

Women for a sustainable future of European rural areas

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This short article focuses on women in rural areas, draws attention to examples of initiatives driven by women and presents some policy perspectives. Furthermore, the article aims to raise awareness of the impacts of COVID-19 and the contributions of rural women to the recovery process. Many of the examples included in this short article, have been identified and analysed throughout projects in which AEIDL is involved. Special thanks are due to Márta Márczis, Enrique Nieto, Yves Champetier, Katalin Kolosy, Michel Laine and Robin Salter for their valuable feedback and contributions.

Introduction

Women are vital for the sustainable development of rural areas, bringing added value to local communities. Women are frequently the driving force of innovation, diversification, and the development of new opportunities. However, these roles are often obscured, with the men of family businesses in rural areas being the registered owner and performer of more visible roles. As such, women in rural areas still face challenges related to employment and education opportunities, access to land, and a weak presence in decision-making forums.

A recent [European Parliament study](#) shows that women represent a considerable proportion of labour in rural areas, with an estimated 45% of them being economically active. About 40% of them work on family farms. Their importance in rural economy is even greater, however, [official statistics](#) often underestimate women's work and their contribution to national wealth. This is due to the (i) invisibility of women's work; ii) seasonal and part-time nature of women's work; iii) unremunerated family labour; and

iv) lack of ownership of the farm or family business.

The insufficient understanding and consideration of women's full contribution in rural areas, presents a deficit in effective and evidence-based policy development. This should go beyond the farm gate and encapsulate topics such as female entrepreneurship, the role of women in non-agricultural services, voluntary work, childcare shortages, ageing and isolation, etc.

Women drive innovation in rural communities

There are many initiatives, led by women, responding to women's needs and challenges in rural areas, using available rural funding or even outside of any support or funding scheme, such as the platform Mallata.

Generally, women are already at the forefront of a range of entrepreneurial initiatives in rural areas and often they engage into farm and business diversification. Yet there is still work to be done to fulfil the entrepreneurial potential of women in rural areas.

The online platform Mallata.com, managed by Lucía López, promotes various initiatives across Spain led by women in rural areas, aiming to connect and inspire them. These initiatives focus on providing services such as environmental education, childcare, recycling, among others, but also promoting SMEs and rural businesses related to wellbeing, local and seasonal products, fashion, arts and culture.



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A Swedish project, 'Business Development for Women', used EU Rural Development funding to deliver a targeted training programme for women to develop a business plan for a new or existing rural business idea. It used a mix of theory and examples from real cases to improve the business knowledge, skills, and confidence of the participating women.

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In Hiiumaa, Estonia, several women are the driving force behind the diversification of fisheries-dependant family-run businesses. One business, owned by former net-mender, now produces dried fish for export with a focus on the biltong/jerky snack market. Several other women on the island have set up cafés and restaurants which network through a now nationally famous 'Hiiumaa Café Days' festival bringing tourism to the area.

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Women are a driving force for the maintenance, conservation and development of the local culture and traditions. Their awareness and knowledge of local needs, places them in a position to create and develop activities that contribute to the local economy and quality of life.

In Poland, the culinary book 'In the footsteps of the old flavours of Przeworsk county', became much more than just a collection of recipes as it helped to build intergenerational cooperation and promote the region's culinary tradition, preserving its cultural heritage.



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An analysis conducted by the research project, Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas (**SIMRA**), concluded that female social innovators in rural areas play a crucial role in improving the wellbeing and resilience of the entire community. SIMRA specifically highlights positive impacts on a range of activities such as: (i) valorisation of local traditions, foods and handicrafts; (ii) the promotion of rural lifestyles and ecological values; and (iii) the enhancement of a more equitable division of income among genders and community members.

Recognition and visibility of women in rural areas

In 2008 the **United Nations** declared 15 October to be Rural Women's Day, in an effort to raise awareness and recognise *"the critical role and contribution of rural women, including indigenous women, in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty."*



Across EU there are several initiatives and examples to increase women's visibility and their representation in decision-making forums. Such is the case of the Irish Farmers' Association, who launched a [Diversity Strategy](#) in 2019, resulting women now making up 13% of the National Council.

A recent article in ENRD's magazine, [Rural Connections](#) (p. 19), highlights the importance of diversity in European agriculture. The author points to EU's commitment to gender mainstreaming, encouraging Member States to ensure that women are well represented in decision-making processes.

In this regard, as part of the CAP negotiations, [Spain](#) has taken into account the gender dimension throughout the process, with specific focus on targeting measures to support women in rural areas, including positive discrimination. Spain is one of the countries that has carried out exhaustive [analysis on the role of women in rural areas](#), starting from 2010, and now is in the process of elaborating a new report analysing the evolution for the past decade.

Recognising women's work and contributions to agricultural innovation through annual awards at national or European levels, also helps to raise awareness and promote innovative projects, initiatives and businesses led by women.

[Copa-Cogeca](#), the European association representing farmers and agri-cooperatives in the EU, has been organising the [Innovation Award for Women Farmers](#) since 2010, highlighting women's contributions to rural development, forestry and farming. Furthermore, the award is seen as an opportunity to showcase the innovative projects and initiatives led by women in their quest to finding solutions to the challenges faced in rural areas.

There is a need to further mainstream a gender perspective into many of the CAP measures. Specific targeting to women is key to advancing gender equality and empowerment. This could have a significant impact in areas suffering depopulation. For example, targeting funding to women could be addressed within the existing CAP measures (e.g., start-up support, investments) or through the development of the new CAP interventions similar to those for young farmers.

In addition, gender mainstreaming in measures such as EIP-AGRI Operation Groups and LEADER will also boost the important role that women play in innovation in rural areas, including social innovation.



COVID-19 impact on rural women

The current health crisis has had a significant impact on women in rural areas, as they are playing a vital role in responding to the virus, including as frontline healthcare workers and carers at home. In this respect, women's unpaid care work has increased significantly, as a result of school closures and the increasing needs of older people.

The [UN reports](#) that women have also been hit harder by the economic impacts of COVID-19, as they disproportionately work in insecure labour markets.

Even though women have taken the hardest hit in this pandemic, they are also the backbone of recovery in communities. Putting women at the centre of economies will drive better and more sustainable development outcomes for all, support a more rapid recovery, and place the world back on track to achieve the [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

Concluding remarks

Women actively participate and contribute to the sustainable development of European rural areas, even though their role is often hidden behind incomplete statistical data, resulting from narrow perspectives given to their activities. There is further need to implement specific and targeted measures, support and investment for rural women.

Timing wise, there is scope for Member States to gender mainstream their policies and thus reap the benefits of investing in women in rural areas. Two important instruments are already available and can help realise this opportunity: through the future [CAP Strategic Plans](#), and through the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#).



The **Rural and Territorial Development Unit** of AEIDL gathers experts who foster community-led innovation by facilitating peer learning, co-creating and transferring of knowledge. The Unit also provides analysis and evaluation of relevant EU policies and advocates for an enhanced support to community local action. It acts as a knowledge hub to inspire and connect local and EU stakeholders.

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