



REGIONAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION'S ANNUAL CONFERENCE SPECIAL SESSION

Exploring Gender Equality in Policy: Regional and Rural Perspectives

The **Regional Studies Association's Annual Conference 2025** was held in partnership with the School of Economics and Management at the University of Porto, Portugal.

Taking place over four days, the conference **focused on the theme *Navigating Regional Transformation*** and brought together academics and policymakers from around the world. Participants exchanged news, insights, and research findings across the fields of regional studies and science, regional and economic development, policy, and planning.

The **Special Session on Exploring Gender Equality in Policy Regional and Rural Perspectives (SS13)** was organised by **AEIDL** (European Association for Innovation in Local Development) as part of the **GRASS CEILING Horizon Europe project**, funded by the European Union under Grant Agreement No. 101083408. It brought together a diverse group of contributors, including representatives from the [Joint Research Centre](#) of the European Commission, [ISEG Research at the University of Lisbon](#), the [Horizon Europe project GEPINC](#), the [University Valladolid](#), [Jagiellonian University's Institute of Geography and Spatial Management](#), the [Polytechnic Institute of Viseu](#), and the [Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences](#) and the [Centre for Research and Intervention in Education at the University of Porto](#).

ORGANISER:



[AEIDL](#) (European Association for Innovation in Local Development) in the frame of [GRASS CEILING](#) Horizon Europe project (funded by the European Union under GA no. 101083408)

CONGRESS: [2025 RSA Annual Conference](#). *Navigating Regional Transformation*



SESSION: SS13 - [Exploring Gender Equality in Policy: Regional and Rural Perspectives](#)



Faculty of Economics (FEP), University of Porto (Portugal) - Room: 141



9 MAY 2025 (10.30 AM -12.00 PM)

CONTRIBUTORS: Joint Research Centre (European Commission); ISEG Research University of Lisbon; Horizon project GEPINC; University of Valladolid; Jagiellonian University. Institute of Geography and Spatial Management; Polytechnic Institute of Viseu; and Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences - Centre for Research and Intervention in Education of University of Porto.



Agenda and presentations [here](#)



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The **collaboration reflected a strong interdisciplinary commitment to advancing innovation and research in local development across Europe.**

The **session aimed to create a space for reflection on the needs, possibilities, and opportunities for mainstreaming gender in European regional policies.** It also sought to inspire a rethinking of monitoring systems related to (a) progress in gender equality, (b) the development of policies and initiatives that prioritised women's needs for public support, and (c) the examination of the impact of policy changes. This **special session was framed within a critical policy development context,** taking into account the Long-Term Vision for rural areas with targets set for 2040, the recommendations from the Strategic Dialogue on Agriculture, the Vision for Agriculture and Food, the Roadmap for women's rights, and the new Multiannual Financial Framework (2027–2034), including strategic areas such as cohesion and agriculture, among others.

The **discussion examined the extent to which gender mainstreaming had been integrated into European regional policies and explored the unique challenges faced by women in these regions.** It highlighted disparities in access to resources, public services, training opportunities, representation, and the broader impact of policies on women's economic and social well-being. The session promoted **dialogue among a range of stakeholders, focusing on proposals and solutions for improving the policy cycle.** Panelists and participants reflected on **key challenges related to effectively monitoring women's, priorities and assessing policy impact.** Notable issues identified included: (i) a lack of gender-disaggregated data; (ii) limited comparative studies on rural women across Europe; and (iii) the absence of mechanisms and tools to support the identification and replication of best practices, which hinders the scaling up of successful initiatives.

The Horizon Europe project **GRASS CEILING** (*Gender Equality in Rural and Agricultural Innovation Systems*) is a multi-actor three-year project, aiming to empower rural women and increase the number of socio-ecological innovations led by women in agriculture, the rural economy and rural communities. The project is centered around nine multi-actor **Living Labs**, which include closed coaching sessions for women and collaborative sessions with key AKIS actors, facilitated by two co-leads—a woman innovator and an academic.

