



WHAT EXPERTS SAY:

Interview to Professor Sally Shortall

Professor Sally Shortall, Duke of Northumberland Chair of Rural Economy at Newcastle University, is a sociologist, and coordinator of the Horizon Europe funded project [GRASS CEILING](#). She is interested in farm families, and how their values and decisions shape agricultural practice, and the role of women in farm families. She is interested in rural sociology, community studies, rural development and rural proofing, agriculture, farm families and is specifically known for her work on gender and agriculture. She has carried out research for the European Court of Auditors, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Scottish, English and Australian governments of advancing women's equality in agriculture. Professor Shortall was Elected to the Royal Swedish Academy of Forestry and Agriculture in 2022 in recognition of her international contributions to agriculture.



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?

Of course, the barriers for women in agriculture and rural areas vary by European region, but there are some common similarities. For women in agriculture, **the single biggest challenge is access to land**. In [GRASS CEILING](#), we looked at the three main legal frameworks governing land transfer in Europe. Despite different rules and parameters, the outcome for women was the same; they rarely inherit land. Social and cultural barriers are stronger than legal frameworks. When women do own land, their holdings are smaller. The size of the holding though means that women often lead on sustainable agriculture, because this type of farming can increase profits on small holdings.

For women in rural areas, there are a variety of barriers. In remote rural areas there is often **limited childcare** which restricts women's ability to participate in the labour market. When women try to establish rural enterprises, there is **limited access to micro finance** – a male model is presumed, where support is only given to businesses that plan to generate employment and have an export market.

How does GRASS CEILING seek to contribute to addressing some of these challenges?

GRASS CEILING's work has tried to address these issues at the micro, meso and macro level. At the micro level we have worked with farm and rural women innovators in our [living labs](#) across nine



European countries. We have facilitated peer to peer learning, provided training, learned from the innovators about their needs and facilitated meeting with relevant stakeholders. We have also highlighted that **women tend to organise social enterprises in remote areas where there is weak community infrastructure**. They organise community cafes, libraries and childcare.

At the meso level, we have gathered data from all nine countries at the national level to **learn from best practice**. We have analysed the national Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plans

2023-2027 to see how effectively they have taken account of women, and we have done the same for Rural Development Programmes (2014-2020).

At the macro level, we have analysed how effectively the European Union has integrated rural and farm women into their policies. We have also **analysed the legal frameworks governing land transfer** across Europe. We established a **European Policy Forum** for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas where we feed back our policy recommendations to EU policy makers.



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

Europe's key achievement on gender equality was on **equal pay for equal work**. This was a groundbreaking achievement. It came about because of legislation, or what feminists call hard law. What has been less effective are soft laws – gender mainstreaming for example, is encouraged

but it is not mandated. Europe has identified key issues essential to gender equality such as shared parental and care leave. However, it remains aspirational. Similarly, the **Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025** called for greater childcare in rural areas, but there is no obligation on Member States to make this happen. **The population is so sparse in these areas that the market will never provide childcare**, so we should look at supporting women's community social enterprises instead.



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?

I would like to see the European Commission make it an **obligation for Member States to address women's needs in the CAP Strategic Plans**. Now it is soft law, suggested but not enforced. I have been told by policy makers in Member States that if it is really to happen it needs to be regulated at the EU level. I would like to **see women's needs mainstreamed into the CAP policies**, at the moment women are dealt with on the fringes and then the 'mainstream' business of the CAP continues with no regard to women. I would really like to see strong measures around increasing the numbers of **new entrant women** into agriculture.

What developments are expected in the Gender Equality Strategy post-2025? And in the Roadmap for women's rights?

I think there needs to be a strong emphasis on **sharing parental responsibilities and elder care**. We need greater equality in these spheres. I would also like to see agriculture receive the same recognition as STEM. Agriculture is a more unequal occupation than science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It would be good to see an agricultural focus, and a call for greater representation of women in farming organisations. The difficulty is that while the Gender Equality Strategy is far-reaching and a positive document, it does not carry any authority. It is aspirational. **We need regulations or legislations that will really advance equality** for women in rural areas and in agriculture.

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