the family leave support system and income link payment for leave

- There are a number of different types of schemes that support taking child-related leave in Ireland. Maternity benefit is up to 42 weeks (26 paid, 16 unpaid) for mothers. Paternity benefit provides 2 weeks for partners in the six months following birth of a child. Parent's benefit provides 9 weeks for each parent up to age 2. These schemes provide for leave for employed and self-employed who have the required PRSI contributions (Citizens Information, 2024). A flat rate of €274 is paid per week by the Government and some employers top this up to the salary rate (Keane et al. 2025). Parental leave also exists and both parents can take up to 14 weeks for each child until age of 12 and this is unpaid (Citizens Information, 2024).
- In Sweden for example there is one system. Parents have 480 days of paid parental leave. There is no specific maternity leave. This leave can be shared between parents, but 90 days are allocated to each parent. Pay is based on previous earnings (see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Parental Leave, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).

Design child related leave schemes to support more equal sharing of caring roles

- Paternity leave only exists in Ireland since 2016. Maternity leave has been in place since 1981. According to a recent analysis of child-related leave in Ireland this has contributed to

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reinforcing the societal expectation on women to focus more on children and care work, which is also a contributor to the gender wage and pension gaps (Keane et al. 2025).
- A way forward are family leave schemes that enable the sharing of leave entitlements among parents, such as the Swedish model. While change took time, it is widely understood that Sweden's parental leave system has contributed to changed patriarchal norms. The phenomenon of the 'Latte Papa' is observed to describe fathers on parental leave (The New Nordics, 2023).

Design policies that respond to farm specific demands

- More innovative childcare provision can meet the needs and opportunities of the farming profession. More flexible childcare with extended hours would better support the work demands of farming.
- Farms can also potentially themselves become part of the solution where new innovations such as farm-based kindergartens are developed. For example, FLIARA has identified a number of examples, such as the organic farm and kindergarten Maso Canova in Italy.
- In Finland holiday leave for farmers is supported under a publicly funded farm relief scheme and this covers the cost of temporary workers. A similar scheme in Ireland could both make farming more attractive to women and increase existing farmers well-being (see Best Practices for more).

Policy responses to pension gap

- Automatic PRSI Coverage for Farm Partners - Require joint farm registration for spouses/civil partners to ensure both accumulate PRSI credits. Provide retrospective options for women previously excluded.
- Strengthened Caring Credits - Simplify access and raise awareness of the caring credit scheme. Extend eligibility to cover informal care common in rural areas.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Achieving work-life balance, reconciling family and business commitments, childcare cost and availability were all challenges identified in the FLIARA case studies from Ireland (see Farrell et al. 2024a; 2024b). For example, the rural case study showed how innovators experienced issues around time management, achieving work life balance and meeting the demands of domestic, caring and business tasks. There was a general tendency to put family first. Women leading innovations in rural contexts who had caring commitments described how their time and energy are stretched daily as they work to combine many demands and tasks.

Motivations for innovation in farming case studies highlighted how a farm-based livelihood could combine well with family commitments by working close to home. However, this also came with challenges. Similarly, in the farm case studies, the challenges of combining motherhood and entrepreneurship were also evident. Some women also commented that family caring responsibilities did disproportionately fall to them. Emotional challenges were also highlighted such as 'mammy guilt' as well as working long hours around caring commitments.

The case study evidence highlights how women-led rural and farm innovation presents an important opportunity, but also without the right supports there are significant challenges. The consequences relate to well-being and the potential for burn-out, as well as potentially limiting women's ability to advance and continue to succeed in innovation.

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Farm relief in Finland: This publicly funded system is provided for in regulations under the statute 20.12.1996/1231. The Farm Relief system supports farmers by providing substitute workers or self-arranged substitutes, as well as covering their costs, such as for holidays and illness. The scheme allows for parental leave and pregnancy leave. For more information see FLIARA Policy Brief: Implementing a Farmer Relief Service, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025.

The Swedish parental leave system: Paid parental leave of 480 days is available to parents in Sweden. This is a universal, state administered scheme. Days can be transferred to people other than parents if one parent is absent, such as a grandparent. The scheme is also flexible, and days can be taken in blocks or over longer periods of time. There is also an additional allowance of 60 days paid leave per child to care for a sick child. For more information see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Parental Leave, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025.

Pre-school and after-school childcare system in Sweden: Municipalities must offer full-time pre-school care to all children over aged 1 as well as after school activities. The system does not just provide day care but also most municipalities provide services for night or shift workers. Privately owned or cooperative pre-schools also exist but follow the same regulations. For more information see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Women-led innovation in rural and farming contexts can be supported by developing policy measures, for example, to facilitate networking or provide access to finance and training. However wider policies must be considered as part of this, such as family policies. This is also a point argued in wider research. For example, Ahl et al. (2024) argue: “Entrepreneurship and rural development policy cannot be separated from family policy and welfare state policy. These policy areas intersect in important ways, and policy makers must recognise that they need to work horizontally across policy areas”. To have a comprehensive support system for women-led innovation in rural and farming contexts family and work-life policies must be considered as part of this.

Call to action

- Review child related leave schemes in Ireland and implement changes to support more equal sharing of how caring roles are combined with career and employment.
- Support greater availability and affordability of pre-school and afterschool childcare.
- Conduct a feasibility study to assess the potential for farm-based childcare provision in Ireland.
- Conduct a feasibility study into the cost and benefits of introducing a similar Farm Relief System that is found in Finland.

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Further Reading

FLIARA Sweden Policy Briefs

Find the following Policy Briefs published in D5.1 Policy Booklet and Policy Briefs (Kang et al. eds., 2025):

- Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities
- Providing Adequate Parental Leave
- Implementing a Farmer Relief Service

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About FLIARA

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Italian woman innovators: Linda Montagna and Flavia Amato

Policy Brief IT01, 2025.

Training for Women Innovating in Farming and Rural Areas

"Facilitating trainings for women leading innovative projects favour sustainable change in rural communities."

Executive Summary

Women leading innovative projects in farming or in rural entrepreneurship in Italy often have to rely on self-financed courses and trainings, most frequently promoted by informal groups and networks, in order to acquire specific skills and knowledge. Policy makers should support the creation of regional platforms where information on free and public training courses can be easily found. Besides, the creation of "Learning Centres for Rural and Farming Entrepreneurship" where courses tailored to women's needs can be offered should be supported.

The Challenge

- European as well as national public agricultural training programmes mostly target large conventional agriculture rather than "alternative" forms of agriculture.
- Women tend to lead small-scale farms, multifunctional farms, or environmentally sustainable farms (organic, agro-ecological, etc.). They therefore need to acquire specific knowledge and skills related to these models of agriculture.
- Training courses about sustainable farming techniques (e.g., organic, regenerative, permaculture, etc.) are often not available through public institutions/public educational system. Training on specific competences such as those needed to run an agri-kindergarten, or a social farm are also limited.
- Digital and entrepreneurships skills are required to manage a rural entrepreneurship as well as a farm. Currently, these skills are acquired mainly through paid courses run by associations, NGOs, or private individuals.
- It is difficult to access information on available training courses in a specific region.

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- When available, training courses are usually offered during weekdays and normal working hours, or in central locations limiting the capacity of women managing a farm or a rural business to attend them.

Policy Solutions

We propose to:

- Support the creation of a regional platform where information on training courses available at regional level can be found. The platform may also be managed by the "Learning Centre for rural and farming entrepreneurship".
- Support the creation of "Learning Centres for rural and farming entrepreneurship" in each Region. These Centres shall offer free training courses and specific courses tailored to women's needs. Public plots of land for the implementation of practical activities should also be available.

Practical Tips

- Contact public agricultural institutes, high schools, universities, and training associations at the regional level to inquire about their offer on sustainable farming techniques and on rural business/farm management.
- Make a regional inventory of public courses and trainings available to feed regional platforms platform and ensure its systematic updating.
- Get inspiration from best practices based in Italy and in other European countries to organize the training offer of Learning Centres.
- Training courses need to be flexible and adapted to women's needs. Therefore, specific courses should be organised according to their requests.
- To gather information on specific interests and needs (both in terms of content and logistics), it is necessary to conduct a regional survey among women farm managers and rural entrepreneurs, involving local women farmers' and rural women's associations.
- Courses could be organized both in-person and online (to facilitate the engagement of women living in remote rural areas). Include both theoretical and more practical and interactive modules.
- Looking at the results of the FLIARA project, some possible training courses are: organic, regenerative, agro-ecological farming; agri-kindergarten; social farms; digital skills; web marketing, farm escape rooms.
- Mentorships and peer to peer programme should also be offered.
- Design programs that offer potential or existing female entrepreneurs the opportunity to move for periods of time to do training (for instance by providing assistance to manage their farm/business while they are away).
- Advertise the courses through regional and local farmers organizations, LAGs and other rural networks, making sure to reach out women.
- The Learning Centres could be opened within agriculture schools.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Training has been a challenge for Italian women innovators. Most of them had difficulty in finding appropriate courses, which in most cases were offered by non-governmental organizations, associations, informal groups and networks and they have to self-finance these courses. Some of the Italian women innovators selected by the FLIARA project attended business start-up courses such as EWA (Empowering woman in Agrifood) which they found useful to acquire the basic skills for running a business. Best practices identified by the FLIARA project are the: **Warmonderhof Foundation** in the Netherland which manages a small-scale vocational school training on biodynamic and sustainable agriculture. The school provides training, education, teaching facilities, internships, and practical testing. The **Business Incubator** created at the Polytechnic Secondary School of Technology in Kyjov (Czechia). The purpose is to keep high school graduates in the region through the development of the local business environment utilizing start-ups, a coworking centre, the involvement of companies from the region and the Chamber of Commerce. The school also focuses on adult education. The **Irish CAP Strategic Plan** offers female focused knowledge transfer groups for women to influence peer-to-peer learning while addressing shared challenges and gender balance. In Spain, the **Rural Women's Advancement Program** supports women through training, mentoring and finance, also including a focus on entrepreneurship and innovation. The **ACORNS** programme in Ireland, established under the Rural Innovation and Development Fund, support early-stage female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland through interactive round table sessions that are facilitated by female entrepreneurs, known as 'Lead Entrepreneurs', who have started and successfully grown businesses in rural Ireland.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Training rural women strengthens agricultural sustainability and fosters inclusive development of rural areas.

CALL TO ACTION:

- The training must be designed to meet women's demands and needs.
- Women farmers' and rural women's associations should be involved in designing appropriate training courses.
- Policymakers should fund localized training programmes tailored to women's needs.
- A regional coordination among organizations, stakeholders and public institutions offering different types of training courses would be useful and important.
- Stakeholders should facilitate mentorship, trainings, and visibility opportunities.

By investing in these strategies, women's innovations in farming and in rural areas in general can be enhanced by favouring sustainable change in rural communities.

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About FLIARA

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Italian women innovators: Luigia and Simona Soffritti

Policy Brief IT02, 2025.

Funding and Advisory Services for Women Innovators in Rural Areas

"Funding and establishing an advisory service for women innovators in farming and in rural areas could greatly support and increase women's engagement in rural sustainable development and contribute to gender equality."

Executive Summary

Women in rural areas often do not have access to information about funding and capacity building programmes, or do not get proper support to apply for such programmes. Hence, it would be important to have a national platform where all the information about funding can be easily accessible; furthermore, to support women innovators starting from scratch microcredit, small grants and accessible bank credit will be useful. In addition, public desks in rural areas offering women-centred services are a valuable tool to help women develop business plans for innovative and sustainable agricultural and rural projects, access and apply for funding and capacity-building programmes. Furthermore, interventions targeting only women should be foreseen in the LAGs' action plans. In the next CAP National Plan specific interventions targeting only women should be activated.

The Challenge

- Women in rural Italy often face challenges accessing information on funding and capacity building programmes, and often do not receive adequate support to apply for such programmes. Bank credit is difficult and personal guarantees are always required. Hence, they frequently remain excluded, having to rely on personal savings and support networks.
- Awareness of women's contribution to rural sustainability development is low at policy level.

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- The Italian CAP Strategic Plan does not include specific provision that target women exclusively. In fact, women are almost always mentioned along with young people.
- There are few initiatives promoted by LAGs to encourage female-led innovation.
- There are financial measures to support women's entrepreneurship managed by different bodies (such as INVITALIA, Ente nazionale per il Microcredito, ISMEA etc.) which makes it difficult for women to have a clear picture of the different funding available. For instance, at national level specific funds for women in rural areas are: Imprese femminili innovative montane – IFIM (Innovative mountain women's enterprises – IFIM) and Più Impresa - Imprenditoria giovanile e femminile in agricoltura (More Enterprise - Youth and women entrepreneurship in agriculture), the latter also supporting young people. Other funding is available not only for women working in rural areas. For example, Fondo Impresa femminile (Women's Enterprise Fund); in the framework of NRRP, the programme Imprenditoria femminile (Female entrepreneurship) is activated; within the existing Fondo di garanzia per le PMI (Guarantee Fund for SMEs), is established a special section for female enterprises; for women assisted by Anti-Violence Centers or guests of Shelter Houses who would not have easy access to traditional bank credit is activated the fund Microcredito di libertà (Microcredit of freedom). In addition there are funds which supports women and young people as: On - oltre nuove imprese a tasso zero (On-over new enterprises at zero-interest) and funds which foreseen an additional sum to women such as Incentivi imprese turistiche (IFIT) (incentives tourism enterprises) and Smart&Start Italia. Furthermore, at regional level, there may be other funds for women available such as Fondo imprese femminili activated by the Calabria Region.

Policy Solutions

We propose to:

- Raise awareness of gender issues among operators and policymakers at regional level and in the LAGs as well as among agricultural sector associations and Producer Organisations (POs).
- Promote a gender assessment of the CAP National Plan and the Complement Regional Strategic Plans (CSR).
- Creation of a platform where all the funding (at regional and national level) specifically for women can be easily found.
- Activate micro-credit and/or small grant programmes (e.g., 15.000/20.000 €). These would enable women to test their innovative ideas thanks to small credits/contributions provided without requiring an advance on expenditure but only based on a well-structured business plan.
- Provision of bank credit facilities for women, e.g., through public guarantees and reduced interest rates, as done in the document "Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture" for young people with the intervention "Dedicated loan package".
- Allocate public funds to support association/organisation offering at local/regional level women-centred services (e.g., Female Entrepreneurship, capacity-building, Counselling) and establish local open desk targeting rural women.
- Include interventions targeting only women in the LAGs' action plans as well as sensitising the LAGs to ensure an active presence of women in decision-making bodies.
- A specific objective on women should be included in the next National CAP Plan, leading to specific interventions and higher contribution rates for women-led interventions.

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Practical Tips

- National/regional governments could provide rural women entrepreneurs with a well-developed business plan with micro-credit programmes, small grants and facilitated bank loans. Women entrepreneurs would ideally be assisted in developing a business plan and in applying for microcredits/small grants – to increase chances of success. These financial instruments should be easily accessible (very low level of bureaucracy). This action would help women, and particularly those who did not inherit a farm or an asset, to develop their ideas and projects.
- Promote a call at the national or regional level for local associations/organizations already working on women's rights and supporting women managers in rural areas and in the farming sector, or existing women's associations within trade unions, to receive funds for providing women-centred services opening local open desks. The staff of these associations and NGOs should be further trained on the different funding and capacity building programmes available at the European, national, regional, and local levels for women-led innovation in rural areas. Involving local municipalities or the LAGs to support these open desks, also in terms of logistic can be useful.
- Advertise the set-up of such open desks through the local LAGs, at farmers markets and through existing local and regional women farmers' and rural entrepreneurs' networks.
- Training regional and LAGs operators on the importance of women-led contributions in rural development and sustainability. Draw from existing research including the findings of the FLIARA project.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The Assessment of Rural and Farming Policy and Legal Frameworks in relation to Women-led Innovation developed by the FLIARA project highlights in relation to CAP 2023-2027 that only two State (Ireland and Spain) focus in particular on addressing the issue of improving women's participation in farming. Although Italy proposes some interventions to support women, these are always targeted at women and young people, which weakens the results in terms of the objective of gender equality. The European Commission underlined that a "… Greater attention to equality will be needed in those Member States where this remains a challenge" (EC, 2022 p.31). The current **Spanish CAP Strategic Plan** (CSP) adopts a gender balance approach in the distribution of the financial aid: targeted and additional financing are granted to women farmers who are already active in agriculture or who want to start a new business. Furthermore, the CSP in Spain seeks to coordinate with other EU funding sources (e.g., the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) in order to help construct a stronger support system. The current **Irish CAP Strategic Plan** includes direct interventions linked to the need to increase opportunities for women in agriculture and business development such as the "Women Farmer Capital Investment Scheme"; in addition, depending on local need, women-only knowledge transfer groups can be set up. In relation to the **LEADER programme**, evidence suggest that in Ireland it has been a significant support to rural and farm women innovators. In Romania the LEADER Strategic Development Guidelines for 2023-2027 include measures to increase women's role in rural economic development. LAGs in Romania are required to choose several types of interventions in their strategies to qualify for additional funding. One of these intervention types is related to operations with an economic purpose whose direct beneficiaries are women. In Germany the LEADER funded programme 'Innovative Measures for Women' in Baden-Württemberg includes qualification and coaching measures for rural women and provides grants for the development of women's non-agricultural enterprises. In Italy, although gender equality is among the criteria to assess proposed Local Development Strategies and selection of LAGs, a recent study (Di Napoli, Reda, 2021) showed that only a few LAGs are promoting female-led innovation through specific initiatives. The **Tuscany Region**, in Italy, has promoted a **gender assessment of the Rural development Plan** (RDP) 2014-2022. It aimed to evaluate the overall contribution of the Program to gender equal opportunities and included the identification of the needs of female agricultural entrepreneurs within the framework of the RDP 2014-2022 to establish what the Program has contributed to achieving - on the territory, in the economic and social fabric, etc. - and what can still be promoted - both in the agricultural and more "system" context - thanks to the Regional Complement for Rural Development (CSR) 2023-2027 and the other european structural funds. Data collected in the context of the FLIARA project shows that the access to funding is difficult and that that advisory services targeting women specifically can enhance rural sustainable development and gender equality. The organization **Longford Women's Link** in Ireland, for instance, provides support to rural women to access a wide range of programmes and supports yielding benefits for themselves, their families and their wider community.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Increasing funding specifically for women is crucial to improve their participation in sustainable rural development and to support their efforts to implement sustainable and innovative projects in rural areas. Furthermore, women must have accurate information and support to apply for funding and access capacity building programmes at European, national and regional levels.