**KNOW OUR
LIVING LABS**



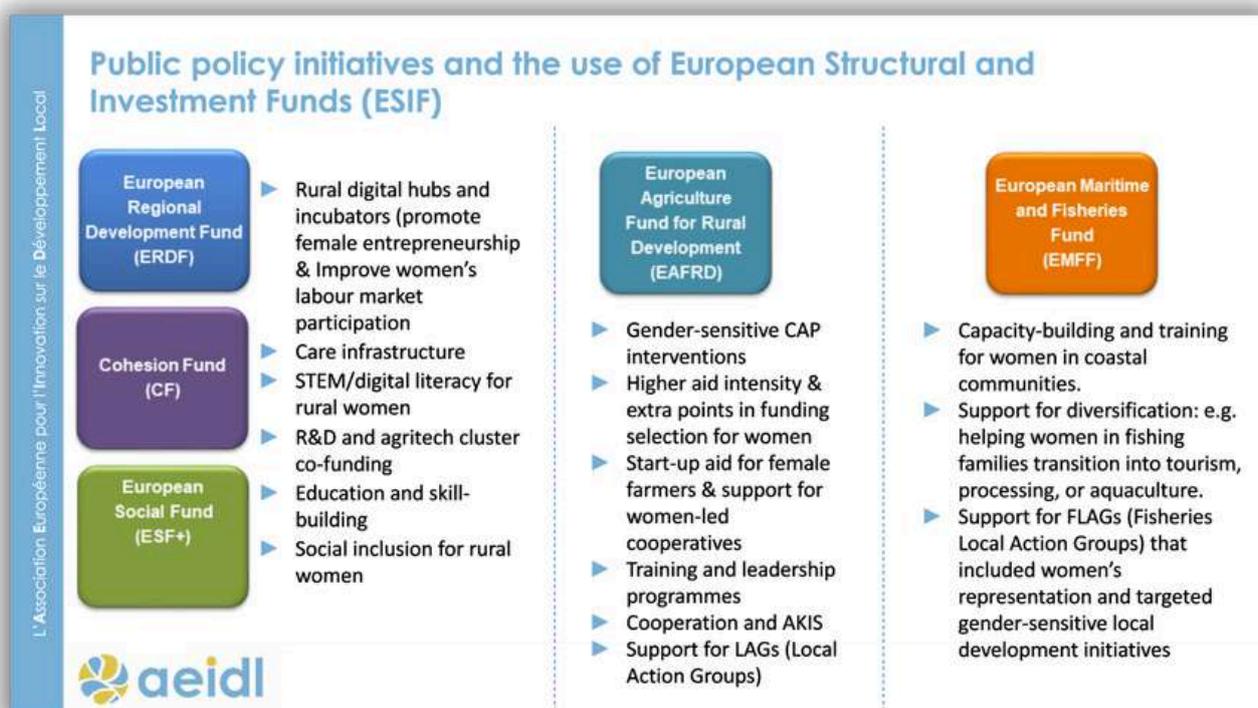
Exploring Special Session Talks

The session shed light on a crucial yet often overlooked dimension of regional policy — **the role of women in development and innovation**.

As we know, rural areas and regions across Europe face complex challenges from demographic decline and limited infrastructure. Within this, women play a pivotal role, not only as farmers and entrepreneurs but also as community leaders, caregivers, and changemakers.

Blanca Casares Guillén (AEIDL) opened the session by introducing the [European Policy Forum](#) for women-led innovation, highlighting how EU Funds and policy instruments can be used to advance gender equality.

Fellow AEIDL representative **Raquel Pastor Carretero** explored gender integration in Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), focusing on LEADER and the function of Local Action Groups in shaping inclusive strategies.



The session featured a range of insights from European researchers and institutions. **Marie Lalanne** (Joint Research Centre, European Commission) provided descriptive statistical insights from Horizon-funded projects, offering a mapping of women's participation and roles in agriculture and rural areas across Europe. **Elsa Fontainha** and **Tanya Vianna de Araújo** (ISEG, University of Lisbon) presented findings on rural-urban gender disparities from the GEPINC project. **Margarita Rico** (University of Valladolid) reported on women's innovation in Spanish agriculture through the GRASS CEILING Living Lab.

Further contributions included **Daria Zozulia's** (Jagiellonian University) exploration of women's environmental activism in Poland around river protection, **Cristina Amaro da Costa's** (Polytechnic Institute of Viseu) work on biocultural heritage among women farmers, and a study by **Sofia Marques da Silva** and **Sara Faria** (University of Porto) on young women returning to rural regions after higher education.

