



WHAT EXPERTS SAY:

Interview to Florence Raes

Director of United Nations Women Brussels

UN Women is a global leader for gender equality, working to ensure that every woman and girl can enjoy her rights and reach her full potential. UN Women is co-custodian for six [SDG](#) indicators, and co-responsible for collecting data and monitoring the indicators. The 2030 Agenda principle of leaving no one behind is deeply anchored in UN Women's work. The [UN Women Brussels Liaison Office](#) engages in policy dialogue and exchanges, joint programming development, and joint advocacy at the European Union level.



"UN Women works with EU Member States and supports the advancement of the gender equality agenda in EU external policies. Internally, UN Women supports gender mainstreaming in line with the EU dual approach and the advancement of the EU Gender Equality Strategy (GES). Engaging in dialogue about the EU's internal gender equality efforts with Member States and EU partners and agencies is highly valuable."
Florence Raes, Director of UN Women in Brussels

GRASS CEILING Horizon Europe (2022-2025) project aims to support the development of a context where women can drive socio-ecological transitions, fostering innovations to address socio-ecological challenges and enhance the resilience of rural areas.

The online **European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas** plays a key role in pushing for change and increase women-led socio-ecological innovations in farming, the rural economy and in rural communities. It is coordinated by **Copa-Cogeca** and **AEIDL** (European Association for Innovation in Local Development).

What would you highlight about the implementation and future action of the Gender Equality Strategy?

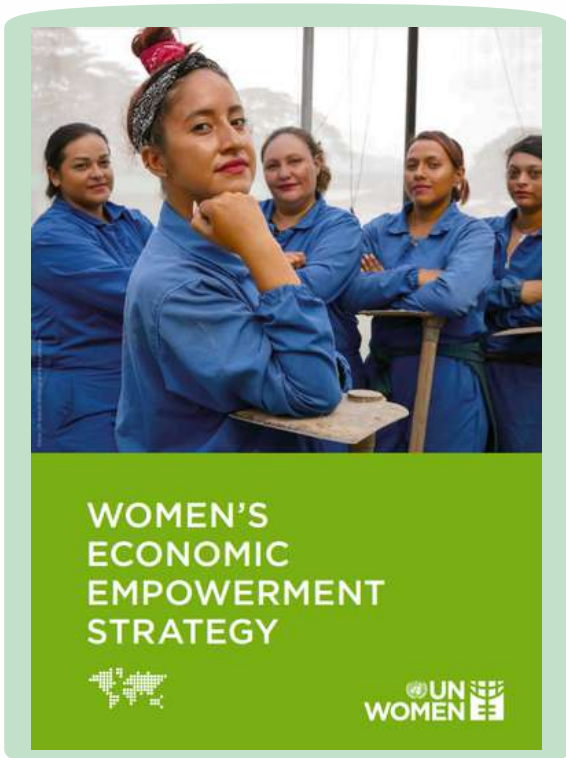
The Gender Equality Strategy is still being implemented, particularly through the Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) as part of foreign policy and development efforts, as well as through initiatives like the Global Gateway. There is also a strong focus on women, peace, and security alongside the European External Action Service.

UN Women is regularly consulted in its global role with more limited involvement in EU internal work. In partnership with the [Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers](#), our work connects to international conventions and frameworks, such as the upcoming [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (CSW) and next year's 30th anniversary of the [Beijing Declaration](#). Internally, we contribute to strategies on key issues, including care, equal pay, women on boards, and violence against women.

The previous Commission made significant progress in advancing women's economic empowerment and participation, making it a priority to preserve these gains. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure that these policies are adequately funded and effectively implemented.

We believe that gender cannot be addressed in isolation from the broader global pushback against women's rights, which is visible within the EU and its Member States from various opposing forces. Some areas, such as care, could see more ambitious action under the new Commission. It is also crucial for the EU to continue to be a global leader in advancing gender equality, as it has been over the past 5 to 10 years, despite ongoing challenges such as wage inequality and political underrepresentation. The Beijing report highlights that, in certain countries, progress in these areas has actually reversed over the past decade.

For UN Women, care is a primary focus. Last year, we redefined the work on women's economic empowerment based on the regions we work in. As part of this effort, the new UN Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy (2024) highlights the disproportionate burden of care work, revealing that women spend an additional hour and a half on child labour and care work compared to men. Addressing this imbalance is critical from various perspectives: climate, employment, and beyond.



What would be the main and overarching challenges for women in agriculture and rural areas?

Climate change is a central issue when discussing agriculture today. Its impacts make rural areas less resilient, which is why UN Women has supported diversifying activities beyond traditional agriculture. Climate financing tends to focus more on mitigation rather than directly addressing the human communities affected. Therefore, it is crucial to advocate for both the needs of the end beneficiaries and the opportunities available to those already working on the ground.

The effects of climate change are now more visible than ever—while we traditionally associate it with droughts in the Sahel or floods in Mozambique, we are now seeing it closer to home, such as with the Ebro River or in areas around Valencia. While urban areas are affected too, the impact on rural areas, especially on women's ability to adapt and shift to alternative strategies, is particularly significant. This really calls for urgent action and attention to integrate climate resilience, not only in agriculture but in rural lives in general. It is not just the destruction of crops but also infrastructure and everything else essential to these communities.