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Call to Action:

- Policymakers should, particularly in the CSP, in the CSRs and LAG plans, provide for interventions that support only women-led projects.
- Regions should adopt a gender assessment of the CSRs which should include the identification of the needs of female agricultural entrepreneurs.
- Policymakers should fund localized advisory services/open desks supporting female-led innovation.
- LAGs should pay more attention to supporting initiatives promoted by women.

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Italian women innovators: Giulia Jannelli and Francesca Casaluci

Policy Brief IT03, 2025.

Local Support to Women Innovators

"Local authorities supporting women-led innovation projects can improve the quality of life in rural communities."

Executive Summary

Local authorities, LAGs and local communities can support women-led innovation projects in different ways, thus contributing to improving the quality of life in rural communities. Public spaces and public land could be rented/made available to facilitate the creation of innovative projects led by women. In addition, local services may be ensured by civil society/private – public partnerships and by funding/supporting the creation of multifunctional shops and agri-kindergartnes. With the support of local authorities and local LAGs, women leading farms and business could also gain recognition within their local community, thus enhancing social cohesion and boosting gender equality.

The Challenge

- Women starting from scratch have difficult in accessing lands and/or may need spaces where they can implement their innovative projects.
- Rural areas throughout Italy are still dominated by patriarchal social norms: women managing farms or rural businesses are looked at with scepticism and are often not supported by their local community, especially if they start a business from scratch.
- The provision of services, such as childcare, could help women not to be
- Local authorities often have public land or spaces which they do not use, and which also generate maintenance costs.
- Especially in rural villages and remote rural areas, it is difficult to maintain services.
- The reduction of services contributes to the depopulation of rural areas.

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burdened by the need to reconcile daily life with business commitments

- LAGs often do not have specific programmes and support services targeting women.

Policy Solutions

We propose to:

- Made available public spaces and public land plots under favourable conditions for women proposing entrepreneurial or social projects.
- Promote Civil Society/Private-Public Partnerships to ensure the maintenance of services at local level. LAGs could facilitate these partnerships targeting women farm managers and entrepreneurs specifically.
- Support the creation of farm- kindergartens and of multifunctional spaces.
- Promote women-led businesses through public events (markets, festivals, etc.) to give visibility to women entrepreneurs and increase their recognition within the local community. This would contribute to challenge gender stereotypes and to promote gender equality.

Practical Tips

- Local authorities and LAGs should organize regular meetings with women farmers and rural entrepreneurs to get to know their needs and be informed about the challenges they face.
- Local authorities should promote calls for tenders for the management of public spaces/public land, possibly also in collaboration with local LAGs. Projects submitted by women will be given preferential eligibility.
- Local authorities should negotiate agreements with agri-kindergartens to offer childcare services.
- Regional and local authorities should provide financial support for the opening of multifunctional spaces (e.g. multi-service shops), particularly in remote rural areas. Get inspiration from the call of the Piedmont Region

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The FLIARA Project found more than one project making use (usually for a fee) of public spaces or public land and demonstrating the relevance of this type of policy in encouraging female innovation and ensuring new services at local level. Municipalities should facilitate access to these assets under favourable conditions for women proposing entrepreneurial or social projects, potentially also involving LAGs. These public areas or spaces are little used or not used at all by public administrations, who have to bear the cost of maintaining them. Making them available for activities promoted by women is therefore doubly beneficial, both in terms of reducing public costs and in terms of supporting the local economy and/or creating new services for citizens.

In Italy, for example, the **project of Salento Km0** expanded in 2015 when a Laboratory was opened in a public space provided by a local Municipality, and where events, workshops and dinners dedicated to the enhancement of local products are organized, as well as a weekly farmers' market.
A **young woman** developed her innovative idea of extracting birch sap by obtaining a concession for a birch forest owned by the municipality. She guarantees the cleaning and maintenance of the forest at the same time.
Another woman manages an alpine hut owned by the local municipality. It is open all year round, thus guaranteeing a meeting point for the local community; providing a restaurant and a bar, as well as a place where children and adults of all ages can meet, play games, share stories, and read books.

An interesting experience is that of the **Cooperativa Agricola Germinale,** which also runs a small restaurant in a public space. A "Bottega dei servizi" (funded by the Piedmont Region and FinPiemonte Spa) has been opened in the same space. It is a multifunctional shop where it is possible to buy basic necessities and access various services (e.g. home deliveries, co-working space, sports equipment rental, etc.).

The **RYSSBY Library project** in Sweden is a prime example of a Civil Society-Public Partnership that successfully ensured the maintenance of services at the local level. The municipality made an agreement with 14 local associations and handed over the management. The library has become a "local living room" used by the village associations to host cultural events.

The evidence from FLIARA clearly shows that the establishment of agri-kindergartens has a double benefit. First, it increases the farm's profit. Second, it promotes social inclusion in rural areas by helping women balance work and private life. Children learn to live in harmony with nature, how food is produced and processed, and the role of different animals and insects on the farm.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Local authorities should support women-led innovative projects.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Local authorities and LAGs should organize regular meetings with women farmers and rural entrepreneurs to get to know their needs and be informed about the challenges they face.

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- Local authorities should made available public spaces and/or public land for innovative project developed by women in order to support them.
- Local authorities should promote public/civil society partnerships to enhance local services, also involving women farmers' and rural women's associations.
- Policymakers should fund multiservice shop to guarantee more local services also in rural remote areas and support the creation of agri-kindergartens.
- Funds should be allocated to promote women-led businesses through markets, festivals and other public events to give visibility to women and enhance the recognition of their work within the local community.

By investing in these strategies, the contribution of women's innovations in agriculture and rural areas can improve the quality of life of rural communities.

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About FLIARA

The project is on a mission to create a more sustainable future by highlighting the role of women in agriculture and rural areas. FLIARA will boost understanding of the needs and challenges facing women leading innovative environmental and rural development practices in EU farming and rural areas.

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Italian women innovators: Giulia Marzaro, CilentoLab. Italy

Policy Brief IT04, 2025.

Improving Family and Work Balance in Rural Areas

"Implementing policies that balance work and family life may importantly contribute to empower rural women, boosting their self-realization and well-being, as well as promoting gender equality."

Executive Summary

Women in rural areas play a vital role in driving sustainability and innovation, but their potential is often limited by unequal caregiving responsibilities and patriarchal environments. The Italian case studies from the FLIARA project (Sivini, Roos and Leonardelli, 2024) highlight ongoing shortcomings in family-work balance policies (e.g. in terms of maternity leave, availability of kindergartens and children care facilities, availability of territorial health services) that hinder rural women's leadership opportunities. Strengthening childcare infrastructure, promoting a relief support system, providing preventive and curative health services in rural areas (taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the use of new technologies in health services), and implementing gender-sensitive funding can help break down these barriers, empowering women as leaders and entrepreneurs.

The Challenge

- Many women innovators in rural Italy juggle farm leadership or business management tasks with caregiving responsibilities, often lacking essential support services like childcare or gender-responsive funding and allowances.
- A relief system has not been activated.
- Women reporting difficulties in being acknowledged as "managers" and in navigating male-dominated and patriarchal farming and rural environments.
- Maternity allowances are limited (five months), paternity allowances are most often limited to ten days of leave, and kindergartens are often not available, especially in remote rural areas and in the South of Italy. For these reasons, it is very challenging for women to

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continue managing a recently established business or farm if they have babies unless they have their partner or other family members importantly supporting them.
- Poor public infrastructures in rural areas such as access to transport, and local health services further constraints women's ability to combine work and family life.

Policy Solutions

We propose to:

- Open and maintain local childcare facilities. Considering the rural context, flexible services that take into account the working hours of women engaged in agriculture or in rural business should be supported (e.g. agri-nurseries, tagensmutter-type services).
- Create funding programmes for women with children to complement maternity leave.
- Establish a relief system that can help women during the periods of time when they have to be absent from work (e.g. for maternity, for taking care of elderlies, etc.).
- Improve paternity leave.
- Coordinate agricultural, social and health policies to ensure better services at local level.
- Support (through funding programmes) women innovators networks to boost collaborations at work and mutual support.

Practical tips

- Involve local communities in care service design and management to make sure their needs are met.
- Improve paternity leave to allow men to take up to five months of leave (just like as it is for women) when they become fathers.
- Promote local campaigns about equal care distribution and gender equality, including in schools and during public fairs, events and festivities – making sure men are also engaged in such discussions.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Evidence from FLIARA case study in Italy (D3.3) suggests the need to improve work-life balance policies for women living in rural areas. Rural areas are still governed by profoundly patriarchal social norms and women struggle to juggle between care work and business management, as they most often are the main care givers. This is a major challenge, especially felt by women involved in farm innovation, which is a very male-dominated field. Maternity leave for self-employed women covers only 5 months and childcare facilities are not always available in rural areas, especially in remote rural areas. Besides, parental leave for most fathers (excluding those working in the public sector) only entails 10 days of leave. For these reasons, especially for women managing a recently established business, it is challenging to develop it while taking care of young children, unless they receive a lot of support from their partner and from other family members. In addition, in Italy a relief system has never been activated (Pirras, 2021).
Best practice in this regard comes from Northern European countries. For instance, **Finland's farmer relief system**, regulated under statue 20.12.1996/1231, support agricultural entrepreneurs by providing substitute services during vacations, illness, or other periods of incapacity. These include assigning substitute workers or compensating farmers for the cost of self-arranged substitutes. The system is designed to make sure that farmers can carry on with their work without any interruption, which in turn helps to boost their sense of social security and work motivation.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Women in rural areas are already key drivers of innovation, sustainability, and local development. Yet, without systemic support to reconcile work and family responsibilities, their contributions often go unrecognized and insufficiently supported.

Prioritizing work-life balance is an investment in gender equality, rural sustainability and social cohesion.

Call to Action:

- Policymakers should integrate work-family conciliation as a central component of rural development strategies at EU, Italian, and regional levels.
- Funding institutions should revise their criteria and processes to better reflect the realities of women innovating while caregiving.
- Local authorities and service providers should collaborate with rural communities to design flexible and affordable care services. These are cizenship rights and as such should be guaranteed by social and inclusion policies in general, which should pay more attention to territorial gaps

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Image courtesy of Giulia Montepaone, We're South. Italy.

Policy Brief IT05, 2025.

Reframing and Expanding AKIS in Italy to Reach Women Innovators

Women farmers and entrepreneurs leading environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable innovations often remain outside the reach of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), in Italy just like in other European countries. Reframing and expanding AKIS could help better support inclusive innovation in farming and rural development.

Executive Summary

The Agriculture and Knowledge Systems (AKIS) in Italy needs to reach a wider group of farmers, rural entrepreneurs and food producers. Evidence from the FLIARA project shows that female innovators in farming and rural areas are a target group that currently are often not aware of AKIS or does not believe it could be relevant for them. In particular, women leading projects focusing on organic, biodynamic or regenerative farming are identified as a group in need of more support.

The Italian CAP Strategic Plan includes the description of the nationally defined AKIS strategy and emphasises the importance of the regional dimension. In 2024, the National AKIS Coordination (CN-AKIS) has been officially established in Italy: a new body composed of 18 experts in AKIS and digitalization of the agricultural sector. At Regional level AKIS Coordination Bodies have been established. In this regard, the Italian AKIS Coordination Bodies should make an explicit effort to reach out to women innovators working in agriculture and food production. Activities and actions specifically targeting women should also be planned. The presence of women in AKIS bodies should be increased, also favouring the participation of female agricultural and rural women representatives.

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The Challenge

Women farmers and rural entrepreneurs interviewed in the context of the FLIARA project in Italy, just like in many other European countries, argued that they are not aware of AKIS and that in general they feel that there is a lack of support for environmental, social and economic innovations, especially in small-scale organic farming, food production and businesses. AKIS should consider women needs.

Policy Solutions

We propose to:

- Frame the AKIS program's communication to emphasize its support for a wide range of innovation projects—not just conventional large-scale farming, but also small-scale, alternative approaches such as organic, biodynamic, and regenerative agriculture, as well as sustainable food production; and to reach women innovators in farming and food production specifically. Women's agricultural associations, as well as associations of female producers (there are several for example Associazione Nazionale Donne dell'Olio, Associazione nazionale Le Donne del Vino, etc.) could play a strategic role in communicating the AKIS programme.
- Training for farmers should be organized considering women needs, also in terms of work-life balance.
- Support pilot actions and innovation testing promoted by women on sustainable farming and food production as well as on sustainability education (for both children and adults) to foster long-term sustainable rural lifestyles and cultivate deeper sustainability awareness, while also fostering gender equality.
- Ensure gender balance within AKIS actors involved in the regional and national coordination bodies to ensure that women needs are considered.

Supporting Evidence

The FLIARA project, both from Italy and the other partner countries, indicates that AKIS is not well known among women farmers and other rural entrepreneurs. The role of AKIS in supporting women in farming still remains very marginal, with the vast majority of women across countries being unsure or totally unfamiliar with the concepts or practices of AKIS. (Roos, Sivini, et al, 2025).

Case studies from Italy revealed that female farm and rural innovators were unaware of AKIS, despite the fact that many of their innovation initiatives align closely with AKIS's current focus and objectives. In Italy, none of the 20 women innovators interviewed mentioned AKIS. (Sivini, Roos & Leonardelli, 2024). This highlights a disconnect between the program's outreach and the communities it aims to serve.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

FLIARA data indicates that AKIS is not reaching farmers and entrepreneurs as broadly as intended. A strategic re-launch of AKIS, could better address the needs of female innovators in agriculture and rural areas, particularly those involved in organic farming and sustainable food production.

Call to Action:

- Information about AKIS should be widely improved throughout the country, through regional communication and specific campaigns to reach small-scale farmers practicing sustainable agriculture, and especially female innovators.
- Emphasize that the AKIS program supports a broad spectrum of innovations—not only AI and high-tech solutions for large-scale conventional farming, but also social, environmental, and grassroots innovations relevant to diverse farming and food production models.
- AKIS should promote specific actions to support women innovators, from gathering their needs to providing support.
- Increase the presence of women in AKIS bodies by involving female representatives, e.g. from women's agricultural associations and producer associations.

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About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of Linda Montagna. L'Eco della Terra. Italy.

Policy Brief IT06, 2025.

Spotlighting Women in Sustainable Rural Innovation

"Spotlighting women contributing to sustainable innovation in rural areas favor knowledge exchange, help to strengthens networks and inspire other women to engage in innovation."

Executive Summary

Women play key roles in leading sustainable innovation in farming and in rural areas in general. However, their contribution is often not visible and goes unrecognized. The creation of a national online inventory of women leading farming and rural innovative projects will enhance their visibility and may inspire other women to be engaged in sustainable innovation in rural areas.

Following the successful approach of the FLIARA project, which entailed the creation of such inventory at the national level and the subsequent selection of 20 women innovators (10 farmers and 10 rural entrepreneurs) to document their innovation journey and impacts. Fact sheets about these women and their projects were created and published on the FLIARA project website to enhance their visibility and strengthen their networks.

Policymakers should develop a similar initiative or expand the existing one to spotlight rural women engaged in sustainable innovation across Italy. At the same time, they could support local events (e.g. through the LAGs) where women innovators could showcase their products and services to a wide audience as well as meet and network with other women innovators. Such national as well as localized engagement strategies would contribute to empower female innovators, spotlighting their projects, facilitating peer learning and accessibility of information, and inspiring other women.

By selecting key female innovators, documenting their experiences, and fostering a supportive community, this approach promotes knowledge exchange and leadership. Lessons from the FLIARA project demonstrate that regional and national initiatives can be equally effective, with informal networking preferred. Policymakers should support tailored programs that empower

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female innovators, facilitate peer learning, and ensure accessibility through localized engagement strategies.

The Challenge

- Women bringing forward innovative projects in farming and in rural areas are often not seen or not known beyond small groups of insiders or beyond their networks.
- Women's contribution to rural sustainability often goes unrecognized.
- There is a lack of platforms where female role-models in farming and rural areas can present their projects and inspire other women.

Policy Solutions

Identify women that bring forward innovative and sustainable projects in farming and rural areas.

- Consider multiple dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental, social, cultural).
- Use an assessment framework (see Initial Case Study Assessment and Selection Framework for an example).
- Identify women that bring forward innovative and sustainable projects in farming and rural areas in each region of Italy.
- Build a national inventory of women-led innovative projects.

Produce fact sheets about each project

- Contact the women included in the inventory to ask if they would like their project/innovation to be included in a national online and open access platform
- Obtain an informed consent form from each woman to present their project in a factsheet
- Use a standard layout that includes text and visuals
- Fill in a factsheet for each woman-led project collecting standardized information to present their project, their innovation journey, the products and services they offer, their impact on different sustainability dimensions, and add relevant related websites and contacts. For a practical example see the factsheets created in the context of the FLIARA project: Innovators - FLIARA Project

Create a public open access website to upload the factsheets and advertise it

- Upload the facsheets produced on a website created specifically to spotlight rural women
- Include an interactive map to show where the different projects are located
- Add a "contact" section, so that women innovators interested in being added can contact the website managers
- Make sure the website is regularly updated
- Advertise the website at the local level (e.g. through events organized by the LAGs, markets, public spaces), as well as at regional and national events (e.g. on the website of the national strategic plan of the CAP)

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Organize Community of Practice

- Community of Practice (CoP) bring people with a common interest together to share knowledge, innovate, offer support and advance an agenda. Organizing CoP at regional level or/and at local level (for exemple by LAGs) would be useful to increase awarness about womens needs.
- Organize workshops/events involving women, policymakers and other stakeholders which are parto of the CoP to discuss innovations, problems and solutions and learning experiences

Support the organization of events spotlighting women innovators specifically

- Allocate funds to support local events and initiatives (e.g. organized by the LAGs) to showcase and appreciate particularly women-led projects
- Allocate funds to support the organization of at least one regional fair about women-led innovation in farming and in rural areas in general
- Share outcomes through media channels

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

A similar approach to the one suggested here was successfully implemented in the **HORIZON EUROPE** project **FLIARA** (Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas). The initiative engaged 200 women from 10 EU Member States, and included among other tasks, the production of 200 factsheets on women-led projects on farming and rural innovation and the creation of a Community of Practice.

