EUROPEAN POLICY FORUM

FOR WOMEN-LED INNOVATION IN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AREAS

Session on public policy initiatives supporting rural women and farmers

On 24 March 2025, over 110 participants convened online for the **new session** of the **European Policy Forum** on women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas. The event focused on how public policies can better support rural women and women farmers across Europe, in particular, EU Funds. The session showcased national good practices and encouraged open discussions about how to build stronger and more inclusive public support mechanisms for the post-2027 programming period.

This online event was organised by **AEIDL** (the European Association for Innovation in Local Development) in the framework of the Horizon Europe project GRASS CEILING (Gender Equality in Rural and Agricultural Innovation Systems). It aims to empower rural women and increase the number of socio-ecological innovations led by women in agriculture, the rural economy and rural communities.

In particular, this session was organised around the publication of the Vision for Agriculture and Food and the Roadmap for Women's Rights.

ORGANISER: aeidl

Work Package Leader on Transition through policy recommendations and tools

24 MARCH 2025

ONLINE

110 PARTICIPANTS

(EU institutions; public authorities at national and regional level; researchers; advisors and NGOs)

27 COUNTRIES

Agenda, presentations and recordings here

If you see this icon, click to see the presentation

If you see this icon, click to see the video

Know more about the European Policy Forum on Women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas here.

Do you want to be part? Contact Blanca Casares (bca@aeidl.eu) and sign up here.

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GRASS CEILING project: findings and lessons learned

Professor Sally Shortall

South East Technological University (SETU) – Project coordinator

Charlene Lambert

Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP)

Sally Shortall, GRASS CEILING's coordinator, and Charlene Lambert from the Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP), presented recent findings from the project.

Sally highlighted the transformative, multi-actor initiative aimed at enhancing rural women-led socio-ecological innovation across nine Living Labs (LLs).

Through a unique living lab approach, the project engages women and men innovators, stakeholders, and policymakers to co-produce solutions that challenge gender norms and promote inclusive rural development.

Sally Shortall

Sally explained that the GRASS CEILING project has identified critical insights into gender dynamics in rural innovation across the EU. It revealed significant data gaps and the influence of diverse gender regimes across Member States. New data collection efforts have enhanced understanding of both male and female entrepreneurs, complemented by the training of 72 innovators across nine countries. This has deepened knowledge of women's innovation pathways and their potential. Benchmarking of policy documents and legal frameworks further highlighted whether gender considerations are mainstreamed or marginalised. Notably, women's approaches to innovation differ—often smaller in scale but crucial for rural and remote areas, with a strong ecological focus driven by profit.

Key findings underscore the distinct innovation styles of women, their ecological and profit-oriented motivations, and the systemic barriers they face, such as limited access to land, finance support for entrepreneurial activities, and supportive infrastructure.

GRASS CEILING advocates for rethinking policy frameworks, ensuring gender mainstreaming in EU agricultural and rural policies, ultimately calling for structural changes to achieve genuine gender equality in rural innovation ecosystems.

Then, **Charlene Lambert** outlined key findings from a comprehensive gender benchmarking study across EU and national agricultural and rural policies. Analysing four major EU policies (i. the Common Agricultural Policy; ii. the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas; iii. the Farm to Fork Strategy; and iv. the European Green Deal) and 36 national counterparts from the nine countries of the project LLs, the research revealed significant gaps in recognising and addressing gender. While policy documents often mention gender, they lack concrete strategies, measurable goals, or dedicated budgets for women's support in rural areas. The presentation stressed the urgent need for a coordinated EU-level strategy and a cross-sectoral task force to mainstream gender considerations and support women farmers and entrepreneurs.

Without such systemic change, rural depopulation, productivity decline, and gender imbalance are likely to worsen.