Another key challenge is **social protection**. While social protection systems are more developed in Europe, they often do not cover informal work, which disproportionately affects women, especially those balancing multiple roles such as caregiving and motherhood. In countries like Portugal, Spain, and Italy, many seasonal workers—often migrants from North Africa—are left unprotected.

Women play a crucial role in local food production and consumption, essentially supporting food security. However, they often do **not engage in commercial markets** that could offer higher incomes. Instead, they primarily sustain local consumption, which is vital but less profitable.

Access to land is one challenge, but **access to finance and capital** is often an even greater barrier. While progress has been made through alternative banking schemes, microcredit, and other initiatives, large-scale investments still rarely reach these women. This brings me to the Global Gateway, which is a significant concern for us. The approach focuses on sustainability and scalability by involving the private sector, but given that women are already in a

less favourable position, we question how much they will actually benefit from these investments. While the initiative may drive economic growth, it is crucial to ensure that women are included in these opportunities and that their needs are specifically addressed to prevent further inequality.

One area UN Women is revisiting is the focus on **strengthening women's organisations and movements**, which was a key priority in the 80s. After the democratic changes in the 80s and 90s, we shifted to focusing more on technical solutions, assuming less political involvement was needed. However, with current challenges like reduced support for civil society and less democratic stability, it's clear we need to reinvest in these groups. These grassroots organisations have been vital—without them, we would not have the Beijing Platform for Action globally.

And, of course, there are stereotypes and gender norms that create major barriers. In developing UN Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy, we identified three core areas: climate, care, and

work/jobs/income. Additionally, we recognised two unique areas where we could add value—first, examining gender through macroeconomic lenses, questioning not just budgeting and taxation but also monetary policies and debt structures; and second, focusing on social norms. Social norms are of critical importance, and while addressing them may seem straightforward, as if it comes without significant cost, this is not entirely the case.

I would also like to mention that change starts with **education, revision of role models, and visibility of initiatives and solutions**, like women's innovation forums. For example, in the climate debate, we keep hearing that women are more vulnerable, which is true to an extent, but it overlooks their local knowledge and resilience. From Mozambique to Paraguay, women innovate out of necessity, but their solutions often go unrecognized. It's not a one-size-fits-all solution. Therefore, it is crucial to highlight these innovations, give them visibility, and support the women behind them.



What opportunities are identified from European action on gender?

The European Union may be supporting innovative actions abroad, but often these efforts do not lead to lessons that are applied internally, even though the contexts may differ. The more I settle here, the more I realise how much we can **learn from regions like Africa and Latin America**. For example, in Latin America, we have done many exchanges on care policies—they have some of the most developed frameworks. In Africa, there are a lot of rural innovations, though they often struggle to be institutionalised due to unstable governance systems. These innovations could be incredibly valuable here in Europe. This is something I am particularly focused on —**bridging these gaps, as these are truly global issues**. Without addressing them on a global scale, we will not make meaningful progress.

In addition, there is significant innovation taking place, much of it funded by the EU or its Member States. However, there is often a lack of care support and insufficient efforts to facilitate dialogue between rural women in the EU and those in different areas.

Digitalisation has played a key role in supporting resilience. Electronic platforms and new technologies have been vital in connecting these women with buyers in other countries. We developed a platform called "Buy from Women," which gathers women producers in various crop areas and directly links them with buyers based on demand. One innovative element was integrating this platform with our work on **gender-sensitive procurement**. We linked public procurement efforts, initially in the food sector, with women producers, allowing for larger-scale production, increased resilience, and greater diversity. This tool facilitates connections between the women,



commercialisation, and procurement—something that can also be applied to other rural areas.

Another dimension UN Women explored was drone-irrigated rice fields and similar technologies. This had an interesting impact. When I visited, I noticed many young women were engaged and proud to manage the drone technology. Normally, you see out-migration, leaving older women behind while men and younger people leave. But the introduction of this technology gave young people a renewed sense of pride and hope for a future in rural areas, effectively reducing migration. **New technologies** like these can indeed provide a strong **incentive for young people to stay and invest in rural life**.

When we look at **data and projections**, we have also been focusing on the **cost of inaction**—essentially, what we stand to gain if we take action. For example, investing in care infrastructure alone (just the infrastructure, without considering other aspects) could create around 15 million jobs by 2035.

This assessment highlights that care is a long-term investment, not an expense. It generates employment, taxes, and consumption—it is a public good, not just a "women's or gender issue."

Investing in women-led rural businesses could boost production, lower unemployment, and increase economic opportunities. Food security and growth are also linked here. There are numerous arguments on the cost side, similar to our approach in assessing the cost of violence against women, but we also need to highlight the economic potential of these investments.

One of our global programmes, Accelerating Progress Towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment, has shown **tangible benefits** such as an increase in production by rural women, leading to increased income from sales and the growth of women-led organisations, loans, and savings in rural areas.

SIGN UP TO THE FORUM



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