The women who participated in this initiative expressed great enthusiasm about being involved in the project activities. Their projects got visibility in their own country as well as across Europe, demonstrating the importance of supporting and creating new ways to spotlight women-led innovative projects and their impact on rural sustainability. In addition, the women involved created a WhatsApp group that enabled networking among themselves.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Spotlighting women innovators in farming and rural areas, and their roles in promoting sustainable innovation can empower women, strengthen their networks, facilitate peer learning, and provide inspiration for other women.

The success of the FLIARA project highlights the effectiveness of spotlighting female innovators, also to point out the challenges they face, the support they need and to highlight the impacts they have. Regional and national initiatives can replicate this model, ensuring accessibility and relevance.

Call to Action:

- A national online, open access platform showcasing female-led innovative projects in farming and in rural entrepreneurship, and their contribution to rural sustainability, should be funded through public support (e.g. through the CAP National Strategic Plan).
- Regional and local events and the creation of Communities of Practice should also be encouraged, and financial support (through public funds) should be provided to create spaces where women can present their projects, gain visibility and meet other women to network with.

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By investing in these strategies, it is possible to amplify women's contributions and drive meaningful, sustainable change in rural communities, while promoting gender equality.

Further Reading

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Innovators - FLIARA Project

Ambassadors - FLIARA Project

Initial Guidelines for Case Study Assessment and Selection https://zenodo.org/records/14045179

Strategic Action Plan https://zenodo.org/records/14045414

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Image courtesy of: Merel Gerritse and Irma Brassinga, Eetmeerbosch. Netherlands

Policy Brief NL01, 2025.

Promoting a Diversity of Inclusive and Sustainable Agricultural Practices

"The future of agriculture depends on diverse hands, minds, and methods working together for a thriving, sustainable countryside."

"Diverse farming is resilient farming—especially when we recognize the knowledge and leadership women bring to the field."

Executive Summary

The Netherlands' agricultural sector faces mounting environmental, social, and market pressures. Traditional monoculture models are proving increasingly unsustainable.

Despite the Netherlands' reputation for agricultural innovation, female farmers and rural entrepreneurs remain underrepresented and under-supported in national policies targeting inclusive and sustainable agriculture. While many women lead groundbreaking ecological, social, and economic innovations, existing CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) and NSP (National Strategic Plan) mechanisms insufficiently recognize or target their specific contributions.

Diverse farming approaches—including agroecology, biodynamic farming, permaculture, and multifunctional agriculture—offer pathways toward more resilient, sustainable systems.

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However, these approaches, often led by women, remain structurally under-supported in national and European funding frameworks. CAP and CSP must intentionally nurture a wider range of farming models if rural economies and ecosystems are to remain viable in the future.

This policy brief recommends advancing inclusive, sustainability-centered farming by strengthening gender-responsive CAP measures, expanding training and access to regenerative and agroecological practices, and providing structural support for multifunctional farm models, many of which are spearheaded by women.

The Challenge

- The Dutch agricultural sector faces pressing environmental and social challenges, including nitrogen crises, biodiversity loss, and rural demographic shrinkage. Yet, innovation pathways led by women—such as regenerative farming, community-supported agriculture, and multifunctional farms combining care, education, and production—remain marginalized.
- Current CAP and NSP frameworks focus heavily on technical modernization and scale enlargement, with insufficient attention to sustainable, community-oriented, and gender-inclusive practices.
- Existing advisory services and funding programs rarely tailor support toward smaller, multifunctional, female-led farms despite their significant contributions to environmental stewardship, rural vitality, and social cohesion. The dominant policy focus remains on technical innovation within industrial farming rather than on systemic transformation toward diversified, multifunctional, and regenerative models.
- Women leading these innovations encounter multiple barriers: limited eligibility for subsidies, land-use regulations that fail to recognize multifunctionality, and an advisory system heavily geared toward large-scale, single-sector operations.
- Without targeted support, diverse farming will remain niche, and rural sustainability goals will falter.

Policy Solutions

At national and provincial level

- **Introduce CAP sub-measures specifically targeting multifunctional, sustainable, and female-led farms**, ensuring dedicated funding windows and simplified application processes.
- **Fund pilot projects and living labs** showcasing diverse, sustainable farming systems, with special emphasis on female-led initiatives.
- **Expand advisory and training programs** on regenerative, biodynamic, and agroecological practices, prioritizing female farmers and rural entrepreneurs as primary recipients.
- **Integrate gender equity objectives explicitly into environmental and rural sustainability goals** of CSP measures and LEADER programs.
- **Encourage flexible provincial land-use policies** allowing multifunctional activities (e.g., care farms, educational farms, food forests) as legitimate farming operations.
- **Invest in gender-responsive extension services** that not only provide technical advice but also empower women to develop leadership skills and resilient farm businesses.
- **Enhance visibility campaigns** highlighting female-led sustainable farming as a model for future agriculture.
- **Establish knowledge-sharing platforms** that connect practitioners of diverse farming with researchers, consumers, and policymakers.

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- **Provide financial incentives and risk-sharing tools** for farmers transitioning toward diversified production systems.
- Develop **training programs** focused on the business models of diversified farming, targeting young and female farmers.

Practical Tips at local level

- Local land use plans may unnecessarily restrict certain types of farming
- Use land policies to make land available for new entrants close to build-up areas
- Invite key players to town and village halls to facilitate networking

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

- Dutch examples: Regenerative cow farming by female-led farms in remote rural areas shows clear environmental and business viability, yet struggles with access to tailored technical support and subsidies.
- CSA models: Community-supported agriculture initiatives, often co-led by women, promote soil health, biodiversity, and social cohesion but rarely receive structural CAP support despite proven sustainability impacts.
- In FLIARA 200 female innovators have been interviewed. Fact sheets produce information on how their work has developed. **Dutch biodynamic farms** successfully integrate education, food production, and biodiversity enhancement yet face disproportionate bureaucratic hurdles in accessing public funding.
- **Community-supported agriculture farms** demonstrate market resilience and high consumer loyalty, yet lack recognition in traditional agricultural policy frameworks.
- **French and German CAP Strategic Plans** increasingly recognize agroecology as a priority area for public support, providing examples for the Netherlands to follow.

Conclusion & Call to Action

The Netherlands must urgently integrate gender responsiveness into its agricultural sustainability policies. Promoting inclusive and sustainable agricultural practices means:

CALL TO ACTION:

- Acknowledging and financially supporting women's innovations in regenerative and multifunctional farming.
- Reforming CAP and NSP interventions to be truly inclusive.
- Investing in a new generation of diverse rural innovators—regardless of gender—who prioritize environmental stewardship, social resilience, and economic viability. Embed support for diversified models at the heart of agricultural and rural development strategies.
- Actively target female-led farms and businesses advancing multifunctional and sustainable farming.
- Remove legal, financial, and cultural barriers that favor monoculture dominance

A thriving countryside depends on fostering the full richness of its agricultural imagination.

Without these changes, the Netherlands risks missing its environmental goals and deepening gender gaps in rural leadership and innovation. A fair and sustainable agricultural future requires full inclusion now

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Further Reading

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Innovators - FLIARA Project

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Image courtesy of Froukje de Jong-Krap, Bildtse Aardappelweken (BAW), Netherlands

Policy Brief NL02, 2025.

Promoting Positive Images of Rural Farming Women and Rural Women Entrepreneurs Across All Education Curricula

"You cannot become what you cannot see—rural girls need role models, not stereotypes."

Executive Summary

Persistent stereotypes about farming and rural entrepreneurship undermine the aspirations of young women in the Netherlands. Mainstream education at MBO, HBO, and VWO levels often ignores or caricatures rural life and agriculture, particularly female roles in these sectors. Reforming curricula and promoting positive, diverse images of rural women entrepreneurs is crucial for building an inclusive, future-proof rural economy.

The Challenge

- Many educational materials present rural life as outdated or secondary, reinforcing urban-rural divides and gender biases.
- Teenage girls from rural areas rarely encounter inspiring role models who combine farming, entrepreneurship, sustainability, and leadership.
- In many family farms traditional gender models are internalized and it is difficult to break these open.

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- This gap leads to brain drain from rural areas and the underrepresentation of women in rural innovation.

Policy Solutions

- **Review and revise education curricula** (MBO, HBO, VWO) to include contemporary rural themes and role models, with a gender-sensitive lens.
- **Integrate case studies** of successful rural women innovators into civic education, entrepreneurship, and sustainability classes.
- **Support teacher training programs** that challenge stereotypes about farming, entrepreneurship, and gender.
- **Develop national campaigns** featuring rural women leaders across media and education platforms.
- **Encourage rural schools and universities** to organize field trips, guest lectures, and mentorship programs led by rural women innovators.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

- **Multifunctional farms** led by women already serve as excellent real-life case studies ready for curricular inclusion.
- **Studies show** that role models significantly influence girls' career choices across sectors.
- The Netherlands **only 5.6%** of farm managers are **female** in 2020 (EUROSTAT). This is even a slight **decline** in comparison with 2010. This is far **below the EU average** of 31.6%. Unlike in the Netherlands, the share of female farm managers is growing in the EU. This makes that there are **few female role models** around in the Netherlands, and these is a need of spotlighting female role models and reimaging female entrepreneurship in farming and rural areas

Conclusion & Call to Action

Without visible role models, the next generation of rural women entrepreneurs will hesitate to lead. The Netherlands must:

CALL TO ACTION:

- Reform educational materials to reflect modern rural life and women's leadership.
- Promote positive rural identities alongside urban ones.
- Inspire young women to see farming and rural innovation as desirable, viable futures.
- Address all people involved in family farming with this message

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Further Reading

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Innovators - FLIARA Project

Ambassadors - FLIARA Project

Initial Guidelines for Case Study Assessment and Selection https://zenodo.org/records/14045179

Strategic Action Plan https://zenodo.org/records/14045414

Eurostat, Agricultural holdings and utilised agricultural area by training, age and sex of farm managers https://edu.nl/8684p

About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of Anneke van Hootegem, Grote Verleiding. Netherlands

Policy Brief NL03, 2025.

Supporting Direct-to-Consumer and Short Supply Chain Farming

"The shorter the distance between farmer and table, the stronger our rural future"

Executive Summary

Direct-to-consumer (DTC) and short supply chain (SSC) models offer critical pathways toward more sustainable, equitable food systems in the Netherlands. Women farmers and rural entrepreneurs are key drivers of these models, enhancing food sovereignty, reducing carbon footprints, and revitalizing local economies. Yet, these initiatives remain under-supported in existing CAP and national policy frameworks. A targeted effort is needed to foster DTC and SSC farming, integrating them fully into the mainstream rural and agricultural strategies.

The Challenge

- Dutch farming is a highly successful player in producing for the world market. This is being supported by current agricultural subsidy frameworks and food market structures that favor large-scale production and long, centralized supply chains. To stay competitive, farmers need to enlarge their scale (more hectares per farm), resulting in less and less farms in the Netherlands, contributing to an alienation between farming and society.
- Next to this there is space for farmers with more direct relationships with local and regional customers using DTC and SSC models—such as CSA (community-supported agriculture), farm shops, online farm-to-table services, and farmers' cooperatives—often operate at smaller scales and face challenges accessing investment, scaling logistics, and navigating complex food safety regulations.
- Female-led initiatives play a larger role in these more local-in particular often lack tailored financial, technical, and legal support.

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Policy Solutions

- **Create dedicated CAP and LEADER funding windows** for DTC and SSC models.
- Simplify food safety and logistics regulations for small-scale, direct-selling farmers.
- **Support digital infrastructure investments** (e.g., online ordering, logistics platforms) for rural farms.
- **Promote consumer awareness campaigns** highlighting the benefits of short supply chains and women-led initiatives.
- **Establish mentoring and training programs** for farmers shifting to direct sales models, with special outreach to female entrepreneurs.
- **Pilot public procurement schemes** prioritizing SSC suppliers for schools, hospitals, and municipal services.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

- Many of the female innovators interviewed by FLIARA show a strong combination of local networking and innovation.
- **Regional food hubs** in Germany and Belgium demonstrate that strategic logistical support can scale SSC models effectively.
- **French public procurement laws** now encourage sourcing from local, small-scale producers—a model adaptable to the Dutch context

Conclusion & Call to Action

The following actions can support a higher share of local food production and establish closer links between consumers and food production:

CALL TO ACTION:

- Prioritize support for direct-to-consumer and short supply chain models.
- Recognize and nurture the leadership of rural women in innovating local food systems.
- Adjust legal, funding, and regulatory frameworks to match the needs of diverse, community-centered farming models.
- To call for organizations (local authorities, schools, offices) to buy food at local farms; adopting local producers as key suppliers.

Short supply chains are not a nostalgic return to the past—they are a vital part of sustainable rural futures.

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European Commission (2020). Farm to Fork Strategy.

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Image courtesy of Inge Vleeminghand Heimen Vos. De Goed Gevulde Boerderij, Netherlands

Policy Brief NL04, 2025.

Incorporating Gender Policy KPI in CAP, CSP & LEADER

"What we measure, we value. Without gender indicators, rural equality remains invisible"

Executive Summary

Despite formal commitments to gender equality, CAP, CSP, and LEADER programs often lack specific, measurable gender-related Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Without clear metrics and monitoring systems, women's contributions to rural innovation remain underrecognized, underfunded, and undervalued. Integrating gender KPIs is essential for achieving real progress toward inclusive rural development in the Netherlands.

The Challenge

- Current CAP and CSP monitoring frameworks primarily track environmental, economic, and territorial impacts without adequately considering gender equality.
- Gender-disaggregated data are rarely collected, analyzed, or used in decision-making.
- As a result, the specific needs, barriers, and achievements of women farmers and rural entrepreneurs are rendered invisible in policy implementation and evaluation.

Policy Solutions

- **Mandate the collection of gender-disaggregated data** across all CAP, CSP, and LEADER projects and interventions.
- **Include gender equality as a formal cross-cutting objective** in CSP and LEADER evaluations.

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- **Develop and implement gender-sensitive KPIs** such as:
  - Percentage of female project leaders and beneficiaries
  - Access to training, advisory services, and financial instruments by gender
  - Representation of women in local LEADER decision-making bodies (LAGs)
- **Incentivize gender-balanced partnerships** in CAP-funded projects.
- **Provide technical assistance** to local, regional, and national authorities on integrating gender KPIs.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

- **Austria and Sweden** have successfully integrated gender indicators into their CAP Strategic Plans.
- **OECD guidelines** recommend gender-disaggregated monitoring for rural policy effectiveness.
- **Experience** in the Netherlands with other sectors (e.g., health, education) shows that gender KPIs significantly improve equity outcomes when consistently applied.
- Current indicators, such as, the share of farm holdings (5.6%) led by female farm managers, suggest that there is room for a larger female presence and good KPI help to keep track of this

Conclusion & Call to Action

Without measurable targets, gender equality remains aspirational rather than operational. The Netherlands must:

CALL TO ACTION:

- Incorporate robust gender KPIs into CAP, CSP, and LEADER programming and monitoring frameworks.
- Use gender-disaggregated data to improve future rural development policies.
- Ensure that the voices and contributions of rural women are not just acknowledged but systematically valued.

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Further Reading

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Image courtesy of Marleen and Willeke van Rijn, 't Geertje. Netherlands

Policy Brief NL05, 2025.

Addressing Underrepresentation of Rural Women and Rural Entrepreneurship in the Emancipation National Policy

"Emancipation is incomplete if rural women's leadership remains unseen and unsupported"

Executive Summary

The Netherlands' National Emancipation Policy ("Emancipatienota") focuses heavily on urban and professional contexts, neglecting rural women's specific realities, roles, and challenges. Women-led innovations in farming, rural entrepreneurship, and community development are key drivers of sustainable rural futures. Yet, they remain invisible in national gender equality frameworks. This brief advocates for integrating rural women's leadership and innovation into national emancipation policy goals and programs.

The Challenge

- Rural women in the Netherlands face distinct structural barriers, including restricted access to land, finance, training, and decision-making spaces.
- Their unpaid contributions to civic life—managing foundations, cooperatives, and rural services—are vital yet unrecognized in policy frameworks.
- Current emancipation programs do not target or address these realities, reinforcing the invisibility of rural women's leadership.

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Policy Solutions

- **Explicitly include rural women's leadership and entrepreneurship** in the objectives and measures of the National Emancipation Policy.
- **Establish a rural women's leadership platform** within the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science's emancipation programs.
- **Fund dedicated programs** to support rural women innovators, including access to land, finance, and education.
- **Conduct a national survey** on rural women's socio-economic conditions and leadership roles.
- **Promote partnerships** between urban and rural women's organizations.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

LEADER programs show strong female leadership at local levels (19 of the 31 Leader coordinators are female, and LAGs show a diversity of genders)—but **national policy lags behind**.

Experiences of rural innovators interviewed by FLIARA show that there are substantial gender issues in rural areas. This is not only a matter of policies but also of expectations of key stakeholders that look for a leading male figure to address in doing business.

National Emancipation Policy has no eye for rural women and rural women vocations. Specific, targeted national policy for rural women is needed

Conclusion & Call to Action

Rural women must no longer be the invisible backbone of Dutch rural development. The Netherlands must:

CALL TO ACTION:

- Recognize rural women's contributions in its national emancipation policies.
- Provide structural support to amplify their leadership.
- Make rural gender equality a national political priority.
- Make communication to change traditional gender perspectives a priority

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Image courtesy of Stela Zămoiu, Romanian Peasants' Association EcoRuralis. Romania.

Policy Brief RO01, 2025

Unlocking the potential of rural women through inclusive CAP measures

"Targeted support for non-agricultural innovation and rural women is not optional—it is essential for truly inclusive rural development."

Executive Summary

Romania's current CAP Strategic Plan (2023–2027) misses a critical opportunity to support rural women and diversify rural economies. Two significant interventions—support for non-agricultural enterprises and cooperation in value chains—were removed in the most recent revision. Although LEADER is presented as a delivery mechanism, the programme's budget remains unchanged, putting unrealistic expectations on Local Action Groups (LAGs).

