

# The role of women in rural development and innovation

Author: Blanca Casares (Rural Development Officer).

Contributors: Lucía Garrido, Patricia Martínez, Enrique Nieto, Merveille Ntabuhashem, Robin Salter, Roxana Vilcu.

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**Women are vital for the sustainable development of rural areas, bringing added value to local communities. They are frequently the driving force behind innovation, diversification, and the development of new opportunities. In short, women give life to rural areas.**

In March 2021, part of the European Association for Information on Local Development's (AEIDL) team published a short [article](#) focused on women for a sustainable future of European rural areas. It drew attention to examples of initiatives driven by women and presented some policy perspectives. The article aimed to raise awareness of the impacts of COVID-19 and the contributions of rural women to the recovery process.

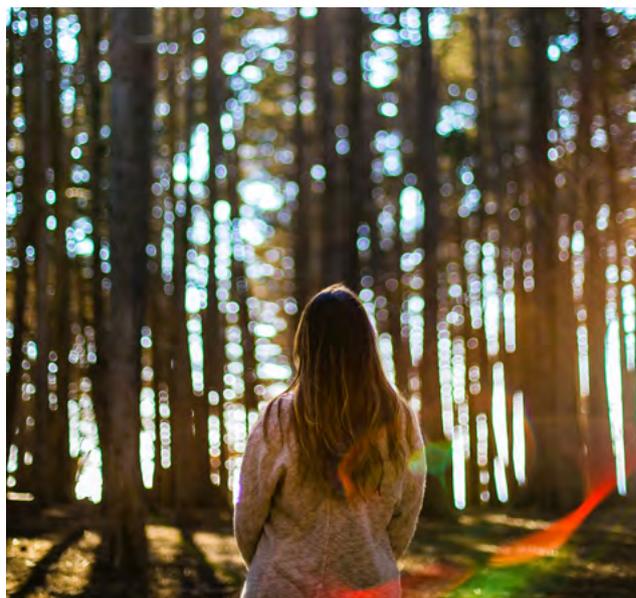
Following this intervention, on 5 October 2021 the team organised an AEIDL Talks on [Women in rural areas](#) with Roxana Vilcu as moderator and Blanca Casares as speaker.

This AEIDL Talks was organised close to the date of the International Day of Rural Women which has been held every 15 October since 2008.

In this AEIDL Talks, Blanca Casares, Rural Development Officer at AEIDL, discussed the challenges faced by women in rural areas. She reflected on the many roles women have in rural communities and their broad capacity for innovation, bringing forward the voice of some rural women thanks to the contributions of more than a dozen women.

## Setting the scene for women in rural areas

Equality between women and men was recognised in the Treaties since the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. However, the progress remains insufficient and many inequalities between women and men persist. Women remain less likely to participate in the labour market than men; are more likely to be unemployed than men; and are over-represented in informal and vulnerable employment. According to the [EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas](#) by 2040, there is a gap between male and female employment in rural areas of 13 percentage points, rising to over 20 in certain Member States.



A number of important data emerges from the [study](#), commissioned by the European Parliament in 2019, entitled “The professional status of rural women in the EU”. This study indicates that women in rural areas of the EU make up below 50% of the total rural population, they represent 45% of the economically active population, and about 40% of them work on family farms. It is also stated that their importance in the rural economy is even greater, since their participation in the informal rural economy is not statistically recognised. As for management, around 30% of farms across the EU-28 are managed by women.

The particular case of immigrant women in rural areas should be highlighted. Research on immigrant integration (for instance [MAX project](#)), shows that

immigrant women also face cultural, knowledge and linguistic barriers in addition to the difficulties posed by the fact of being women.

“ According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), migrant women represent a fundamental pillar of agricultural and farm work in rural areas. And while there is a lack of robust and consistent data on migrant women workers in agriculture in the EU, many studies claim that they are more likely to be both overqualified and have poorer labour outcomes than migrant men and native women”.

- Patricia Martínez, Project Manager of MAX

It is also noted that women also bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work.



