



### WHAT EXPERTS SAY:

#### Interview to Dr. Maura Farrell

Dr. Maura Farrell is an Associate Professor in the School of Geography, Archaeology, and Irish Studies at the University of Galway. Specialising in Rural and Agricultural Geography, her research and teaching delve into the social, cultural, and economic transformations shaping rural communities. With a strong focus on rural sustainability and innovation, Dr. Farrell has spearheaded several high-profile national and EU-funded projects. She is the Lead Coordinator of the Horizon Europe [FLIARA project](#) (Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas) and the Principal Investigator of the Horizon Europe [PREMIERE project](#). Her leadership also extended to her role as Principal Investigator for previous projects, such as the [Irish National Rural Network](#) and the Horizon 2020 [RURALIZATION project](#), where she has contributed to advancing rural policy and practice.



**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 are the main challenges faced by women in agriculture and rural areas?

Through my involvement with the FLIARA project, I have gained valuable insights into the critical challenges faced by women in agriculture and rural areas. Historically, women's contributions to farming and rural economies have been undervalued and overshadowed by male-dominated practices in agriculture and rural entrepreneurship. Despite women often playing a central role in farm work, preserving cultural community traditions or leading economic and environmental sustainability, their contributions have typically been invisible in formal economic reporting and policymaking. One of the primary challenges women face in farming and rural

areas is **gender bias**. Unfair and unequal treatment of women in areas such as land ownership, access to land and financial resources, can limit their ability to invest in or make decisions about their farms or rural business. This lack of control restricts women's financial independence and ability to grow their agricultural or rural enterprise. Additionally, women often **struggle to access credit, training, and new technologies**, which further limits their capacity to innovate and improve their productivity. This inequity is often compounded by inadequate support for work-life balance, with women shouldering most of the unpaid domestic labour, which further limits their professional opportunities and career advancement.

Addressing these challenges requires **comprehensive strategies that promote gender equality, improve access to resources, and support women in taking leadership roles** within agriculture and rural economies. The FLIARA project is a step in the right direction, advocating for female-led innovation and empowerment in these critical sectors.

### What are the key achievements and what opportunities arise from Europe's actions on gender equality?

The European Union's **efforts to improve gender equality in recent years are heartening**. Specifically, they have enacted a number of policy instruments, including the [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#), which aims to promote gender equality. Additionally, the EU introduced the [European Accessibility Act](#), the [Work-Life Balance Directive](#), and the [Directive on Equal Pay for Equal Work](#). These legislative developments are intended to contribute to working conditions, driving salary equality, and enhancing protection against discrimination for women and marginalised groups. The EU also introduced a **gender mainstreaming approach** that guarantees a gender perspective in all policies. Although these developments impact all EU women it is not until very recently that more specific considerations were given to rural and farm women, via the Common Agricultural Policy. All gender-based policies are a step in the right direction towards greater equality for all women across the EU and although still a long road to travel, current policies have increased female representation in leadership, are addressing pay disparities, reduced gender violence and achieved near-parity in educational attainment. Such achievements, however, are more pronounced in some EU member states than others, highlighting **disparities in the implementation and impact of gender initiatives**. Ensuring these policies are applied across all EU member states and regions is crucial if we are to fully unlock the potential of rural and farm women to contribute to the continued viability of their farms and rural communities.

Despite the above-mentioned EU policy instruments and strategies, considerable diversity exists across the various EU member states between men and women. To deal with this disparity further, **the EU's cohesion policy is an additional investment and development plan**, aiming to reduce economic, social, and geographical disparities among its member states. As evidence of how important

gender equality has become to EU Cohesion Policy, **almost 30% of all cohesion policy investments are focused on advancing gender equality** between 2021 and 2027 ([EU Commission, 2023](#)). As such, all cohesion programmes, including the European Social Fund Plus, the European Regional Development Fund and the Just Transition Fund have gender equality requirements. All of this is exceptionally positive; however, its effectiveness and impact are still indeterminate or pending. What is evident however, is the **varying levels of implementation at member state level**, particularly as gender equality is not a separate policy goal but is mainstreamed throughout Cohesion Policy. This approach, in turn leaves it open to interpretation, often resulting in a lack of accountability, commitment and a fragmented approach to achieving gender equality.