This policy brief recommends rebalancing Romania's CAP to better serve non-agricultural development and female innovators. It outlines actionable solutions: reallocating funding, targeting women specifically in CAP measures, promoting cross-sectoral investment, and reducing access barriers. These are vital steps for sustainable and inclusive rural futures.

The Challenge

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Policy Solutions

- Increase LEADER budget allocation to allow LAGs to effectively support non-agricultural and women-led local development needs.
- Create specific CAP interventions targeting women entrepreneurs in both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors.
- Eliminate access barriers by strengthening women's financial literacy, grant-writing skills, and business development capacities through tailored training and mentoring.
- Systematically collect and use gender-disaggregated data in all CAP policy and funding measures.
- Promote cross-sectoral funding mechanisms that recognize and support the complex, multifunctional character of women-led innovations in rural areas.
- Implement lump sum funding mechanisms to simplify administrative procedures for both beneficiaries and managing authorities, especially important for small-scale women entrepreneurs.

Practical Tips

- Engage with women's organizations and LAGs to co-create and design inclusive interventions.
- Encourage the use of participatory budgeting to reflect gendered needs in rural development strategies.
- Develop and promote capacity-building programmes tailored for women in business planning, project management, and accessing EU funds.
- Promote visibility and awareness campaigns for existing funding opportunities aimed at women-led rural innovation.
- Include women entrepreneurs as evaluators or advisors in shaping local and national CAP-related measures.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

FLIARA Case Studies (D4.3) show that women innovate by leveraging local resources to enhance rural multifunctionality, protect cultural heritage, and strengthen community cohesion. Women lead social enterprises, environmental innovations, and adopt circular economy principles that address urgent local needs while empowering marginalized groups.

Italy: The CAP 2023–2027 includes as a priority the support of women entrepreneurs in diversification interventions, alongside youth, and this is reflected in the beneficiary selection criteria.

Slovenia: CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 allocates additional selection points for young women farmers establishing businesses.

These examples show how targeted CAP measures can successfully stimulate innovation and equality when funding criteria are gender-responsive.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

To ensure resilient and inclusive rural economies, Romania must reinforce its CAP Strategy by meaningfully integrating gender equality and non-agricultural development. This requires:

- Adequate financial reallocation toward LEADER and targeted support for women-led enterprises;
- Simplified access to funding;
- Recognition of the multifaceted value of women's rural innovations.
- Local Action Groups need clear mandates and increased budgets to fulfill their community development role.
- Managing Authorities should adapt selection criteria to prioritize women and multifunctional rural innovation.

Failing to act now will risk exacerbating gender gaps and undermine rural sustainability. A future-proof CAP must be inclusive, diversified, and community-driven—with women as central actors in shaping that future.

Further Reading

https://fliara.eu/innovators/

D4.3 Initial Benchmarking Report: https://zenodo.org/communities/fliara

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Image courtesy of Brîndușa Birhală, Strawbale house. Romania.

Policy Brief RO02, 2025.

Building gender-sensitive capacity for rural development governance

"Empowering those who implement rural development policies with gender-sensitive knowledge is essential for inclusive governance and unlocking women's potential in rural innovation."

Executive Summary

Despite the LEADER programme's potential to promote community-led innovation and inclusive rural development, its impact is often limited by a lack of gender sensitivity at both the implementation and regulatory levels. Local Action Groups, local governments, and national authorities often lack the skills, tools, and awareness necessary to integrate gender equality into program design, fund management, and project evaluation.

This policy brief proposes a strategic approach to build gender-sensitive governance capacity across all rural development actors.

Drawing from FLIARA insights, this brief recommends targeted action at all levels—from national to local—to ensure institutions are equipped to recognize, support, and promote rural women's innovation through gender-sensitive governance structures.

The Challenge

Although gender equality is a stated objective in EU policies, in Romania, the rural development system lacks the institutional capacity to translate it into practice. Key actors involved in CAP implementation—LAGs, local authorities, and program managers—are often not trained to identify or address gender-specific barriers.

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Moreover, while LEADER is meant to be a flexible, locally driven tool for innovation, its implementation is often constrained by either rigid national/regional regulations or by the limited gender awareness of those designing or delivering the interventions.

The FLIARA project highlights that women face specific challenges in accessing rural innovation support, especially when bureaucratic procedures and eligibility criteria are not designed with their realities in mind. Without targeted capacity building, both frontline implementers and managing institutions will continue to miss the opportunity to support rural women effectively.

Policy Solutions

- Introduce modular training programs tailored for different stakeholder groups:
  - LAGs and local public institutions: integrating gender into local strategies, project design, and community engagement.
  - Managing authorities and evaluators: designing gender-sensitive calls, funding criteria, evaluation tools, and reporting mechanisms.
- Create a national pool of certified trainers and a learning community to ensure long-term support for gender integration in rural development governance.
- Support LAGs to leverage LEADER's tools—small-scale projects, community-specific target groups—to promote inclusive, gender-sensitive innovation.
- Align national regulations and funding guidelines with gender equality objectives, allowing for flexibility and tailored approaches in line with local needs.
- Incorporate gender-disaggregated indicators and monitoring frameworks into program evaluation to track progress and impact.

Practical Tips

- Design short, role-specific training modules to support LAGs, local councils, and managing authorities in integrating gender-sensitive approaches into their daily work.
- For funding programme managers and evaluators, include dedicated sessions on:
  - Incorporating gender equality into eligibility and selection criteria.
  - Using gender-sensitive evaluation grids and scoring systems.
  - Collecting and reporting gender-disaggregated data as part of monitoring requirements.
- Use real case studies from rural Romania and the FLIARA network to show what inclusive practices look like in practice.
- Provide a "gender lens checklist" for LAGs and authorities to use when assessing project relevance and impact.
- Develop open-access toolkits and templates, including checklists, guidance notes, and training decks.
- Encourage joint training sessions that bring together LAGs, local public servants, and national-level stakeholders to build shared understanding.
- Foster peer learning exchanges between regions already applying gender-sensitive measures and those starting the journey.
- Offer follow-up coaching or online community support to trained actors, beyond one-off workshops.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

FLIARA D4.3 findings confirm that participants perceive a lack of well-informed local actors capable of navigating complex systems, with bureaucratic and inaccessible support systems discouraging women's participation.

Participants from rural Romania highlighted that rigid criteria, underfunding, and bureaucratic overload hindered local development—revealing a critical need for skilled professionals trained in gender-sensitive governance.

Successful examples in countries such as Ireland and Sweden show that gender mainstreaming training for local institutions can directly impact the inclusiveness and effectiveness of LEADER interventions.

Conclusion & Call to Action

For gender equality to move from principle to practice in rural Romania, stakeholders at every level of rural governance must be equipped with the right knowledge, tools, and support.

CALL TO ACTION:

- The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development should coordinate a national training programme for gender-sensitive CAP implementation.
- Managing authorities must integrate gender criteria and inclusive evaluation practices into all calls and selection procedures.
- LAGs and local actors must receive consistent training and guidance to apply gender-aware methods in community engagement and local strategy design.

Investing in capacity building for gender-sensitive governance will not only empower women—it will improve the quality, inclusiveness, and innovation capacity of rural development as a whole.

Further Reading

FLIARA Deliverables: https://zenodo.org/communities/fliara

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Image courtesy of Alina Zlati, Vertical Roots. Romania.

Policy Brief RO03, 2025.

Supporting Women's Return to Rural Areas and Promoting Female Entrepreneurship

"When women return, communities thrive—supporting their skills, networks, and ideas is key to rural Romania's sustainable future."

Executive Summary

Women returning to rural Romania—often with international work and/or study experience—drive sustainable innovation in local communities. Targeted support through grants, reintegration programs, and peer networks can enhance rural entrepreneurship and development while fostering knowledge exchange between returnees and local women—a key condition for sustainable innovation. This brief proposes dedicated policies to support the return migration of women to rural areas, addressing reintegration barriers and enabling sustainable innovation across ecological, social, and cultural dimensions.

The Challenge

As shown in FLIARA report D3.3 on rural innovation in Romania, many successful innovative women had previously lived, studied, or worked abroad before returning to rural communities. This trend includes both women returning to their home villages and urban-born women choosing rural life. Their diverse experiences position them as crucial agents of sustainable rural transformation. Supporting these returnees with targeted measures can enhance rural development and foster innovation by promoting the exchange of knowledge and skills with local communities—an essential condition for context-sensitive, sustainable solutions.

- **Barriers to reintegration**: lack of tailored policies to support women returning to rural areas and insufficient support for women aiming to implement ecologically, socially, and culturally sustainable projects

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- **Limited access to education and skill development**: few scholarship or training opportunities aligned with sustainable rural development and women's professional interests or gaps
- **Weak reintegration mechanisms**: absence of structured peer-to-peer knowledge exchange between returnees and local women and lack of formal reintegration programs connecting returnees to local communities
- **Poor rural infrastructure**: inadequate public and school transport systems and limited access to quality education services in rural areas, posing a barrier for familie
- **Underutilized potential in local governance**: lack of mechanisms to engage returnee women with relevant skills in local governance or institutional development.
- **Fragmented support networks for women entrepreneurs**: Insufficient networking opportunities or support systems for women entrepreneurs at local, regional, or translocal levels
- **Inadequate financial support for innovation**: limited availability of accessible, small or medium-sized, non-repayable grants and excessive administrative burdens in funding applications and reporting processes.

Policy Solutions

To support women's return to rural areas and promote female entrepreneurship, policies must address three key areas. First, national-level interventions are essential to facilitate return migration through targeted scholarships, reintegration programs, and accessible, low-bureaucracy grants that encourage women to start innovative rural initiatives. Second, local and regional efforts should focus on strengthening female entrepreneurship by expanding support networks, enabling access to resources, and fostering collaboration through women-led associations and translocal networks. Finally, improving the attractiveness of rural life for women—particularly those returning or migrating from urban areas—requires investment in public infrastructure, such as transport and education services, and the inclusion of women in local governance. Ensuring women are part of decision-making processes at the community level is vital to shaping inclusive, responsive rural development.

- **National scholarship programs**: new scholarships for rural women to acquire skills and education, supporting their return and local involvement. A priority focus is recommended on (a) developing the skills needed for sustainable rural development, taking into account both (b) areas of increased interest for women and (c) areas where women are underrepresented.
- **Reinsertion and integration programs**: It is recommended to implement programs that support the reintegration of women in rural communities and the effective use of their skills. Including peer-to-peer knowledge exchange programs that link returnees with women in the community/region for mentoring and facilitate exchange of best practices.
- **Start-up grants and funding for rural innovation**: It is proposed to provide financial support to women returnees to launch start-ups or innovative rural projects, with a focus on small and medium grants that are non-reimbursable, easy to access and have low administrative/reporting requirements.**Empowering women entrepreneurs**: encouraging rural entrepreneurship by strengthening support networks and access to resources for women returnees. Local/regional or translocal women's networks are supported to integrate and connect women entrepreneurs.
- **Attract women with relevant skills and experience to work with local government and institutions**.
- **Rural infrastructure improvement**, with a focus on expanding and adapting local and school public transportation to meet the needs of women and families. Lack of access to adequate transportation and quality educational services is a major barrier to women's relocation and active involvement in rural life.

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Practical Tips

- Develop measures to asses key competencies gained by the women before returning in order to better tap into their potential within each community.
- Approach the tailored solution systemically by pairing the capacities of the women with the needs of rural communities (eg. Childcare, eldercare, etc.).
- Use real case studies from rural Romania and the FLIARA network to show what the supports and good practices look like in practice.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Start-up Nation Program for Romania

The Start-up Nation Romania program offers grants for newly established companies, including start-ups, small businesses, and SMEs, with a focus on entrepreneurship. The program includes two pillars: one for local applicants (Pillar I) and one for those returning from the diaspora (Pillar II). It provides non-reimbursable funding of up to 100,000 lei for creating one job, or up to 200,000 lei for creating two jobs, covering up to 95% of eligible project expenses. In 2022, the program allocated a total budget of 520 million lei for local entrepreneurs and 20 million lei for the diaspora. Managed by the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism, it promotes smart, sustainable growth through digitalization, innovation, and job creation. This program can be an essential policy tool to support women entrepreneurs returning to rural areas, fostering economic development and job creation in these communities.

Conclusion & Call to Action

The return of women with international experience to rural Romania is a powerful driver of sustainable innovation. These women bring valuable skills, global perspectives, and a strong commitment to local development. Yet, without the right conditions, their potential remains underutilized.

To harness this transformative force, the following actions are needed:

- Implement national reintegration programs tailored to women returning to rural areas, including mentorship, peer exchanges, and skill recognition.
- Expand access to non-repayable start-up grants for sustainable rural initiatives led by women, with minimal bureaucracy.
- Invest in local infrastructure and governance inclusion, ensuring returnee women help shape community development.
- Build and support women-led networks that connect returnees with local women to exchange knowledge and co-create resilient solutions.

Now is the time to act—supporting returning women is investing in Romania's rural future!

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Further Reading

D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

https://fliara.eu/innovators/

FLIARA Deliverables: https://zenodo.org/communities/fliara

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image courtesy of Andrea Tasnádi, Hummus Association. Romania.

Policy Brief RO04, 2025.

Improving networking support and social spaces for rural women

"Empower rural women through networks and support—unlock innovation, foster inclusion, and drive sustainable development in rural communities."

Executive Summary

The long-term vision for rural areas (LTVRA) and CSPs, as outlined by the European Commission (2024), emphasize the need to enhance rural connectivity, social inclusion, and rural business innovation. Networks supporting women, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, and local communities are crucial for the success of women-led innovations. Proposed policy measures include creating collaborative social spaces, offering logistical and financial support to women's networks, expanding digital connectivity, and promoting peer-to-peer learning. These initiatives aim to empower rural women, foster sustainable development, and improve political participation, ensuring inclusive, effective governance and strengthening local cohesion in Romania's rural areas.

The Challenge

These challenges, described in D3.3 and D4.3 highlight the need for targeted interventions to support rural women in Romania and improve overall rural development:

- **Need for improvement and adequacy of actions** supporting higher rural connectivity and social inclusion, as well as rural businesses and innovation.
- **Gender equality challenges** related to building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions, particularly in improving women's participation in rural politics.
- **Limited participation of rural women in decision-making**, which is influenced by women's empowerment and their motivations to engage in the decision-making process.
- **Insufficient support for women's networks and civil society organizations (CSOs)**, hindering the creation of collaborative social spaces and the expansion of rural development initiatives.

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- **Lack of financial and logistical mechanisms** to support women's networks, knowledge exchange, and community engagement in rural areas.
- **Limited access to digital connectivity** and necessary technological infrastructure, hindering the formation of online networks and access to funding opportunities.
- **Barriers to peer-to-peer learning and mentoring** for women, especially in rural areas, due to a lack of structured support programs and platforms.
- **Economic sustainability challenges** for women-led rural businesses, stemming from limited access to resources, knowledge, and best practices.

Policy Solutions

Strengthening networks and creating social spaces for rural women in Romania is essential for promoting inclusive, innovative and sustainable rural development and strengthening local cohesion.

- Women's participation in decision-making: Networks to support women's empowerment, and increased empowerment enhances the chances of their active participation in political decision-making.
- Conditions necessary for the success of innovations: Support networks/family relationships, local and regional women's groups, translocal cooperation networks, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange networks exist to support women
- Creating collaborative social spaces: Investments in (new) community centers that provide safe and accessible spaces for women, alongside other community groups, to gather, collaborate, organize, and develop innovative projects
- Support for women's networks and CSOs that promote their establishment: Provide logistical and financial support to existing women's networks and CSOs that assist in creating such networks.
- Providing financial incentives for participation in networks: Introduce financial support to compensate women and CSOs for the time invested in networking and knowledge exchange activities, encouraging broader participation.
- Supporting peer-to-peer learning and mentorship: Develop online platforms at local and regional levels to connect innovative women with mentors and collaborators in the environmental field, supporting them to leverage their sustainability commitments and accelerate the impact of their innovations on rural areas.
- Improving digital connectivity and skills development: Expand access to digital technologies and provide training programs to support the creation of online networks, information exchange, and facilitate access to funding.
- Integrated platforms: Develop platforms for local and regional networks that include both physical socializing and networking spaces as well as digital platforms.
- National expansion: Provide infrastructure and funding to expand the platform of good practices for rural women across all counties in the country.

Practical Tips

- Identify and document best practices for building networks and creating community spaces in rural areas.
- Explore existing infrastructure, opportunities and involved actors by engaging with the Local Action Groups and local initiative groups.
- Create adaptable pilot model to test and improve.
- Invest in new community centers or repurpose existing cultural homes to provide safe, accessible spaces for women to meet, collaborate, and organize.

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- Ensure these spaces are open to other community groups, fostering inclusivity and strengthening local ties.
- Ensure all support is easy to access and transparent to foster trust and participation.
- Use real case studies from rural Romania and the FLIARA network to show what the supports and good practices look like in practice.
- Expand successful initiatives and platforms to all regions of the country, ensuring that rural women across different areas can benefit from shared resources and knowledge.
- Provide the necessary infrastructure and funding to scale these efforts and ensure their sustainability over time.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

- *The Women's Vicinity of Saschiz* (Romania): Inspired by the Saxon tradition of community organizing, is an informal network founded in 2015 to develop social and cultural projects, fostering strong bonds among women based on shared community belonging.
- *See Her Elected Program* (Ireland): Offers training, mentorship, and networking to support rural women's participation in local democracy.
- *ACORNS Program* (Ireland): Provides peer-to-peer learning and mentorship to bridge the skills gap among rural women entrepreneurs.
- *German Rural Social Projects*: Create new meeting spaces to improve social life in rural communities.
- *Women's Rural Entrepreneurial Network* (Ireland): Supports independent women entrepreneurs in Cork and Limerick through local action groups (LAGs).
- *Slovenian Agricultural Women's Association*: Empowers rural women in agriculture through collaborative initiatives.