Charlene Lambert

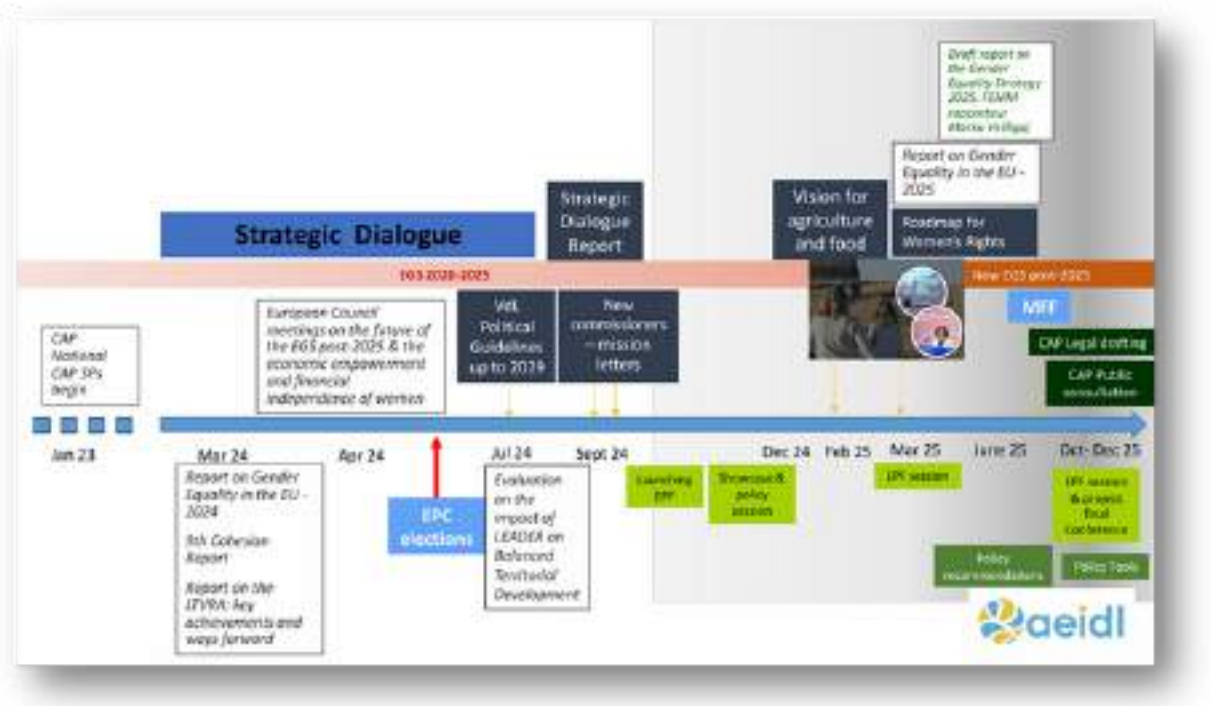
The European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas

Blanca Casares

Policy expert and project manager, European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)

Blanca Casares (AEIDL), presented the online European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas as well as the policy work developed so far, coordinated by AEIDL, with the aim of co-creating policy recommendations and tools that enhance the role of women in the sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas. This work targets three key objectives: (a) collaborating with policymakers, women innovators, and ecosystem stakeholders to address gender bias in policies and governance frameworks; (b) developing tailored innovation-support tools to overcome gender-specific barriers; and (c) creating practical policy instruments to help decision-makers and trainers identify, support, and scale women-led, user-centred innovation initiatives.

After introducing the Forum's objectives and activities, Blanca further illuminating the EU's political landscape and its ongoing commitment to gender equality and women's rights.



Blanca concluded by highlighting the opportunities to strengthen innovation ecosystems for women through strategic alignment and policy development. She pointed to the importance of defining a clear vision and roadmap, while capitalizing on the upcoming post-2027 national programming for key EU funding instruments, including the ESF, ERDF, EARDF, EAGF, and EMFAF. Within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), she noted the possibility to revise strategic plans—up to twice annually—and to reconfigure CAP interventions for greater gender inclusivity. The integration of the post-2025 European Gender Strategy into national policies was also identified as a key opportunity. Finally, she underscored the need to connect these initiatives with broader national and regional efforts tackling challenges such as brain drain, rural depopulation, just transition, smart rural strategies, and generational renewal, while embedding gender perspectives into upcoming national social-climate plans.