### What are the key achievements and what opportunities arise from Europe's actions on gender equality?

Building on recent efforts, the European Commission is expected to continue advancing gender equality strategies into the future. This commitment was reaffirmed when the Commission set out its [Roadmap for Women's Rights](#) in March 2025, while also presenting the [2025 Report on Gender Equality](#). Key priorities include addressing **gender-based violence**, improving **health care standards**, ensuring **equal pay** and promoting **economic empowerments** for all women across the EU. Additional focus areas include **work-life balance**, **equal employment opportunities**, **quality and inclusive education** and ensuring specialised institutional infrastructures for gender equality.

Reflecting on these commitments and in turn the work carried out in the FLIARA project, there are many similarities, but I will focus specifically on gender violence and work-life balance. While gender-based violence is not explicitly referenced in the FLIARA fieldwork, it remains highly relevant. Our findings emphasise the indirect control and symbolic violence that rural and farm women regularly encounter. This manifests in many ways, including unpaid or undervalued farm or rural business work, **women left out of the decision-making process on farms and agricultural policies**, institutions and indeed the media portraying farming as a male-dominated field. Consequently, women's contributions to farming and rural business are often made invisible through the use of inappropriate language, policy frameworks and

inheritance laws, which persist in favouring men over women. Addressing these systemic issues needs to be part of the EU policies post-2025, with a specific focus on rural contexts where these challenges are often more pronounced.

Promoting work-life balance in farming and rural women-led innovations is also a key area of concern and interest, as highlighted by the FLIARA project. Juggling multiple roles, a lack of network support and issues around financial and resource constraints are challenges faced by rural and farm women. These

challenges can often hinder rural and farm women starting or scaling up an innovation on farm or in their rural community. **Post-2025 policies therefore most prioritise tailored supports** that address the unique needs of rural and farm women, ensuring they have access to adequate and affordable childcare, pension options for older innovators and flexible work arrangements. It is imperative therefore that policies post-2025 **recognise the diversity of women in general**, including rural women, thereby avoiding a 'one-size-fits-all' policy approach.



### In particular, how should the CAP better address women's needs in the CAP Strategic Plans? What would be your recommendations for CAP policy design, implementation and evaluation?

The CAP 2023-2027 required member states to consider a gender approach to their CAP Strategic Plans, with an aim to **enhance the participation of women in farming and rural innovation**. Despite being an important step towards equality for farm and rural women, only a small number of EU member states have adopted it, and only a handful have put real measures into place. Opportunities to encourage and promote women in agriculture and rural innovation have been made possible by those who have implemented gender policies. However, **if the EU were to insist on wider adoption, considerably more potential might be unlocked**.

Ireland was one country which implemented a number of strategies to facilitate greater engagement of women in farming. These included **women only knowledge transfer groups, higher grant aid of 60% for targeted modernisation schemes on farms, a dedicated gender call under**

the European Innovation Partnerships in Agriculture Programme to examine women's participation in farming. All of these were welcomed by women in farming and indeed the broader farming community. Nonetheless, going forward, it becomes imperative that these initiatives are evaluated to ensure changes can be made to the next Irish CAP programme.

Within the broader EU perspective post 2025, the initial imperative is that gender remains part of the CAP format going forward. Additionally, **women often encounter barriers to owning or accessing land**, which limits their ability to fully participate in farming. To address this, the CAP could introduce policies which promote equal access to land, tackle inheritance rights and improve leasing opportunities for women would enhance opportunities for women engaged in farming or new entrants considering farming. Additionally, ensuring **gender-based representation in farming organisations** and other agricultural and rural bodies, via a quota system if required is essential to foster an inclusive environment in agriculture, but also to enhance the effectiveness and diversity of leadership within agriculture.

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