Conclusion & Call to Action

In Romania, women in rural areas face significant barriers to active political participation and lack sufficient support networks, hindering their capacity for innovation and social impact. To address these challenges, it is crucial to invest in creating collaborative social spaces, providing logistical and financial support to women's networks, and expanding access to digital tools and peer-to-peer learning platforms. Strengthening these initiatives will empower women to actively engage in decision-making processes and foster sustainable rural development.

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Further Reading

https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

https://fliara.eu/innovators/

D4.3 Initial Benchmarking Report: https://zenodo.org/communities/fliara

About FLIARA

The project is on a mission to create a more sustainable future by highlighting the role of women in agriculture and rural areas. FLIARA will boost understanding of the needs and challenges facing women leading innovative environmental and rural development practices in EU farming and rural areas.

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Image courtesy of Patricia Marina, Toma Marin Art. Romania.

Policy Brief RO05, 2025.

Promoting gender equality in Romania's rural communities by supporting innovative women

Executive Summary

This policy brief advocates for promoting gender equality in rural Romania by supporting women innovators driving sustainable development, particularly in agriculture and rural communities. It identifies gender inequality as a barrier to women's participation in decision-making and innovation. The brief proposes comprehensive policies that eliminate stereotypes, provide institutional support, and empower women. Key measures include skills development, gender education, gender impact assessments, and national media campaigns to raise visibility and challenge stereotypes. We call for collaboration between government, civil society, and communities to foster inclusive rural development and enhance women's roles as agents of change.

The Challenge

Gender inequality in rural Romania hinders women's potential as innovators and leaders, especially in agriculture and rural development. The problem of women shouldering a greater burden of domestic and childcare responsibilities stems from the lack of gender equality, which affects their capacity and availability to engage in other types of labour. These issues limit the ability of many rural women to engage in innovation, but also more broadly to engage in public decision-making and initiatives outside the home, which in turn maintains the status quo of gender inequality. Beliefs such as 'women are not interested in politics' still influence rural women's public presence and engagement, either as a direct barrier to accessing decision-making spheres and spaces, or becoming internalised by women, who then become disempowered. Entrenched patriarchal norms and scepticism towards women in non-traditional roles limit collaboration and recognition of their work and impact. Ineffective public policies and mistrust of institutions further exacerbate these challenges (D4.3).

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Policy Solutions

- **Funding and implementation of cross-cutting skills development programs for rural women** and facilitating access to best practice models and functional networks to strengthen their confidence, agency, and involvement in rural innovation.
- **Improvement of gender equality education and training** in rural communities through the development of educational tools and the integration of gender equality education in both formal and informal settings.
- **Implementation of Gender Impact Assessments (GIA):** It is recommended that institutional-level GIA be carried out, with specific breakdowns for women, youth, and young people in rural agriculture, entrepreneurship, and rural development policies.
- **Support for the expansion of existing empowerment programs for rural women through**: a) Adoption of short training courses offered by CSOs (civil society organizations) to support the self-empowerment of rural women, helping them identify as agents of change in their communities; b) Funding and c) National/local coverage.
- **National, regional, and local media campaigns for visibility** through a) Institutional media initiatives to present rural innovations led by women and b) Counteracting gender stereotypes by promoting diverse success stories at all levels: local, regional, and national.

Practical Tips

- Monitoring and evaluation of the impact of policies on different categories of rural women (ethnicity, age, religion, income, marital status, disabilities, etc.).
- Facilitate participation in decision-making by supporting the development of local and regional platforms where women can share knowledge, collaborate, and engage in shaping local policies.
- Use media and storytelling to change perceptions by promoting diverse success stories from rural women, and countering gender stereotypes through national, regional, and local campaigns.
- Use real case studies from rural Romania and the FLIARA network to show what the supports and good practices look like in practice.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Visibility and local marketplaces (Romania): Platforms dedicated to rural women's products and innovations that enhance visibility and market access for women entrepreneurs.

Paid and shared parental leave (Sweden): Welfare policies supporting shared parental leave that reduce gender barriers and encourage both men and women to engage in rural innovation.

Public childcare support (Sweden): Accessible childcare services that enable women to balance family responsibilities with entrepreneurial and innovative activities.

Cultural shift in gender norms (Sweden): Progressive family policies contributing to changing patriarchal norms and encouraging male participation in childcare, fostering a more equitable environment for innovation.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

To achieve sustainable rural development in Romania, it is essential to empower women as key drivers of innovation. Gender equality remains hindered by deep-rooted cultural norms and insufficient institutional support, limiting women's participation in decision-making and innovation. Policies that provide training, foster networks, ensure gender-sensitive infrastructure, and support visibility campaigns are vital to raising awareness and challenging stereotypes. Consistent, intentional action is needed to counteract these barriers and promote women's roles in rural entrepreneurship and agriculture in Romania. Immediate and focused efforts are required to dismantle stereotypes, empower rural women, and integrate gender equality into rural development policies for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Further Reading

https://zenodo.org/records/14045390

https://fliara.eu/innovators/

D4.3 Initial Benchmarking Report: https://zenodo.org/communities/fliara

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Source of image: Pixabay

Policy Brief SE01, 2025.

Providing Adequate Parental Leave

Provision of adequate parental leave systems levels the playing field and ensures that rural economies fully benefit from the innovative contributions of women farmers and entrepreneurs.

Executive Summary

Combining work and family is one of the most salient obstacles for women innovators. Inadequate parental leave systems and stereotypical gender norms, particularly the notion that women have the main responsibility for childcare and household work hold women back. Policy should include adequate parental leave systems that are paid, flexible, and that encourage men and women to share childcare and household work on equal terms.

The Challenge

Women in the FLIARA project reported maintaining work/life balance as one of the most salient obstacles for their innovative projects. One reason is lack of paid parental leave benefits which restricts women's opportunities to combine work and family.

Women typically assume, and are expected to assume, the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work. The uneven distribution of childcare and domestic work between men and women creates further barriers for women to engage in entrepreneurship and gainful work. As a result, rural economies do not fully benefit from women's innovative contributions. Consequently, both material provisions and gender norms must change.

EU members states regulate social policy on the national level. Parental leave policies vary widely, thus providing unequal conditions for parents across Europe. There is a need for countries lagging behind to step up their policies. The *only* country in the FLIARA project where women innovators did not identify work/family conflict as a major problem was Sweden. Swedish policy is therefore the inspiration for the policy solutions.

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Best Practice from Sweden

The Swedish system includes 480 days of universal, state administered paid parental leave, financed by statutory social security fees. Reimbursement is 80% of prior income for 390 days (up to a cap) and 90 days are paid a minimum level. 90 days are reserved for each parent. Days can be transferred to other persons if a spouse is absent, and days can also be transferred to, for example, a grandparent. There is flexibility on how much and when days are taken – it can be taken part time (25,50 or 75%) and it can be spread out over time as one wishes until the child is four years old. 96 days can be saved until the child is twelve years old. Additionally, until the child turns twelve, Swedish parents are entitled to a maximum of 60 paid days off per child and year to care for a sick child. The renumeration is the same as for parental leave days, and the days can be shared among the parents as they wish. Fathers take 40% of these days on average.

Sweden legislated shared parental leave in 1974. Men's uptake was at first negligible. In 1995, 30 days were earmarked for each parent, which in 2002 was increased to 60 days, and in 2016 to 90 days. If men did not use them, the family lost it. This gradual increase, a nudging approach if you will, has increased Swedish men's uptake of parental leave days. It is now about 30% (more than the mandated days). It has also changed gender norms. It is now completely taken for granted that men take parental leave - parents of today have never experienced any other system.

Employers no longer have a reason to discriminate women on the grounds that they may have babies and stay away from work for a long time, since the male work force is no more reliable. The system applies to the self-employed in equal measures. Legislation has, over time, changed gender norms dramatically. *Social change can thus be instigated by new laws* – they may meet resistance at first, but over time change will occur. Men and women's participation in the workforce is high in Sweden, both around 80-85%. The dual breadwinner family is the norm – less than 1% of Swedish adult women are homemakers and financially dependent on a partner.

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Policy Solutions

We propose EU member state to:

Provide adequate parental leave

- Member states should have a universal, paid parental leave system financed through the state budget and equally available to everyone, irrespective of employment status.
- Reimbursement should make up for lost income, with a minimum level for those without a prior income.
- Legislation should guarantee job security for the parent on leave.
- Parental leave should be offered for 18 months or more per child and be seamlessly integrated into childcare availability.

Encourage parents to share parental leave

- At a minimum, parents should be able to split the parental leave months as they wish.
- Each parent should formally be awarded half of the parental leave days – if not splitting 50/50 days must be transferred from one parent to the other. This sets a standard of parenting being a shared responsibility.
- Consider earmarking a portion of the parental leave months for each parent to encourage fathers to take parental leave.

Make parental leave flexible

- Allow flexibility in the use of parental leave – parents should be able to use it part time, and over an extended period, which is particularly important for the possibility of combining parenthood and business ownership.

Conclusion & Call to Action

The data from FLIARA demonstrates how work/family conflict is a major obstacle for women's contributions to rural development. The data also shows that adequate and shared paid parental leave is one of the most powerful tools available to empower women and to change outdated gender norms.

CALL TO ACTION

- EU member states should provide adequate, paid parental leave systems.
- The system should be flexible.
- The system should encourage parents to share parental leave days.

Further Reading

Försäkringskassan. (2024), "Care of a sick child (vab)", 18 November, available at: https://www.forsakringskassan.se/english/parents/care-of-a-sick-child-vab (accessed 28 March 2025).
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Parental Leave Act. no 1995:584. available at: https://www.government.se/contentassets/d163a42edcea4638aa112f0f6040202b/sfs-1995584-parental-leave-act/ https://www.forsakringskassan.se/english/parents/when-the-child-is-born/parental-benefit (accessed 28 March 2025).

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About FLIARA

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Source of image: Pexels

Policy Brief SE02, 2025.

Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities

Provision of adequate childcare and after school activities levels the playing field and ensures that rural economies fully benefit from the innovative contributions of women farmers and entrepreneurs.

Executive Summary

Combining work and family is one of the most salient obstacles for women innovators. Inadequate provision of good quality, affordable childcare and after school activities hold women back. Policy should therefore include adequate and affordable childcare provision as well as after school activities.

The Challenge

- Women in the FLIARA project reported maintaining work/life balance as one of the most salient obstacles for their innovative projects. One reason is the lack of available childcare in rural areas, or the need to pick up children early from school.
- Since women typically assume the primary responsibility for childcare, this inhibits women's opportunities to devote themselves fully to their innovative projects.
- As a result, rural economies do not fully benefit from women's innovative contributions.
- Consequently, childcare provision is crucially important for gender equality and rural viability.
- Childcare policies vary across EU member states, thus providing unequal conditions for parents across Europe. There is a need for countries lagging behind to step up their policies.

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Policy Solutions

We propose EU members states regulate social policy on the national level. The *only* country where women innovators in the FLIARA project did not identify work/family conflict as a major problem was Sweden. Swedish policy is therefore the inspiration for the policy solutions:

Provide good quality childcare facilities/preschools in rural areas

- Provide full-time daycare/preschool for children aged one or older, until school starts.
- Make daycare/preschool available in all areas where people live.
- Staff daycare/preschool with qualified personnel with adequate education.
- Serve the children lunch.

Make sure that teachers are well qualified

- If not already in place, consider including programs for the education of preschool teachers and leisure time pedagogues at universities or vocational schools.

Provide meaningful after school activities for school age children

- Provide meaningful after-school activities for school age children at, or nearby, the school so parents can work a normal full-time day.
- Make sure that the staff is well qualified and have an adequate education.

Make childcare affordable

- Make fees low and income tested so that everyone can afford them. Subsidize the cost through the tax system.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

For inspiration, we describe the Swedish system, which works well. Swedish municipalities are mandated to offer full-time preschool to every child aged 1 or older, and after school activities in “leisure-time centres”, often located in the school, when parents are working or studying. Schools and preschools serve a hot lunch and snacks. Fees are income tested and publicly subsidized. Parents of preschool children pay 3% of their income for the first child, 2% for the second and 1% for the third. The fourth is free. There is a cap: the highest fee in 2024 was 147 euro per month. Students pay nothing. Fees become lower when the child is 3, at which time all children have the right to 3 hours of free preschool per day irrespective of the working status of the parent. Most municipalities also have services for those working nights or for shift workers. Some preschools are privately owned, or run by a parent cooperative, but they are financed in the same way as the public ones, through a voucher system, and follow the same regulations.

To become a certified preschool teacher in Sweden one must attend a 3,5-year long education at university level. Sweden is one of very few countries that have a professional preschool teacher education at university level. The education for leisure time pedagogues is three years long. Both receive a bachelor’s degree.

Preschools and leisure time centres have a double purpose: they enable all adults to engage in full time work or studies, and they provide all children with a good quality education and care. 86% of children aged 1-5, 90% of children aged 2-5, and 95% of those aged 3-5 attend preschool in Sweden (school starts at six). Children typically attend leisure time centres until they are old enough to walk home from school by themselves.

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“About preschool (Om förskolan på engelska) - Utbildningsguiden” available at: https://utbildningsguiden.skolverket.se/forskolan/om-forskolan/about-preschool-om-forskolan-pa-engelska (accessed 27 April 2025).

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After-school activities are especially beneficial for rural areas. These programs can provide essential support to children and families in communities that often face higher rates of poverty and fewer resources compared to urban areas. After-school activities offer safe, structured environments where children can engage in educational and recreational activities, which can help bridge the gap in access to quality education and extracurricular opportunities.

For rural women entrepreneurs, this creates a unique opportunity to start businesses that cater to these local needs. With a growing demand for structured and enriching after-school programs, women could leverage their insights and experiences to develop innovative services tailored to children's educational and recreational needs. This could include a variety of offerings such as arts and crafts, sports, tutoring, and STEM activities. Additionally, government support and funding for these programs would lower entry barriers, making it easier for women to launch and sustain their businesses. By addressing the specific needs of rural communities, these businesses can thrive while contributing to the overall development and well-being of the area.

Conclusion & Call to Action

The data from FLIARA demonstrates how work/family conflict is a major obstacle for women’s contributions to rural development. The time demands put on women in lieu of adequate childcare provision and afters school activities hold women back. Policy must offer affordable solutions that make the combination of work and family possible.

CALL TO ACTION

- EU member states should provide high quality daycare/preschool facilities and after school activities for school age children in rural areas.
- Services should be subsidized and affordable for everyone.
- The staff should be well educated.

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Village school. Source: Skanska

Policy Brief SE03, 2025.

Maintaining Schools in Rural Areas

Nothing is more important for rural viability than a school. Without a school, there will be no families, no population growth, no new businesses, a dwindling labour pool, and ultimately rural decline.

Executive Summary

A local school is the most important infrastructure element for rural viability. Without it, families cannot live in rural areas and businesses cannot be started. Lessons from FLIARA underscore the crucial importance of a school – the female-led innovations documented in FLIARA would not have taken place if the interviewed women had not been able to raise a family in their rural locations. The Swedish government is urged to guarantee schools in rural areas even if student numbers are low. It pays off in the end, since rural decline cannot be haltered without the existence of good schools for the rural population.

The Challenge

The interviewed women innovators in the FLIARA project stressed the critical importance of a local school. It was a “make it or break it” deal. They would not have been able to engage in their innovations if there was not a local school for their children. Without a school, rural families with children, or those planning a family would have to move. Vice versa, without a school, rural areas would not be able to attract families to move there. Without a school, the spiral of rural depopulation and economic decline continues unabated.

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Policy Solutions

In Sweden, the municipal budget pays for the schools. Schools with a small number of students are often closed in order to save money. This may be shortsighted and suboptimal, since tax income from rural families are bound to decline if doing so. The municipalities have many competing demands and may not be able to justify the expenditure for maintaining a rural school.

Some Swedish municipalities have creative solutions for the demands for facilities, such as sharing a kitchen and dining hall with the local home for the elderly, or using the sports clubs' facilities for gym classes, and similar. Such opportunities should be investigated. Similarly, school regulations should allow for creative solutions.

We propose:

- A state, and state financed, guarantee for rural schools. Rural schools must have the same, regulated standard as any school, which in Sweden includes professionally trained teachers, a school library, suitable facilities for all school subjects, and a free, nutritious cocked lunch.
- School regulations should allow for creative solutions to enable municipalities to maintain and develop rural schools.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The FLIARA visions for a sustainable future developed in collaboration with local Swedish stakeholders underlined the crucial importance of a local school for rural sustainability.

There are many success stories in Sweden where the local community took action and persuaded the local politicians to save a village school, and where the population and economic activity has since increased. One example is provided in the links below.

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Lindholm, M. (2024), "Hon räddade byskolan och blev rektor vid 32", *Östersunds-Posten*, 24 August, available at: https://www.op.se/2024-08-24/hon-raddade-byskolan-och-blev-rektor-vid-32/ (accessed 31 March 2025).

Conclusion & Call to Action

Local schools are crucial for rural innovation and economic development and must be safeguarded. We propose:

- The national government should guarantee local, rural schools, through legislation and funding.
- Municipalities should look for creative solutions regarding use of facilities.
- School regulations should allow for creative solutions.

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Newspaper article on how a saved village school turned the village around (in Swedish): Lindholm, M. (2024), “Hon räddade byskolan och blev rektor vid 32”, *Östersunds-Posten*, 24 August, available at: https://www.op.se/2024-08-24/hon-raddade-byskolan-och-blev-rektor-vid-32/ (accessed 31 March 2025).

About FLIARA

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AI generated image

Policy Brief SE04, 2025.

Culture and Sports in Rural Areas

The lack of culture and sports activities, particularly for children, makes rural areas less attractive. Families may choose to move to urban areas if this is lacking, and business owners may have difficulties in recruiting personnel.

Executive Summary

The interviews in FLIARA showed that parents in rural areas were keen on being able to provide their children with the same access to culture and sports as urban children. Regions and municipalities should provide opportunities for culture and sports, particularly for children, in all areas. The state may help finance it, or the state may mandate regions or municipalities to provide these services.

The Challenge

In addition to stressing the importance of a local school, women interviewed in the FLIARA project were keen on being able to provide their children with the same opportunities to take part in culture and sports as urban children. Also, women innovators in rural areas sometimes had problems recruiting and retaining personnel because of a lack of meaningful things to do for children.