## Rural women in the current policy framework

Currently, the main legislative framework to consider is:

- 🌻 [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#). This strategy presents policy objectives and actions to make significant progress by 2025 towards a gender-equal Europe. The strategy will be implemented using intersectionality as a cross-cutting principle. This refers to the combination of gender with other personal characteristics or identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination. This strategy indicates that intersectionality of gender with other grounds of discrimination will be addressed across EU policies.
- 🌻 [Proposal regulation COM \(2018\) 392 final](#) for establishing rules on support for Strategic Plans to be drawn up by Member States under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). There is only one specific mention of women in Article 110 stating that the Managing Authorities, responsible for the management and implementation of the CAP Strategic Plan, shall ensure the publicity of this Plan by informing the bodies involved in the promotion of equality between men and women..
- 🌻 [Farm to Fork Strategy](#) within the EU Green Deal (EGD) where there is no specific mention to women but it is known that women in rural areas contribute to multiple objectives of this strategy and of the EGD.
- 🌻 [EU long-term vision for rural areas](#) by 2040 where it is expressly stated that young women are more likely to leave rural regions than young men. In addition, the Vision proposed that attention should be paid to the fact that many women have precarious contracts (e.g. seasonal workers) or play an ‘invisible role’ in rural societies (e.g. assisting spouses), which may leave them exposed to vulnerable situations (such as no access to social protection or maternity benefits, in some cases). The Vision states that women represent a significant driving force for prosperity and social inclusion in rural areas, notably through entrepreneurship.



## Looking at the challenges

The situation and challenges **differ considerably between women** by individual socio-demographic characteristics such as age, education and life cycle position; and also between countries and regions.

In relation to rural **women's work and income**, although women's participation in paid work has greatly improved over the last decades, employment rates are lower and unemployment rates higher among women compared to men.

Women's labour market position is also more precarious due to a larger part being part-time work or based on contracts with limited duration. Many women combine off-farm and on-farm activities.

Regarding **political participation and decision-making**, various factors constrain women's entrance into the political arena. In areas of expertise such as agriculture, forestry and rural development there are more male political representatives.

**Gender relations** are changing and modernising also the rural regions, but the image of rural society is still one of traditional gender relations **and identities**.

Advisory services, mentors, neighbours, from whom to learn and share certain primary sector activities, are often men. It is important to consider these relationships when analysing the situation of women.

One of the key challenges is the **lack of public services in rural areas** compared to urban areas. At the family-level in rural areas, improvements are needed for childcare, health and social care for the elderly and women-centred services such as medical specialties.

Another main challenge is the **access to land**. Old inheritance laws and other factors have led to the majority of farms today being owned by men. There are some examples, such as the case of Spain, which has regulations on **shared ownership**, but there is still a long way to go in terms of ownership.

## Analysing the position of rural women presents difficulties

In addition to the challenges outlined above, there are few statistics available that are differentiated by gender as well as level of degree of urbanisation (rural areas) and no comparative studies on rural women across Europe.



## Opportunities and actions to be undertaken to support women in rural areas

### Use of public support (different funds, mechanisms and instruments) to:

- Encourage shared ownership and facilitate access to land;
- improve the provision of infrastructure and services in rural areas;
- reduce precarious employment;
- promote generational renewal;
- promote rural innovation and entrepreneurship;
- support to multifunctional projects - multifunctional agriculture;
- concerning CAP support, (i) programming specific interventions for women; (ii) prioritising women in the selection criteria for support; and (iii) differentiated aid intensities or unit amounts for women;

- ensure participation in decision making;
- review EU policies through a rural lens, ensuring rural and gender proofing.

### Enhance public-private agreements to:

- Facilitate access to credit and reduce taxation;
- target certain advisory services; specific training for women in primary and other sectors;
- support rural women's organisations;
- favour multi-stakeholder work and ensuring gender balance among the members of the group. For example in Horizon 2020 research projects like [SHERPA](#), the multi-actor platforms (MAPs) represent a science society policy interface and the [criteria](#) for establishing them specifies the gender balance;
- increase attractiveness, promote the visibility and empowerment of rural women;
- provide information and raise awareness.

### Women's footsteps and their multiple faces

The AEIDL Talk of 5 October 2021 ended by presenting a series of experiences and opportunities that rural areas offer to women through quotes from a dozen women who live and work in rural areas of Spain.

[WATCH THE PRESENTATION](#)





The **Policy Unit** of AEIDL gathers experts who foster community-led innovation by facilitating peer learning, co-creation and transfer of knowledge. The Unit also provides analysis and evaluation of relevant EU policies and advocates for an enhanced support to community local action in thematic strands such as rural and territorial development; green growth, environment and climate action, or or employment, entrepreneurship and inclusion. It acts as a knowledge hub to inspire and connect local and EU stakeholders.

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