Together, these presentations explored how gender equality is not just a matter of rights, but a driver of innovation, territorial resilience and social justice.



With insights from researchers and practitioners across Europe, it is clear that **mainstreaming gender in EU regional and rural policies** requires a **place-based, locally grounded approach**. A major obstacle remains the **limited availability of gender-disaggregated data** and the **lack of scalable tools** to replicate successful initiatives across regions. Strengthening **data collection, monitoring systems, and gender-sensitive indicators** is essential to inform and evaluate policies effectively at sub-national levels.

Urban/rural differences exist in public attitudes toward gender equality (e.g., in politics, business, family). These attitudes **impact the success of equality policies**. Tailored support for women, as an heterogeneous group, particularly in agriculture and rural development, is necessary to address **resource, service, and representation disparities**. Women continue to face **higher unemployment and precarious work**, despite achieving higher levels of tertiary education.

Current **agricultural, environmental, and regional policies often neglect gender perspectives**, with sparse references to gender equality in spatial strategies. Calls for more **inclusive, gender-sensitive, and territorially equitable policies** are growing, especially in response to the critical roles women play in **environmental stewardship** and **community resilience**. Public policy and **EU funding instruments (e.g., CAP, ESF, ERDF, EMFAF) must better integrate gender** to support sustainable transformation. Several national plans have already been effectively developed

using these funds. To enhance their impact, it is crucial to **promote the exchange of best practices among managing authorities and provide targeted training for implementation at the governmental level**. **Establishing gender-responsive budgeting targets** would be a key step toward ensuring the integration of gender perspectives in public spending.

Women in rural and peripheral areas are key agents of innovation and sustainability, leading initiatives in wellness, education, culture, and agroecology. Their return to home regions is frequently driven by **place attachment, emotional geographies, and a desire to invest in meaningful, locally rooted projects**. However, meaningful reintegration depends on **supportive infrastructure, opportunities, and social recognition**.

Mechanisms like **LEADER and Local Action Groups (LAGs)** have the potential to advance gender mainstreaming through **bottom-up and participatory governance**, though their effectiveness varies widely. **Collaborative approaches**, such as Living Labs, have shown promise in involving diverse stakeholders and co-creating practical and inclusive innovations.

Finally, while **women-led activism and local engagement** have had tangible impacts—raising awareness, slowing harmful developments, and building community cohesion—gender-focused rural innovation still receives limited support and visibility in EU research funding and via ESIF or national instruments implying a considerable scope to strengthen and enhance these policies.

Programme and presentation materials

 If you see this icon, click to see the presentation

TIMING	AGENDA ITEM	PANELISTS
10.30 – 10.35	Welcome and introduction	Blanca Casares – AEIDL
10.35 – 10.45	The European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas: public policy initiatives and the use of EU Funds 	Blanca Casares – AEIDL
10.45 – 10.55	Integrating gender equality into Community-Led Local Development (CLLD): Insights from LEADER and Local Action Groups 	Raquel Pastor Carretero – AEIDL
10.55 – 11.05	Mapping women in agriculture and rural areas: descriptive statistics from Horizon-funded projects 	Marie Lalanne – Joint Research Centre, European Commission
11.05 – 11.15	Gender inequality in rural and urban areas across Europe 	Elsa Fontainha and Tanya Vianna de Araújo – ISEG Research University of Lisbon. Horizon project GEPINC
11.15 – 11.25	Women and innovation in the Spanish agricultural sector: Key findings from the European GRASS CEILING Project 	Margarita Rico – PhD. University of Valladolid (Spain)
11.25 – 11.35	Women’s advocacy for river protection in Poland 	Daria Zozulia – Jagiellonian University. Institute of Geography and Spatial Management
11.35 – 11.45	Agricultural landscapes and biocultural memories through generations of innovative woman farmers 	Cristina Amaro da Costa – Polytechnic Institute of Viseu
11.45 – 11.55	Young women returning to rural and low-density regions after higher education: ecologies of investment and regional development 	Sofia Marques da Silva & Sara Faria – Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences; Centre for Research and Intervention in Education – University of Porto
11.55 – 12.00	Closing	Blanca Casares – AEIDL