Swedish municipalities typically run Culture and Music Schools where children learn to play an instrument, sing in a choir, dance, paint, or act. However, the national governmental allocation of funds to local culture and music schools has been up for debate and is not institutionalized or bounded by law. As such, for each budget cut these funds are at risk of being terminated. State

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funding for these schools has recently been significantly reduced, making it harder for the municipalities to reach all children. For 2023 the funds for Culture and Music School were cut in half which led to rural municipalities struggling to keep these activities within their budget. In the current budget the allocation as kept at the same level as 2023.

The Swedish state subsidies all kinds of sports activities. The Swedish Sports Confederation has an annual budget of 156 million Euro used to support local sports clubs. Continued financing of sports activities for rural children must be safeguarded. Municipalities are not always aware of the relationship between rural development availability of culture in rural areas, so political awareness must be raised.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

The vision analysis in FLIARA found that women innovators in rural areas sometimes had problems recruiting and retaining personnel because of a lack of meaningful things to do for children. People want their children to have the same or similar opportunities regarding culture and sports as in urban areas. In the visions of an attractive rural living environment the stakeholders outlined that more ambulatory activities for children were important. Parents did not have time to drive their children to activities in urban areas, and public transport was often missing.

As best practice we highlight Riksteatern. In Sweden, the National Theatre (Riksteatern) plays a crucial role in rural development by bringing high-quality performing arts to communities across the country. With over 220 local theatre associations and nearly 38,000 members, it represents a significant cultural movement that ensures even the most remote areas have access to innovative and relevant performances. This widespread network allows each local association to tailor its repertoire, blending the National Theatre's own productions with those of other performing arts producers, thus catering to local tastes and interests.

Governmentally founded in 1933, the National Theatre was established with the belief that first-class theatrical art should be accessible to all citizens, not just those in the capital. This mission underscores the importance of cultural equity and the right of every community to enjoy professional artistic experiences. By focusing on towns without permanent municipal theatre operations, the National Theatre fills a vital gap, ensuring that professional cultural needs are met across the nation.

State funding plays a significant role in sustaining the National Theatre's operations, with substantial allocations supporting its activities. For instance, in 2015, the state provided SEK 259 million. For reference the Royal Opera in Stockholm was allocated SEK 522,7 million. It is important for rural development that state funding for Riksteatern is safeguarded or increased.

Sources:

Kuhmonen, T. and Tembo, B. (2024a), “D2.2: Future Vision Manifestations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045244 (accessed 31 March 2025).

Kuhmonen, T. and Tembo, B. (2024b), “D2.3: Sustainability Innovations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045277 (accessed 31 March 2025).

Riksteatern. (2015.). “Språk/Languages”, *Riksteatern*, available at: https://www.riksteatern.se/sprak-languages/ (accessed 31 March 2025).

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Policy Solutions

We propose:

- In Sweden, regions or municipalities must make sure that children in rural areas have the same or similar opportunities to take part in culture and sports as children in urban areas.
- The state should help finance it, or the state may mandate regions or municipalities to provide these services in all areas.
- The Swedish National Theater (Riksteatern) which tours the country with high quality productions fills an important role and must be safeguarded and developed.
- Creative solutions are called for. Not every village can build a theatre, but theatre companies can tour the countryside, and music and drama teachers can travel. Distance learning may be used for some areas, such as playing an instrument. Municipalities can arrange bus services to theatres or sports events.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Culture and sports in rural areas, particularly for children, are important for rural viability and should be safeguarded and developed.

- The national government should guarantee that culture and sports is available for children in all areas.
- Municipalities should look for creative solutions, such as travelling teachers, travelling performances, or on-line music instruction.

Further Reading

Article on Culture education through distance learning: “Digital kulturskola - distans och fjärrundervisning för unga”. (2025), *Kulturskolerådet*, 25 February, available at: https://www.kulturskoleradet.se/nyheter/digital-kulturskola-distans-och-fjarrundervisning-for-unga/ (accessed 31 March2025).

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Image courtesy of Maja Söderberg, Nybrukama. Sweden.

Policy Brief SE05, 2025.

Implementing a Farmer Relief Service

Implementing a farmer relief service is crucial for animal welfare, farmer well-being, local employment, and ensuring gender equality and safety for farmers and small children.

Executive Summary

Without substitutes, farmers struggle to take the mandated five-week vacation, leading to overwork and stress. This impacts animal welfare and farmer well-being. Implementing a farmer relief service could boost local employment and it is crucial for pregnant farmers and those with small children, thus ensuring farm safety and gender equality. A new regulation about substitutes is proposed to cover the costs of leave from the farm, childcare and unplanned situations.

The Challenge

Most farmers cannot afford to pay for substitutes on the private market, and not everyone can rely on friends, family and neighbours. For those who can't rely on this support experience stress and put their animals, themselves and their children at risk.

If Swedish agriculture is to be able to meet contemporary requirements for preparedness in times of war and crises, a new generation must enter the industry. For young families to invest in agriculture and animal husbandry, economic and social conditions must be greatly improved in the long term.

Sweden does not have a governmental system for relief services targeting the agricultural sector. Instead, it is available through VÄXA – an economic association with cattle farmers - and through private businesses. The service is expensive, and many farmers do not have the financial availability to prioritize using the service.

No subsidies are given from the national government as is the case in for example Finland and on Åland.

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Best Practice from Finland

Finland's farmer relief system, regulated under the statute 20.12.1996/1231, is designed to support agricultural entrepreneurs by providing substitute services during vacations, illness, or other periods of incapacity. This system ensures that farmers can maintain their operations without interruption, promoting their social security and work motivation. The relief service includes assigning substitute workers or compensating farmers for the costs of self-arranged substitutes. This approach not only enhances farmer well-being but also contributes to local employment and farm safety.

Source:

Finnish law about farmer relief service (in Finnish and Swedish): FINLEX. (n.d.). “Lag om avbytarservice för lantbruksföretagare | 1231/1996 | Lagstiftning | Finlex”, available at: https://www.finlex.fi/sv/lagstiftning/1996/1231 (accessed 3 April 2025).

A farmer relief service is especially important for pregnant farmers and for those with small children. While Sweden has a very good system for parental leave and for caring for sick children, the system is built on the supposition that parents can take time off from work, which is not always the case for farmers. The solution for many farming parents is to bring their children along while working on the farm. However, having children in agricultural work involves a major safety risk that many farmers are concerned about.

Also, in lieu of substitutes, farmers cannot take the state regulated vacation of five weeks, since the animals need daily attention. The combination of long working hours, working alone, high performance requirements, increased vulnerability, conflicting signals from the national government, and the deterioration of economic conditions has meant that the Swedish farmer is overworked and suffers, contrasting starkly with the comprehensive legislative protection for workers in today’s Swedish welfare state.

If farmers are not able to rest, it can lead to burnout and decreased attention to detail, which can negatively impact animal care. Regular rest periods allow farmers to recharge, thus reducing their stress and improving their ability to manage their farms effectively. This, in turn, ensures that animals receive consistent, high-quality care, as a well-rested farmer is more attentive and capable of identifying and addressing health issues promptly. Additionally, taking breaks can prevent decision fatigue, leading to better management practices and overall healthier livestock.

Policy Solutions

We propose farmer substitutes enable farmers with animals to get time off or get extra help when sick.

- Substitutes can be a solution for recurring leave off the farm, child care, or when something unplanned happens, in case of illness for example. It can also be a solution, but not especially argued here, when there is a work peak and additional staff is needed.
- A new regulation about farmer relief services is proposed to cover the costs of leave from the farm, childcare and unplanned situations.
- The purpose of the proposed substitute service for agricultural entrepreneurs is to support farmers opportunities to exercise their right to social security and to support agricultural entrepreneurs' work motivation and opportunities for a longer working life.
- The national governmentally funded farmer relief service could be organized as financially shared between the farmers and society.

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Supporting Evidence

Women farmers we interviewed in Sweden rely on family for extra childcare and family logistics. This includes partners, parents and stepparents. This is especially evident when the children get sick, and operations and animal care still need to happen.

Additionally, implementing a relief service for rural areas could significantly boost local employment by creating job opportunities for residents, while supporting the local economy by keeping jobs within the community and reducing the need for external workers.

A vision of more women in farming

The sustainability visions from Sweden included a future with more women engaged in *ecopreneurship* and organic farming, and the stakeholders interviewed emphasized that would require new work practices and organising of work in farming and food production to be able to combine the business with family life in sustainable way. Especially since these businesses and farms are in general small-scale with few or no employees, which can cover for the farmer during sickness or vacation.

20% of the sustainability problems identified in the FLIARA project was related to inappropriate, inadequate or biased public policies, which if not resolved could intensify the problem or not lead to it being resolved at all. Public policy and sustainable farming models and lifestyles were considered as important areas for innovation and the suggested policy proposal would address these concerns by creating appropriate public policies to support sustainable farming.

Source:

Kuhmonen, T. and Tembo, B. (2024), “D2.2: Future Vision Manifestations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045244 (accessed 3 April 2025).

Conclusion & Call to Action

The FLIARA project shows a need for a solution; therefore, the national government should introduce a system similar to the one in Finland. A new regulation about farmer relief services is proposed to cover the costs of leave from the farm, childcare and unplanned situations.

Further Reading

Case study report on Farming women-led innovations in Sweden: Sivini, S., Roos, A. and Leonardelli, I. (2024), “D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045390 (accessed 3 April 2025).

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Image courtesy of Emilia Hildingsson, Farmors i Grimslöv, Sweden.

Policy Brief SE06, 2025.

Simplifying the Swedish Innovation Support System

With simplified rules, lower fees, and better support systems, small businesses can navigate bureaucracy and grow sustainably.

Executive Summary

Small businesses struggle with the same regulations as large companies, leading to high compliance costs and administrative burdens. They lack resources to navigate bureaucracy, hindering growth. Simplified rules, lower fees, and better support systems are needed. A user-friendly, centralized online resource could help startups access necessary information and support more easily.

The Challenge

Small businesses face significant challenges due to policies that apply the same regulations to both large and small companies. Consequently, complying with regulations and reporting requirements takes too much time and resources for small businesses. For example, the fee for various permits may be insignificant for a large company but very onerous for a small one. A large company can hire legal- and economic experts to help them navigate government requirements, but a start-up or a small company has neither the necessary skills nor the resources to do so. These circumstances hamper business growth prospects.

Some businesses are too small to qualify for national support funds, posing significant obstacles in bureaucracy. This is especially clear when it comes to agricultural support which aims for large-scale economically effective farms and thus disregards all landowners under 4 hectares. Additionally, small-scale landowners, often seasonal and dependent on harvest periods and varying weather conditions, find it challenging to anticipate their need for extra or seasonal workers. Flexible and simplified hiring procedures for fixed-term seasonal and short-term temporary workforce would greatly benefit these rural operations.

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The system seems to work better for those who have adapted and “cracked the code” to qualify for rural development support, demonstrating the expertise and ingenuity required to navigate the complexities of the current business support system, but this may also lead to sub-optimization, such as presenting a predominantly social innovation as investment in buildings and machinery.

Small businesses lack the resources to navigate complex bureaucratic systems, hindering growth. Established businesses also struggle with knowledge and time constraints in applying for funds. Women innovators also wish it were easier and cheaper to hire staff. The difficulty in hiring people and paying for sick leave is particularly challenging for a business that operates on small margins.

Policy Solutions

The solution we propose is that small and large companies play in different leagues, with fewer, less complicated rules and lower fees for small businesses.

Moreover, a user-friendly, web-based entryway with links to everything a start-up must consider, including links to organisations that can help them in starting their business, is called for. The Swedish tax authority is exemplary in this regard, but its website only provides information about tax regulations. However, since every new organisation must register with the tax authorities, this authority is well-positioned to point new organisations to relevant webpages, including webpages that provide information directly relevant to upstart support, for example, Almi, Jobs and Society, local incubators, and regional or municipal trade offices.

Supporting Evidence

WP3 showed that application for funding involves a great deal of bureaucracy in almost all governmental systems. Problems with an onerous bureaucratic system were identified as an obstacle for companies that submitted applications to the Common Agriculture Policy application each year. There have been discussions about simplifying the application process in Sweden for farms for quite some time, but nothing has happened in this area, according to our findings in FLIARA.

In interviews and Community of Practice (CoP) events, female entrepreneurs from the farming and rural sectors emphasized that women often run small businesses that do not align with typical business operations and thus feel unrecognized in regulations. Examples include small-scale (sometimes organic) farms, alternative organizational forms, and tourism enterprises. These small-scale rural and farming businesses often fall between different regulations, which are designed for larger traditional operations.

The results from the FLIARA project showed that 20 % of the sustainability issues identified by rural stakeholders were related to inappropriate, inadequate or biased interventions, incentives and expectations by the society. Public policies were considered to be inefficient, distant and/or bureaucratic, but also that there were an urban and growth bias in the sustainability discourse and solutions.

Sources:
Kuhmonen, T. and Tembo, B. (2024), “D2.2: Future Vision Manifestations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045244 (accessed 3 April 2025).
Sivini, S., Roos, A. and Leonardelli, I. (2024), “D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045390 (accessed 3 April 2025).

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Conclusion & Call to Action

To meet the needs of small-scale businesses and farms, especially targeting women in rural areas, we propose that small and large companies play in different leagues. This can be done through:

- Fewer rules for small businesses.
- Less complicated rules for small businesses.
- Lower fees for small businesses.
- A user-friendly, web-based entryway for start-up.

Further Reading

Kuhmonen, T. and Tembo, B. (2024), “D2.2: Future Vision Manifestations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045244 (accessed 3 April 2025).

Sivini, S., Roos, A. and Leonardelli, I. (2024), “D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045390 (accessed 3 April 2025).

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Image courtesy of Karin Horisaki, Horisaki Design & Handel. Sweden.

Policy Brief SE07, 2025.

Addressing Inequities in Financial Support to Enhance the Sustainable Transition

The financial innovation support should be able to cater to various stages, sizes and types of businesses.

Executive Summary

Norm-breaking, sustainable companies in Sweden face funding challenges, especially non-tech and small businesses. Women entrepreneurs often avoid external funding due to financial risks and value preservation. Current support systems are inadequate, particularly for rural areas. Specialized funds exist but are fragmented, and many businesses struggle to qualify for national support. The financial innovation support should cater to various stages, sizes and types of businesses.

The Challenge

The current innovation funding support systems in Sweden are not well-adapted for small businesses, those without financial profit and growth goals, or non-technology-based enterprises. This has led to unequal impacts, particularly affecting women-owned businesses and rural areas. Consequently, many do not seek or receive adequate financial support. Some entrepreneurs avoid external financing altogether since they are afraid that criteria privileging economic growth before other goals will lead to dependence on financiers' intentions and compromise their vision of a sustainable society.

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Farming Women's Challenges

Farming women in FLIARA face challenges accessing private finance, including a lack of confidence to approach banks and uncertainty about repaying loans. These issues stem from seasonal cash flows, collateral challenges related to asset ownership, and property rights concerns. Consequently, banks are poorly equipped to support women innovators on farms.

Sweden lacks a government-sponsored support system specifically for women innovators or entrepreneurs. Although a project for women entrepreneurs was launched in 2024, it is modestly funded with only SEK 8 million, compared to the SEK 3.5 billion allocated to STEM fields through Vinnova. When women-only funds are available they are still aimed at technological development, thus bypassing many women innovators in rural areas.

While numerous specialized support systems exist, they often cater to specific stages of business development and the systems may not communicate with each other, creating a fragmented support landscape. Tech companies, for example, receive ample support during the business development phase from various sources, including Vinnova and business incubators, while social or cultural innovators have great difficulties securing start-up funding.

Finding financial support for initiatives that aim to sustain existing communities or projects becomes even more difficult. Funds are more readily available for technological development than for production development, administration, or marketing. This may, for example, lead some businesses to engage in construction projects just to qualify for rural development support - ingenuity is needed to navigate the complexities of the existing business support system.

Inspirational Suggestion from Italy

Microcredit programs could be developed to support women innovators lacking the financial capital to implement their ideas. National or regional governments could grant these funds to women entrepreneurs with well-developed business plans. Ideally, women would receive assistance in developing their business plans and applying for microcredits to increase their chances of success. These financial instruments should be easily accessible with minimal bureaucracy. Such program would particularly help women who did not inherit a farm or assets, enabling them to develop their ideas and projects.

Source:

Sivini, S., Roos, A. and Leonardelli, I. (2024), "D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations", 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045390 (accessed 4 April 2025).

Policy Solutions

We propose that the financial innovation support systems should cater to:

- Various stages of businesses, with start-up and expansion phases.
- Various sizes of businesses, especially targeting micro-businesses.
- Various types of businesses, including those without financial profit and growth as goals.

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There is no need for special funds for rural development, but existing resources must be made accessible for rural firms. We therefore argue for changes in the criteria of existing funding solutions. We need funding agencies that can adapt financial funds for small businesses, those that do not have financial profit and growth as goals, or that are not technology based. Adjusting the size criteria is especially relevant for agricultural support, which aims for large-scale economically effective farms and thus disregards all landowners under 4 hectares. Also funding for small-scale environmental initiatives are missing.

Supporting Evidence

Evidence from interviews in Sweden suggests that financial innovation support should cater to various stages, sizes, and types of innovation development. While start-up and idea development are important, there is a significant need to focus on innovations post-start-up and pre-maturity to address their specific policy requirements. The middle stages of the women-led innovation journey present unique opportunities, challenges, and needs that require greater recognition in policy. Supporting businesses that expand gradually and adapt to their own development and emerging opportunities is crucial. For many interviewees, while start-up costs were manageable, financial needs increased significantly to support business growth after the initial phase.

In the FLIARA interviews and Community of Practice (CoP) events, female entrepreneurs from the farming and rural sectors highlighted that women often run micro-businesses that are relatively small-scale and do not align with the typical business operations targeted by funding sources. Examples include food cooperatives, knowledge initiatives, and voluntary associations. These unique small-scale rural and farming activities often fall between different funding schemes, which are designed for larger traditional businesses.

Recent research in Sweden shows that norm-breaking companies working with sustainability often encounter resistance when seeking funding from traditional funding sources, such as banks. This is also reflected in FLIARA where we see a reluctance from the women entrepreneurs to scale their businesses. They highlight concerns about financial risks, maintaining personal values, and preserving close customer relationships and social sustainability.

