



### WHAT EXPERTS SAY:

#### Interview to Sophie Alkhaled

Sophie Alkhaled is an Associate Professor in Entrepreneurship at the Department of Entrepreneurship and Strategy in Lancaster University recently involved in Horizon 2020 projects such as **SIMRA** (Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas) and **TARGETED-MPI** (Transparent And Resilient Gender Equality Through Integrated Monitoring Planning and Implementation).



**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 improvements are necessary to incorporate women's needs into both existing and new EU policies, and what are the expected developments in the Gender Equality Strategy beyond 2025?

My experience is framed around projects such as **SIMRA** (Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas) where the Social Innovation I was involved in, called **The Growing Club**, focused on coaching socially disadvantaged women in setting up and running their own businesses. Participants included women living in rural areas with limited access to resources, single mothers, economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

I think that both **the European Union and the United Kingdom have policies that often appear gender-neutral, complemented by equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies. However, a clearer integration of these approaches is needed to provide comprehensive support for women**

Currently, one of the main problems with our policies is the **lack of intersectional approach** to understanding the heterogeneity of the 'female entrepreneur'. That is, they do not pay sufficient attention to how factors such as race, migration status, age, class, religion and sexuality intersect with gender, and therefore, compound the difficulties they face to work and entrepreneurship. **It is essential to recognise that women are not a homogenous group, but a diverse one**, with different experiences and needs.

Moreover, while the EU has made commendable progress in work-life balance policies, particularly in terms of parental and maternity leave, more can be done. **Mainstreaming family life into policies** for both men and women, and normalising parental leave and work-life balance in both rural and urban areas will ultimately benefit women, men and families as a whole, as well as the organisations they work for and serve.





### How can local and regional policies effectively address women's needs?

From the perspective of entrepreneurship and in the UK, which is the region I am most familiar with, one of the major issues is the **unequal allocation of government resources**, with the majority directed towards the South and South East England. This leaves areas from the Midlands to the North struggling to secure adequate funding. These regions are considered to be more rural, with weaker transportation links and less investment in business and societal infrastructure.

The government has implemented the **"levelling up" project**, aiming to spread opportunity more equally across the UK, for example through improving rail connections within the North, enhancing infrastructure, and boosting investment in healthcare and other sectors. Despite these efforts, there remains insufficient support for women and women-led businesses.

Another initiative to tackle this inequality is the **Northern Powerhouse**, which is the government's vision for a super-connected, globally competitive northern economy with a flourishing private sector, a highly-skilled population, and world-renowned civic and business leadership. Inspired by this initiative, The Northern Power Women organisation was created as an all-inclusive movement that connects people and businesses with an aim to accelerate social mobility, gender equality and diversity across the UK and beyond.

So, at a national and regional level, it is crucial to provide not just financial support but also improve infrastructure, resources, and networking opportunities, especially in marginalised rural areas of the North. **Mentorship programmes are particularly important** to support women and minority groups and this is something the Northern Power Women initiative have been fantastic in creating over the years.

**SIGN UP TO THE FORUM**



**Blanca Casares, AEIDL**

*bca@aeidl.eu*

**Branwen Miles, Copa-Cogeca**

*branwen.miles@copa-cogeca.eu*

[www.grassceiling.eu](http://www.grassceiling.eu)