Good national practices in the use of European funds for the support of women in agriculture and rural life

An important segment of the session was dedicated to exploring effective national approaches to the use of European funds. In particular, four speakers presented national practices demonstrating how these funds have been effectively used to support women in agriculture and rural life. They illustrated how targeted measures within EU funding instruments—such as the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Social Fund (ESF), and others—have successfully advanced gender equality, improved women's access to resources, and foster entrepreneurship in rural areas. These examples demonstrated the importance of strategic planning, gender-sensitive budgeting, and the integration of women's perspectives in programme design and implementation.

Key takeaways: a closer look at the national practices presented by our speakers

Gender Equality in Spain's CAP Strategic Plan

Isabel Aguilar Pastor from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food presented a comprehensive overview of gender inequality in rural areas and the agricultural sector, based on recent data and policy developments in Spain. Key issues highlighted in relation to spanish farm structure include:

- Disparities in farm ownership and management: only 29.92% of farm managers are women, and their farms are generally smaller (17.9 ha vs. 29.4 ha for men) and less profitable (37% below national average).
- Lower access to aid: women receive 37.40% of direct CAP aid beneficiaries and get 37.91% less on average than men (2022 Spanish Paying Agency data; FEGA).
- Less representation in decision – making positions in cooperatives.

- Structural challenges: rural women face compounded difficulties including inequiality in access to jobs and poor service availability.

The presentation emphasised the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, which introduces new opportunities to enhance gender equality through:

- EAGF interventions: increased support for young women entering farming (up to 15% more in supplementary payments).
- EAFRD interventions that include:
  - Specific eligibility conditions for women
  - Differentiated aid amounts and intensities

Although no Managing Authority has fully designed gender-specific interventions, 35 out of 45 interventions incorporate gender-sensitive measures, such as requiring gender parity in LEADER group decisión – making bodies, or prioritsing investments in favor of women. Some regions, like Andalucia, have taken further steps, such as launching a €15M specific call for young women's inclusion in agriculture.

Question & Answer round

Question: Regarding the Spanish eligibility criteria for producing a Gender Plan, could you confirm whether it is required at the individual farm claimant level — meaning that anyone applying for government support must produce a Gender Plan — and if so, is there a provided template? If it is not required at the individual farm level, at what level is it required.

Answer: In Spain, the requirement to produce a Gender Plan under the CAP Strategic Plan is not at the individual farm claimant level. Individual farmers applying for government support are not required to produce their own Gender Plan. The CAP Strategic Plans (2023-2027) prioritise gender equality, including the increased participation of women in farming and rural areas. Member States are required to assess the position of women in agriculture, forestry, and rural areas, and address the challenges they face, as part of their strategic plans.

Question: What are some examples of eligibility criteria in the Spanish CAP strategic plan that favour women? How can these positive discrimination criteria be established?

Answer: Examples of positive discrimination criteria in Spain's CAP Strategic Plan include granting women 15% more aid for young farmers, and female applicants can obtain additional points in the selection process and also benefit from higher subsidy rates, with slightly higher aid intensities or additional payments available for certain rural development measures.

Question: How is the amount of funding allocated to women under Spain's Strategic Plan tracked and reported?

Answer: The amount of funding from Spain's Strategic Plan specifically allocated to women will ultimately be reported through the mandatory Evaluation Plans required of all Member States, using performance. Additionally, the Annual Performance Report (APR) is expected to provide information relevant to gender budgeting. However, in Spain's case, calculating this amount is particularly complex due to the structure of the EARDF programming and the involvement of 17 autonomous community authorities, each responsible for implementing parts of the plan.

In addition to the Evaluation plan, the Regulation (EU) 2022/1475, specifically Annex IV of the information concerning the beneficiaries, requires to provide this information. Field B020 contains the gender of the beneficiary with specific instructions in case the beneficiary is a legal entity. This information is collected and sent by the Paying Agencies Coordination Body (FEGA).

Spanish programme Rural Women's Challenge and the use of the European Social Fund

Ana Lite Mateo, representing the Institute of Women under Spain's Ministry of Equality, discussed the Rural Women's Challenge programme (Desafío Mujer Rural), an initiative aimed at fostering female entrepreneurship in rural areas, supported by the European Social Fund.

The presentation highlighted the Desafío Mujer Rural initiative, an initiative that facilitates access to advice, mentoring, training, and information resources to help women start and sustain businesses.