Source:

Gustafsson, M. (2024), “NEW RESEARCH | Impact companies face obstacles in traditional financing: ‘Slowing down the sustainable transition’ - Esbri”, 4 December, available at: https://esbri.se/en/new-research-impact-companies-face-obstacles-in-traditional-financing-slowing-down-the-sustainable-transition/ (accessed 4 April 2025).

Additionally, the above suggested policy is included as one of the visions in FLIARA Work Package 2. Named as “An inclusive innovation system” the vision focused on the bias of growth and/or urban in the sustainability discourses and solutions. One fifth of the sustainability problems identified by a diverse set of rural stakeholders was related to inadequate biased public policy, that does not resolve the problem and can even exacerbate the issue. It is built up on the rational that diverse innovative projects and persons reform rural areas toward sustainability. The financial support system needs mentors, sounding boards, alumni and coaches that support local actors. The focus is to take a long-term approach in development and policies.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

The financial innovation support should be able to cater to various stages, sizes and types of businesses. While specialized funds exist, they are fragmented, and many businesses struggle to qualify for national support. Consequently, norm-breaking, sustainable companies in Sweden face funding challenges, especially non-tech and small businesses.

Further Reading

Article on how impact companies face obstacles in traditional financing: Gustafsson, M. (2024), "NEW RESEARCH | Impact companies face obstacles in traditional financing: 'Slowing down the sustainable transition' - Esbri", 4 December, available at: https://esbri.se/en/new-research-impact-companies-face-obstacles-in-traditional-financing-slowing-down-the-sustainable-transition/ (accessed 4 April 2025).

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Image courtesy of Camilla Logam, Welcome to my forest. Sweden.

Policy Brief SE08, 2025.

Reforming the Knowledge Support System to Foster Innovation in Rural Areas

Swedish knowledge support systems prioritize economic growth, neglecting social, cultural, and environmental innovations, leaving many rural women innovators out of the support system.

Executive Summary

The Swedish knowledge support systems favour economic growth focused organizations, often neglecting social, cultural, and environmental innovations. Consequently, businesses in these sectors need alternative advice sources. These sources are currently neglected in policy and budgeting. A reformed knowledge system serving women innovators in rural areas must thus account for different kind of businesses, the importance of family support for rural women entrepreneurs, and the significance of local community support for women entrepreneurs.

The Challenge

Current Swedish knowledge support systems and criteria for obtaining knowledge support are predominantly designed to benefit organizations with significant economic growth potential. These systems, including funding, incubators, and rural development advice, often overlook small businesses, non-tech business, social, cultural, and environmental innovations that do not prioritize economic growth, cooperatives, or civil society organizations. The systems consequently strike differently at women and men and in rural and urban areas.

Businesses in these sectors must seek advice and knowledge from alternative sources, financed by municipal and regional culture budgets or private foundations, which are significantly smaller than national innovation support budgets. As such, informal relationships have become essential for inspiration and cooperation.

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Alternatives in the Current System

For example, cooperative solutions, frequently sought for sustainable development in rural areas, are ill-aligned with the existing system, which generally lacks the necessary knowledge. Coompanion, the Swedish support function for cooperatives, addresses this gap by offering advisory services, but its funding (SEK 85 million state funding and some local funding) is meagre compared to Vinnova's annual budget of SEK 3.5 billion for primarily STEM companies. Cooperatives are not included in the 2025 budget bill, despite several other investments in entrepreneurship and sustainability.

Also overlooked is the role of civil society, particularly in rural areas where non-profit involvement is higher than in urban areas. Sweden hosts around 250,000 associations and the non-profit sector contributes approximately 3.32 percent to GDP, which is about twice the contribution of agriculture, forestry, and fishing. Sweden has a tradition of nationalizing innovations from these associations and making them publicly accessible. Despite their huge importance, however, the knowledge system has limited knowledge and understanding of non-profit organizations. These organizations must often seek knowledge as if they were for-profit companies, where the understanding of non-financial goals is limited.

Policy Solutions

We propose a reformed knowledge system serving women innovators in rural areas that account for:

- Different kind of businesses such as micro-businesses, businesses that do not have economic profit and growth as goals, businesses that are not technology-based, businesses that are seasonally based and non-profit organizations.
- The importance of family support for rural women entrepreneurs. Family involvement, whether from a spouse, parents, or access to family resources, plays a crucial role in the success and confidence of rural women in managing their enterprises. Since support extends beyond financial assistance to also include logistical help and emotional backing, the knowledge support system needs to take this opportunity (or lack of it) into account when giving advice.
- The significance of local community support for women entrepreneurs. Being well-known and trusted within the community can be crucial for business success in rural areas. The knowledge support system needs to take the local context into account when advising these innovators so that "urbanized" ideas about market, costumers and value creation is not forced on innovators in rural areas.

Supporting Evidence

The knowledge system needs enhancement because many women entrepreneurs interviewed in FLIARA were reluctant to scale their businesses, preferring to expand their knowledge rather than their finances. They provided two main reasons: financial risk and the potential loss of core values. Instead, they sought personal development, such as learning new skills.

In the FLIARA interviews and Community of Practice (CoP) events, female entrepreneurs from the farming and rural sectors emphasized that women often run micro-businesses that are relatively small-scale and do not fit the typical farming operations recognized in regulations. Examples include food cooperatives, knowledge initiatives, and voluntary associations.

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These unique small-scale rural and farming activities often fall between different knowledge schemes and regulations, which are designed for larger traditional operations. Additionally, these businesses are often seasonal and dependent on natural harvest periods or varying weather conditions, making it difficult to anticipate their need for additional or seasonal workforce.

While some FLIARA participants benefit from technical and business expertise from universities and business incubators, most are self-sufficient and see no potential in the current knowledge support system.

Additionally, the above suggested policy is included as one of the visions in FLIARA Work Package 2. Named as “An inclusive innovation system” the vision focused on the bias of growth and/or urban in the sustainability discourses and solutions. One fifth of the sustainability problems identified by a diverse set of rural stakeholders was related to inadequate biased public policy, that does not resolve the problem and can even exacerbate the issue. It is built up on the rational that diverse innovative projects and persons reform rural areas toward sustainability. The financial support system needs mentors, sounding boards, alumni and coaches that support local actors. The focus is to take a long-term approach in development and policies.

Best Practice and Call for Action from Slovenia

Farmers in Slovenia receive support from the Public Agricultural Advisory Service, part of the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia. Each regional office has at least one advisor specializing in young farmers, farm families, women in rural areas, and supplementary activities on the farm. The support is given in five different areas: 1) Advisory services for farm transferors and successors, 2) Employment and farm economic efficiency consulting, 3) Legal assistance, 4) Psychosocial support, and 5) Social security for farmers and farmers family members. Recent progress includes targeted programs for young farmers under the Slovenian CAP intervention, offering training in farm management and financial skills, with optional education in areas like digitization, entrepreneurship, climate change adaptation, health, biodiversity, and intergenerational cooperation.

However, advisory support for rural women remains inadequate, often failing to address their unique challenges. These services are typically part of educational programs on supplementary farm activities, crucial for farm diversification. However, women’s innovation is broader that farm diversification and thus also needs to be treated as such within the support system.

Source:
Slovenije, K. gozdarska zbornica. “Celostna podpora kmetom | KGZ Slovenije”, *KGZS*, available at: https://www.kgzs.si/celostna-podpora-kmetom (accessed 3 April 2025).

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Conclusion & Call to Action

We see clear evidence that the Swedish knowledge support systems for businesses prioritize economic growth, neglect social, cultural, and environmental innovations, leaving many rural women innovators out of the support systems.

As such, our Call to Action for a reformed knowledge system serving women innovators in rural areas is to enhance the offer on business knowledge about:

- Different kind of businesses.
- The importance of family support.
- The significance of local community support.

Further Reading

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About FLIARA

The project is on a mission to create a more sustainable future by highlighting the role of women in agriculture and rural areas. FLIARA will boost understanding of the needs and challenges facing women leading innovative environmental and rural development practices in EU farming and rural areas.

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Image courtesy of Paula Bäckman, Naturbruksskolan Sötåsen. Sweden.

Policy Brief SE09, 2025.

Education on Sustainable Food Production in Swedish Schools

Better education about sustainable and organic farming and food production will lead to better informed consumers and economically sustainable food production in Sweden.

Executive Summary

A lack of knowledge about farming and food production among consumers hampers the development of sustainable farming. A revision of the national curricula in Swedish schools and collaborations with non-profits can address the problem by providing better knowledge about sustainable and organic farming and food production, as well as hands on experience with farming and growing food.

The Challenge

The FLIARA project has identified the alienation from food production and lack of sustainability wisdom as major sustainability problems that needs to be addressed. In Sweden the challenges for farming and rural entrepreneurship are:

- A lack of knowledge among consumers about how farming worked and how the food was produced. In particular, a lack of knowledge about organic farming make them unwilling to pay for the extra costs of the locally produced organic production.
- A lack of understanding of how different choices can contribute to sustainable development among consumers.
- A lack of knowledge about agriculture and food production in the Swedish curriculum has also been identified by the EU program Agriculture and Knowledge Systems (AKIS) in Sweden and they have identified this as a focus moving forward.

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Policy Solutions

We propose two route to take:

Revising the curriculum

- Change the curriculum in Swedish pre-school and school to emphasize the knowledge about organic and sustainable farming and food production.

The policy proposal suggests that the national curricula in Sweden should incorporate more knowledge about sustainable farming and food production, as well as hands on experience with farming and growing food. Better knowledge within this area would help support sustainable farming and inform future consumers about the food they buy and the consequences of sustainable farming for themselves and society. In the national curricula Sweden already has goals about sustainability for the pre-school and the compulsory school. In the material from the Swedish National Agency for Education the teachers in the pre-school are also encouraged to let the children grow things both inside and outside but farming and agriculture are not specifically mentioned in the guidelines. In the compulsory school the pupils are taught the subject Home and consumer studies, based on the idea that "Knowledge of consumer issues and work in the home gives people important tools for creating a functional everyday life and promoting sustainable development by being able to make informed choices as consumers with regard to health, finances and the environment." The goals for the compulsory school only mention sustainability and food production in one sentence in the goals for the years 7-9, and the goals are focused on learning how to buy groceries and plan the meals not farming and food production.

Collaborate with non-profits

- The schools can collaborate with non-profits within farming and animal husbandry to support the teachers.

Collaborations with non-profits has also been proven to be a successful way to give a more hands-on experience. This is a way to provide support for teachers and not put extra pressure of them to acquire deep knowledge about the sustainable food production in Sweden.

The revision can also build on the successful work with another similar system for entrepreneurship, Junior Achievement, which is a non-profit organization that supports elementary schools and high schools by offering programs learning how to start and run a business. There are also already good local examples of collaborating with non-profits in Sweden. For more information see links below.

Best practice from Slovenia

Within the FLIARA project inspiration can be taken from *Organic School Gardens Association*, a Slovenian non-profit founded Anamarija Slabe that works with organic farming together with schools to teach the children and pupils about how to grow vegetables.

Source:
FLIARA. (2024), "Anamarija Slabe", *FLIARA Project*, 26 July, available at: https://fliara.eu/innovator/anamarija-slabe/ (accessed 3 April 2025).

Supporting Evidence

The rural stakeholders in the FLIARA project identified the need for more sustainability wisdom, in particular a need to alleviate alienation from food production and the adoption of sustainable practice and lifestyles in order to create sustainable rural development (D2.3 Sustainability

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innovations). The visions also included more organic food production in the future in Sweden, but they also pointed to the need that then the sustainable and organic products must be attractive to both producers and consumers. The children as future farmers, gardeners and consumers must be able to understand both what it means to produce sustainably and the added value of this type of production in order to create sustainable markets for sustainable and organic food. This supports the policy proposal to also incorporate more education about the conditions and value of sustainable farming and food production for both the environment and the individual.

Conclusion & Call to Action

The data from FLIARA demonstrates sustainable rural development requires citizens that can make informed choices and understand the consequences of their choices when buying food. The data also shows that alienation from farming and food production hinders sustainable development.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Sweden should incorporate more knowledge about sustainable farming and food production in the national curriculum
- The schools should support the teachers by collaborate with non-profits within farming and husbandry
- Take inspiration from successful initiatives from EU, good local examples and build on previous experiences of other youth initiatives

Further Reading

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About FLIARA

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Image courtesy of Frida Holmquist, Skarmansmåla Farm, Sweden.

Policy Brief SE10, 2025.

Diversifying AKIS in Sweden

Women farmers and entrepreneurs working with environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable innovations are not reached by AKIS. Diversifying the focus of the knowledge and innovation systems could help support more innovation in farming and rural areas.

Executive Summary

The Agriculture and Knowledge Systems (AKIS) in Sweden needs to reach a wider group of farmers, entrepreneurs and food producers. The FLIARA project shows that female innovators in farming and rural areas are a target group that currently are not aware of the support available or are not included in the policies. In particular, small-scale organic farming and food production is identified as an area in need of more support.

The Challenge

Farmers, entrepreneurs and other stakeholders interviewed in FLIARA argued that there is a lack of support for environmental, social and economic innovations in small-scale organic farming, food production and businesses.

The FLIARA project, both from Sweden and the other partner countries, indicates that the support available is not known among farmers and therefore does not reach the female innovators in rural areas and on farms, and is believed to target only technological innovations suitable for large-scale conventional farming.

The narrow definition of agriculture and innovation in CAP and EIP-Agri in Sweden excludes most of the female innovators in the FLIARA-project from the support because they are not in primary production full time and their innovations are not deemed as radical enough.

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Policy Solutions

We propose to:

- Market the support within AKIS through new channels to reach female innovators working within small-scale farming as part of their business models.
- Diversify the criteria for CAP and EIP-Agri in order to support a diverse set of innovation projects not only conventional large-scale farming, but also small-scale alternative farming (e.g. organic, bio-dynamic, and regenerative) and food production.
- Increase the financing of social innovations projects such as educational efforts aiming at teaching children and grown-up consumers about sustainable farming and food production in order to create sustainable lifestyles and sustainability wisdom.

Supporting Evidence

One of the most important sustainability problems that was identified in the FLIARA project was inappropriate, inadequate or biased interventions, incentives and expectations by society (D2.2 Future vision manifestations). The most important category of sustainability visions was related to sustainable land, water and forest management (D2.2) and the data showed that a diverse set of rural stakeholders identified the need for more sustainability wisdom and in particular alleviate alienation from food production (D2.3). The visions of sustainable rural development included more organic farming, new crops and more sustainable land and water management.

The case studies from Sweden, and other countries, also showed that the support available in the Swedish AKIS was not widely known to the female innovators or other stakeholders.

Sources:
Kuhmonen, T. and Tembo, B. (2024), “D2.2: Future Vision Manifestations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045244 (accessed 3 April 2025).
Sivini, S., Roos, A. and Leonardelli, I. (2024), “D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations”, 6 November, available at: https://zenodo.org/records/14045390 (accessed 3 April 2025).

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Conclusion & Call to Action

The data from FLIARA demonstrates that AKIS does not reach farmers and entrepreneurs as widely as intended, and a diversification could address the needs of female innovators in agriculture and in rural areas, and in particular farmers and entrepreneurs in organic farming and food production.

CALL TO ACTION:

- Market the support in AKIS through new channels to reach other groups, including female innovators.
- Diversify the criteria in CAP and EPI to support other types of innovations that AI and technological solutions aimed at large-scale conventional farming and food production.
- Create appropriate interventions for small-scale organic farming and food production.

Further Reading

AKIS implementation in Sweden: Landsbygdsnätverket. “AKIS och EIP-Agri”, available at: http://www.landsbygdsnatverket.se/akisocheipagri.4.28dc3ce718e0c90ff2710011.html (accessed 3 April 2025).

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About FLIARA

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FLIARA innovators Amanda Kladnik and Maja Žerovnik.

Policy Brief SI01, 2025.

Start-up Finance, Training and Mentoring Vouchers for Rural Women

"There is a need to improve access to micro-finance, training and mentoring support for women."

Executive Summary

Women in rural areas face significant barriers when starting a business, including limited access to finance, tailored training, and mentoring. To address these challenges, we propose an integrated voucher-based support scheme offering start-up funding, entrepreneurship training, and personalised mentoring. These vouchers would help women cover essential start-up costs, build skills, and gain confidence through individual guidance. Although such programmes exist in several EU countries, they are often project-based. There is a strong need to embed these tools into national policies to ensure long-term, stable support for women entrepreneurs in rural areas.

The Challenge

- Women remain underrepresented in the entrepreneurship.
- Access to funding remains the main challenge for beginner women entrepreneurs.
- Many women must rely on personal savings and informal sources of funding to launch their business ideas and start innovation journey.
- The lack of women-tailored entrepreneurship training and an individual mentoring support presents a significant challenge for women innovators in rural areas, especially in the start-up phase.

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Policy Solutions

- Start-up finance vouchers to provide small-scale funding with lower or eliminate collateral requirements for first-time women entrepreneurs.
- Training and skills development vouchers for educational programme tailored to beginner women entrepreneurs in rural areas (e.g. financial literacy workshops, digital business tools, social skills, marketing, etc.)
- Mentorship and business advisory vouchers to enable women to access personalized mentoring and coaching sessions with experienced entrepreneurs.
- Institutional and legal support, reducing bureaucracy and streamline the process of business registration, licensing and access to public support.

Practical Tips

- Providing a three-month entrepreneurship training course and an individual mentoring scheme. Prioritize hands-on, locally delivered trainings that fits rural contexts and women's time constraints.
- Established women entrepreneurs provide mentorship, on-spot training and incubation support to aspiring or beginner women entrepreneurs.
- Providing a start-up grant for women who complete training and prepare the final presentation of the business model. The initiative can be primarily aimed at women who have been unemployed for least three months, have a higher education, have a convincing business idea and want to start their own business.
- Encourage the use of finance vouchers as a matching fund for accessing other public or private capital.
- Establish centralized service points (physical and/or digital) where women can access all relevant information, guidance and administrative support related to starting and running a business.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

In Slovenia, between 2015 and 2018, a national programme to promote women's entrepreneurship was introduced. The programme, led by public agency in the collaboration with Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, primally aimed to unemployed women with higher education and a viable business idea. The initiative included a two-month entrepreneurship training and a grant of EUR 3.000-5.000. Participants were required to complete training and received individual mentoring to develop their business model. Although not exclusively focused on rural areas, the programme aimed to reach women from diverse backgrounds. As a result, **over 1.000 women successfully started their own business.**

Building on this foundation, efforts to promote women's entrepreneurship have continued through public calls for awarding the best business models by beginner women entrepreneurs. Nowadays, a particular emphasis is placed on the mentoring scheme, which has been recognized as one of the most valued forms of support among aspiring women entrepreneurs.

This aspect was especially appreciated by the **Slovenian FLIARA Ambassador, Saša Kržič**, who herself participated in one such programme and highlighted mentoring as a crucial element in her entrepreneurial journey.

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Conclusion & Call to Action

Vouchers for women entrepreneurs are recognized tool, implemented in several European countries and typically function as seed money that women can use to cover specific start-up costs or access services such as training, mentorship, legal and accounting advice, market research or digital tools, initial investment in equipment or services, etc. Most of these vouchers are not permanent national programs, but rather part of time-limited projects, usually funded through the European Social Fund or other EU cohesion policy instruments.

There is a strong need for stable and predictable support structures. This includes the integration of voucher schemes into mainstream national policies and the establishment of sustainable funding mechanisms that go beyond short-term project cycles. Regular access to financial incentives and personalised support would significantly strengthen women's entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in rural and structurally weaker regions.

Further Reading

https://fliara.eu/

https://fliara.eu/innovators/

https://fliara.eu/ambassadors/

FLIARA Initial Guidelines for Policy Benchmarking https://zenodo.org/records/14045204

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FLIARA innovator Sara Berglez Zajec.

Policy Brief SI02, 2025.

Empowering Rural Women Through Targeted Advisory Services

"I have the ideas and the drive – but what's missing is a supportive system that listens and understands how women build differently."

Executive Summary

Women in rural areas are key drivers of innovation and sustainability, yet their needs remain underserved in existing advisory system. This policy brief calls for a dedicated regional advisory network, with specialised advisors trained to support women. It also recommends broadening the scope of services to include support for diverse business models - not only those within traditional supplementary on-farm activities, but also emerging, socially oriented, sustainable and community-based ventures where women are often at the forefront. Advisory programs should adopt flexible and inclusive formats, that reflect women's needs and realities. Finally, women's representation in professional networks must be strengthened.

The Challenge

- The lack of a gender-responsive advisory services who understand and address the needs and potentials of women in rural areas.
- The focus of agricultural advisory services for women remains centred on support for registration of supplementary activities on farm and matters related to social security issues. While these are important, they do not fully reflect the range of needs and potential of women in rural areas.
- Women possess different entrepreneurial motivations. They are more likely to pursue socially oriented, sustainable, or community-based ventures, which are often overlooked or undervalued by mainstream advisory systems and traditional frameworks.

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- Despite strong capabilities, many women underestimate their skills, especially in technical or economic field, and lack role models, leading to underrepresentation in leaderships and innovation.
- Traditional gender roles place a heavy burden of household, caregiving and farm work on women, reducing their availability for traditional training and business development.
- Women are frequently underrepresented in decision-making structures and professional networks, e.g. chamber of agriculture and forestry, farmers union, cooperatives, other advisory boards, etc., limiting their influence and access to key information and support.

Policy Solutions

- Establish regional advisory services network for women.
- Support flexible and inclusive training formats, promote confidence building and mentorship (rural women-to-women mentorship scheme).
- Recognise and support diverse business models.
- Strengthen women's representation in governance and farmers networks.

Practical Tips

- **Establish regional advisory services network for women.** Ensure at least one specialised advisor in each region, trained and equipped to support women, well familiar with specific challenges and opportunities faced by women in agriculture and entrepreneurship in rural areas. Such advisory support can be provided primarily within the public agricultural advisory service (Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia), while regional business incubators may also play a complementary role by offering specialised support for women-led rural enterprises and start-ups. This also requires that advisory support for women on farms and in rural entrepreneurship is recognised and included as a standalone thematic area within the broader framework of public agricultural and rural entrepreneurship advisory services in Slovenia, ensuring that gender-specific needs are addressed systematically and consistently across regions.
- **Recognise and support diverse business models**. Advisory services must formally recognise and support women in developing diverse forms of entrepreneurship such as social entrepreneurship, different sustainable models, and community-based forms of entrepreneurship. These are areas where women can truly excel, bring innovative, inclusive and locally rooted solutions to rural challenges. The advisory services must recognise these models as equally valuable and impactful as more traditional, profit-driven forms of entrepreneurship.
- **Support flexible and inclusive training formats, promote confidence-building and mentorship.** Offer advisory services and capacity-building programs that account for women's time constraints resulting from traditional gender roles – such as caregiving and household responsibilities -, by providing flexible options like evening sessions, online modules or on-site childcare. Keep in mind that traditional top-down approaches (lecture–listening) often fail to produce the same level of engagement or empowerment. When working with women, participatory, reflective, and relationship-based methods, such as storytelling, experience-sharing, and group learning, are more effective. Women also often exhibit lower levels of confidence in technical or entrepreneurial skills, despite having the necessary capabilities. This highlights the importance of mentorship, empowerment, and trust-building in advisory practices. Support and formalize rural women-to-women mentorship schemes in agriculture and entrepreneurship.

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- **Strengthen women's representation in governance and networks.** Introduce gender quotas or targeted inclusion measures to ensure women's representation in key rural and agricultural decision-making bodies such as chambers of agriculture and forestry, farmers' unions, cooperatives, LAGs, different advisory boards, enabling more balanced participation and access to information and support.

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Farm advisory services in Slovenia are primarily provided by the public institution Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia which operates as broad and well-structured advisory network at three levels: 1) national, with headquarters in Ljubljana), 2) regional, comprising 8 regional advisory centres employing around 70 advisors specialised in various agricultural fields, and an additional 40 other advisors who work with young farmers, and other thematic groups and 3) local level with 59 local units and approx.170 advisors who generally do not have specialised roles. The Chamber is the most recognizable institution, accessible all over country and well trusted by (especially traditional) farmers. Advisory service is organised in five topics: 1) advisory support for successors and retiring farmers, 2) farm economic efficiency consulting, 3) legal assistance, 4) psychosocial support and 5) social security for farmers and family members.

Each regional advisory centre employs one to two specialised advisors for young farmers. Legal and social security support are centrally coordinated, with regional advisors offering basic guidance, while complex cases are handled by central experts. Psychosocial support is a newer advisory area and still developing. The largest advisory area is farm economic efficiency consulting, which includes business planning, CAP measures for farmers, and supplementary on-farm activities—a particularly relevant field for women. Many rural women realise their entrepreneurial ideas through these activities, as they are more accessible than starting an independent business, especially in terms of legal, tax, and administrative requirements.

FLIARA innovator Damjana Ostanek Herič successfully took her first entrepreneurial steps by registering a supplementary activity on farm, through which she developed a recognisable vegetable processing business.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Women in rural areas are key drivers of innovation, sustainability, and community resilience, yet they are still not recognised as a distinct target group in need of dedicated advisory support, unlike young farmers who already benefit from tailored services. To unlock their full potential, Slovenia must take decisive steps to create a more inclusive, gender-responsive advisory framework.

The Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia needs to take a leading role in recognising rural women as a distinct target group and in integrating up-to-date, gender-responsive support into the public advisory system. Establishing dedicated agricultural advisory support for women in every region, adapting training formats for women needs, and ensuring women's presence in decision-making bodies are essential for building more resilient rural future. Regional business incubators may also play a complementary role by offering specialised support for women-led rural enterprises and start-ups.

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Further Reading

https://fliara.eu/

https://fliara.eu/innovators/

https://fliara.eu/ambassadors/

About FLIARA

The project is on a mission to create a more sustainable future by highlighting the role of women in agriculture and rural areas. FLIARA will boost understanding of the needs and challenges facing women leading innovative environmental and rural development practices in EU farming and rural areas.

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PART C THE PROCESS TOWARDS POLICY BRIEFS AND POLICY BOOKLET

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The process

The policy briefs have been prepared by FLIARA consortium partners.

The briefs are based on evidence developed during the FLIARA project. Sources of this evidence are ranging from policy assessment and conceptual analysis in the initial work package on contextual concepts and assessment frameworks, via insights developed during the foresight and trend analysis executed in 9 rural areas in 9 different countries and insights based on 200 interviews and 20 case studies of women-led innovations in farming and rural areas performed in 10 countries, until the outcomes of workshops at the FLIARA Community of Practice Network and work on gender benchmarking. During these activities and during communication, dissemination and exploitation activities, such as webinars and conferences, discussions has been held with policy makers and other stakeholders that have sharpened insights in the needs of policies to better cater for women-led innovation in farming and rural areas.

On 30 November 2024 TU Delft requested partners to propose policy briefs. For this end an 'Inventory form metadata' has been provided, in which partners could note key elements of the proposed policy briefs. To support this process, a few examples of draft policy briefs have been provided to give partners a better picture on how policy briefs could look like.

These proposed policy briefs have been discussed in a meeting in Cosenza on 30th January 2025. Discussions have been held in several rounds in which small groups discussed policy briefs on areas close to each other.

In the period after January 2025, policy briefs have been drafted and uploaded to the internal portal of the project. Meanwhile, these draft policy briefs have been discussed with relevant stakeholders. Texts have been reviewed and improved, and set into a common layout as has been provided by Consulta Europa.

In Ireland the 3 partners (University of Galway, Longford Women's Link and Teagasc.) worked together to ascertain that different perspectives were included in the policy briefs.

Box 1 FLIARA Policy Consultation Activities: Ireland

The development of Ireland's policy briefs was informed by a range of different opportunities to engage directly with policymakers and the policymaking process. This included national opportunities such as:

- Hosted the Atlantic macro region FLIARA Community of Practice (CoP) Network event (July 1st and 2nd, 2024). Across two days this event was held at the University of Galway and included a series of facilitated policy workshops with women-leading innovations, policy and governance stakeholders from Ireland as well as the wider Atlantic macro region covering Germany and the Netherlands.
- Participated in an Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine debate (October 9th, 2024) on the Action Plan arising from the National Dialogue on Women in Agriculture.
- Participated in Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht public consultation events in 2025 in the west and south of Ireland on the next iteration of the national Rural Development Policy, Our Rural Future.
- Discussions with Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine officials on the timeline and plans for the development of Ireland's next CAP Strategic Plan to ensure FLIARA's input into the policy development process at key times.
- Discussion with the Irish Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (November 21st, 2025), Simon Harris on women in agriculture and rural innovation and the availability of appropriate finance. Documentation around Irish FLIARA policy recommendations now sent to the Tánaiste's Office for review.
- Regular discussion with the Irish Local Action groups around LEADER funding for women-led innovation.
- Presented to the Irish Farmers Association in October 2025 the FLIARA policy recommendations around women-led innovation in agriculture.

Future plans to continue to leverage the policy impact of the FLIARA policy briefs and the wider knowledge base emerging from the project to influence policy are also underway. These activities are expected to include:

- Participate in the final phase of consultation on the next iteration of the national Rural Development Policy, Our Rural Future by the end of 2025. This will involve a submission responding to the consultation paper published by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht on the draft policy.
- Engage further with Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine officials relating to Ireland's next CAP Strategic Plan and put forward key insights emerging from the FLIARA project that have implications for the next CAP Strategic Plan nationally.

- Expected to attend another session of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine in 2026 to present final research outcomes and policy recommendations from FLIARA.
- University of Galway to host the Department of Rural and Community and the Gaeltacht Higher Education Committee Meeting in March 2026. A full presentation of the FLIARA policy recommendations will be presented and debated on the day.
- Presentation of FLIARA policy recommendations at other various fora, which are expected to include opportunities as the Rural Voices seminar series that is run in conjunction with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht Higher Education and Research Network and Rural Studies at the University of Galway.

Draft policy briefs have been discussed with relevant stakeholders, such as in Ireland (Box 1). Other examples include a workshop with practitioners and innovators in Romania on April 10th 2025. In Germany, a discussion have been held with a board of experts in rural affairs (Box 2). This committee is highly relevant for FLIARA exploitation. Probably the annual conference in 2026 will focus on women in farming and rural areas. This will give the FLIARA team the opportunity to exploit the results of the project finalised in December 2025.

Box 2 Members of Board of experts in rural affairs discussing FLIARA policy relevant outcomes

- Alois Bauer, Head of Directorate Rural Development at the Federal Ministry for Agriculture (Berlin) – interest in understanding the AKIS concept and in the FLIARA policy briefs for Germany
- Jutta Kuhles, President of the Rheinische landfrauenverband, which has a membership of over 14,000 rural women in the lower Rhine area
- Bettina Locklair , who leads the Katholische Landvolkbewegung Deutschland, a non-governmental organisation that supports interest of rural areas and rural people, based on the participation of people inspired by catholic principles.
- Cord Stoyke , Head of department of the Lower Saxony ministry responsible for Agriculture
- Volker Bruns , vice-chair of the Agrarsozialen Gesellschaft, an organisation that aims to provide the social voice in transformation processes in rural areas.

In Italy, the draft policy briefs have been discussed with Catia Zumpano, senior researcher of the Council for Agricultural Research and Agricultural Economy Analysis (CREA), specifically in the Agricultural Policies and Bioeconomy Research Centre (She is also involved in the Italian CAP Rural Network activities (CREA is the implementing body of the CAP National Rural Network). She has participated in the Italian CoP.

In Finland policy briefs have been discussed with the FLIARA ambassadors; one of the briefs is partly based on experiences of one of the ambassadors.

In Spain, results have been discussed with 5 members of the Rural Women's Area within the Sub-directorate General (SG) for Rural Development of the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

In the Netherlands, TU Delft discussed the policy briefs with civil servants of the informal women and inclusion network at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature to ascertain practice relevant and to promote impact before the final briefs have been launched. Furthermore insights have been discussed with people from farming organisations, including the LTO network of female farmers (which is a partner in the HORIZON Grass Ceiling programme), and with the agency responsible for implementing the National level CAP Strategic Plan of the Netherlands. The close contacts with the ministry have resulted in an invitation for the OECD Workshop Cultivating Change: Promoting Equal Opportunities in Food Systems, (Paris, October 27th, 2025), where key policy outcomes have been presented and discussed.

In Sweden, policy briefs have been discussed in separate policy networks (Box 3).

Box 3 Consultation with various stakeholders in Sweden

- ***Regional innovation support system:*** FLIARA results have been discussed with 9 people from the innovation support system in Blekinge (such as a Swedish state-owned venture capital company, The Swedish Jobs and Society Foundation, and tourism developers). Obstacles to getting involved in entrepreneurship, solutions and policy briefs have been addressed. The same topic has also been discussed with local (Växjö-based) actors in the innovation support system (business developers). Many of the business developers (mostly those working with diversity, non-tech, and cooperatives) were eager to hear that the reality that they meet with challenges of women innovators were heard while some other (more in the traditional growth, tech developing firms) focused on how their hands were tied from another decision maker higher up in their organisation.
- ***Equality in the Swedish CAP strategy:*** FLIARA was invited to take part in a discussion around how to handle equality within the new CAP strategy in Sweden. FLIARA, policy briefs and personal experience of a FLIARA ambassador have been presented and discussed.
- ***AKIS in Sweden*** : The policy brief targeting AKIS has been discussed with an AKIS-coordinator in Sweden. The discussions were fruitful, and helped to sharpen the policy brief.

The development of the Slovenian FLIARA policy briefs was embedded in an intensive, iterative and multi-stakeholder consultation process that unfolded between December 2024 and autumn 2025 (Box 4). Discussions included policy makers at national and regional level, agricultural advisory services, rural women innovators and broader rural stakeholders.

Box 4 Consultation Process Policy Briefs in Slovenia

The first draft of the Slovenian policy briefs was prepared in December 2024. In parallel, intensive communication was established with the **Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food**. Early January 2025, the Sector for Structural Policy and Rural Development held an internal meeting at the initiative of the FLIARA team to discuss support measures for women in rural areas and to identify existing gaps. The Ministry provided written feedback on 8 January 2025. This was followed by renewed, frequent communication (by telephone and email) throughout January and February, during which the content of the policy briefs was jointly aligned with ministry officials. At the opening of the FLIARA exhibition hosted by the Ministry (March 2025), attended by the Minister, senior officials and representatives of the broader support environment, the research team presented preliminary policy recommendations concerning women in agriculture and rural areas. This public event served as a key platform for discussing policy briefs with rural policy stakeholders. In June 2025, an online meeting was organised with ministry representatives. The FLIARA team formally presented the Slovenian policy briefs and invited them to attend the final FLIARA event in Brussels, which a ministry representative then attended. It was jointly concluded Slovenia wished to learn from the experiences and policy briefs of other partner countries.

Communication with the **Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia** and the public agricultural advisory service was continuous throughout the process during summer 2025, because one of the policy briefs directly proposed the introduction of a specialised agricultural advisor focused on supporting women. These culminated in a live stakeholder event at the AGRA agricultural fair in Gornja Radgona in late August 2025.

Experiences of Slovenian FLIARA **rural women innovators**, collected through interviews and Community of Practise, served as a key empirical foundation for shaping the policy briefs. Draft policy briefs were sent to these innovators for review. They were invited to comment, confirm or suggest amendments, ensuring that the documents captured lived realities and bottom-up perspectives of women active in rural areas.

The **Slovenian Rural Development Network (DRSP) and Local Action Groups** were directly involved through a FLIARA research team member who is also an active DRSP member. The topic of women in agriculture and the emerging policy briefs was presented and discussed within the DRSP Committee for LEADER/CLLD implementation. The broader rural public was informed through DRSP newsletters, contributing to wider awareness and indirect consultation.

The rural stakeholders mentioned above, and others, together with the FLIARA research team, also contributed to the **preparation of the national strategic document Slovenian Vision for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas 2040**. Within the strategic orientation on generational renewal and integrated rural development, the thematic area of women in agriculture and rural areas was emphasised (workshops in autumn 2025). Draft FLIARA policy briefs were referenced as a mechanism to support this goal.

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