A key feature of the initiative is the creation of a vibrant community of rural women entrepreneurs, fostering mutual support while amplifying the visibility of female role models to inspire others. The programme directly addresses challenges such as limited access to basic services, persistent gender stereotypes, ageing and masculinised populations, disproportionate care responsibilities, and scarce job opportunities. Aimed at both current and aspiring female entrepreneurs operating in or targeting rural settings, the initiative focuses on five main areas of action: (1) Advice & Support, having already assisted over 4,800 women and 209 organisations with tailored guidance; (2) Training & Monitoring, offering specialised courses and one-on-one mentoring through an online platform; (3) Information & Resources, with centralised tools for regulations, business planning, and funding; (4) Visibility & Recognition, highlighting success stories via media and digital channels; and (5) Networking Opportunities, which have included more than 21 group events involving over 500 participants.

To date, the Desafío Mujer Rural initiative has made a significant impact, supporting over 800 rural female-led enterprises and enrolling more than 1,760 women in training programmes, with a total of 3,980 training hours delivered. The initiative has also achieved broad outreach, with over 255,000 website visits and a growing online community of more than 5,000 social media followers. Looking ahead, the programme aims to further strengthen its impact by enhancing training to align with emerging job opportunities, improving access to financing, expanding entrepreneurial skills and resources, and forging new partnerships with institutions to amplify its reach and effectiveness.

Mentorship programmes for rural women and/or Women's Farmer Capital Investment Scheme in Ireland

James Claffey from the Irish CAP Network provided an in-depth explanation of Ireland's mentorship programmes. He started his presentation by describing the key initiatives and challenges related to gender equality in Irish agriculture. Highlighting data from the CSO Farm Structure Survey 2023, James noted that only 13% of farm holders in Ireland are women, pointing to barriers such as restricted land ownership, limited access to finance, and entrenched cultural norms. Despite women's longstanding yet often overlooked contributions to agriculture, structural inequalities persist.

He introduced CAP Network Ireland as a national body dedicated to promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development, managed collaboratively by Irish Rural Link, Munster Technological University, and ERINN Innovation, with a focus on research, innovation, communications, and implementation.

The presentation included the efforts under the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 to support and empower women in the sector. In particular, Women's Farmer Capital Investment Scheme, highlighting key initiatives such as:

- ACORNS (Accelerating the Creation of Rural Nascent Start-ups) supports early-stage rural female entrepreneurs. It offers mentorship, networking, and business development support. Fully government-funded, showing high impact: €4 million combined turnover from recent participants, 133 jobs created.
- Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

(TAMS 3) - Women Farmers' Capital Investment Scheme (WFCIS). Launched in 2023 under the CAP Strategic Plan, it offers 60% grants up to €90,000 (€160,000 for partnerships). It supports over 400 types of investments with focus on tech, productivity, and sustainability. To date, 1,338 applications received; €2.77M paid to 198 applicants.

In conclusion, James underscored several key measures necessary to promote gender equality in Irish agriculture. He emphasised the importance of inclusive investment schemes that make funding accessible to all farmers while offering targeted support for women in a way that fosters unity rather than division. Ensuring consistent and secure funding across programming periods was highlighted as crucial for building confidence and long-term planning in the sector. Land ownership reform was identified as a priority to dismantle legal and cultural barriers that limit women's rights to own and inherit farmland. To further support change, the need for cultural and social initiatives was stressed—specifically, awareness campaigns to challenge traditional gender roles and encourage broader female participation. Strengthening gender-disaggregated data collection was also recommended to monitor progress and guide future policy. Finally, the importance of flexible support programmes, including access to childcare and adaptable training schedules, was emphasised to better accommodate the varied roles of women in farming communities.

Question & Answer round

Question: Do you support innovative female entrepreneurship is sectors beyond agri-food and forestry? e.g. care, health, education, tourim, culture, etc?

Answer: The ACORNS programme has participants covering many different sectors. It is vital that we promote diverse sectors within the rural economy.

Question: Do you have examples of particularly successful awareness campaigns, especially those relevant to rural development or gender equality?

Answer: We run a campaign every year as part of International Women's day in March. We have produced a video series and a dedicated women in agriculture booklet. My colleague Dr. Maura Farrell led both initiatives. https://nationalruralnetwork.ie/farm-viability/storyboards/

Women in Agriculture Taskforce in Scotland

Fiona Leslie (Scottish Government) described the policy journey that led in 2019 to the creation of Scotland's Women in Agriculture (WiA) Taskforce and presented its current development programme.

Originating from the 2016–2017 research on the role of women in farming, the policy journey has included the formation of a ministerial taskforce, the publication of a 2019 report with 24 key recommendations, and the launch of the Women in Agriculture Development Programme (WiADP), funded at £600,000 annually.

The programme supports women through training courses such as "Be Your Best Self," leadership development, practical funding support, and board training for agricultural organisations. In addition, it partners with platforms like Skillshub Scotland to expand skills and career development opportunities. In 2024, a draft Theory of Change was developed to guide programme outcomes, and a new Farm Household Survey is underway to provide deeper insights into socio-demographic trends, wellbeing, and child poverty in farming households.

Looking ahead, the Scottish Government plans to launch a gender strategy for agriculture in 2025, aiming to embed gender equality into the wider Agricultural Reform Programme and ensure a fairer, more inclusive future for women in Scottish agriculture.

Voices of experience: round-table perspectives

How to systematise public support to women and opportunities to favour innovation ecosystem for women?

A high-level round-table discussion, moderated by Blanca Casares (AEIDL), brought together high-level speakers to look at how public support can be systematised to support women in farming and rural areas.

Elena Schubert (European Commission – DG AGRI) highlighted the European Commission's efforts to enhance women's participation in agriculture through initiatives like the Vision and the Roadmap, the forthcoming Women in Farming Platfom, and the Generational Renewal Strategy, emphasising that greater gender inclusion can boost competitiveness and GDP while underscoring the need for improved gender tracking in the EU budget. **Sally Shortall** (GRASS CEILING coordinator) emphasised the importance of tracking funding for women, increasing female representation in STEM and corporate boards, challenging persistent stereotypes, and leveraging regulations like parental leave. Maria Nikolopoulou (European Economic and Social Committee) highlighted that regulatory measures like work-life balance and paid parental leave are crucial for supporting women and she highlighted initiatives like the EU Organic Awards that "promote women's success stories."

Maura Farrell (FLIARA project) called for gender equality to be "a permanent and structured part of public policy," with dedicated funding, monitoring, independent audit and visibility for women's contributions. **Sari Rautio** (European Committee of the Regions) underlined that "women are underrepresented in rural decision-making, and that must change," and advocated for mentoring, better data, networking, local-level policies and positive discrimination measures, childcare support and other community-based care programmes. "The CoR Opinion on post-2027 LEADER also calls for greater involvement of women in decision-making public. Women are less involved in LAGs decision making for instance".

Louise Méhauden (EU4Advice Horizon project) noted that "short food supply chains, and alternative food networks in general, appear as a solution for many women, to make their business economically sustainable and find advice and support" but emphasised the need for "gender disaggregated data and accurate indicators to better analyse these trends". She remarked that the particularities of women in value supply chains should be taken into consideration, as well as the way AKIS address gender issues. **Mar Delgado** (University of Córdoba) shared insights from the MOVING and DESIRA projects, revealing that women's needs in farming and rural areas are still poorly understood. She reflected on the usefulness of certain online platforms because some major challenges for women farmers are the lack of time, digital skills, and financing, sometimes having to return the funding. **Laura Kaun** (European Women's Lobby) concluded by stressing the importance of the equality framework including gender representation, care policies, and gender budgeting.

Cristina Guarda (Member of the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development) also contributed to this roundtable via video message, echoing the shared view across the panel. Guarda called for gender equality to be set as a specific objective in the next CAP reform, with measurable targets, mandatory tasks to report about it, stronger coordination across EU funds, and gender-disaggregated data.

In closing the event Blanca Casares Guillén (AEIDL) thanked the audience for their active participation and engagement. She encouraged attendees to **join the Rural Pact Community Group on Women in Rural Areas**, highlighting it as a valuable platform for continued dialogue and collaboration. She also reminded everyone to make full use of the European Policy Forum **materials**, which offer key insights, resources, and policy developments to support gender equality and women's empowerment in rural contexts across Europe.