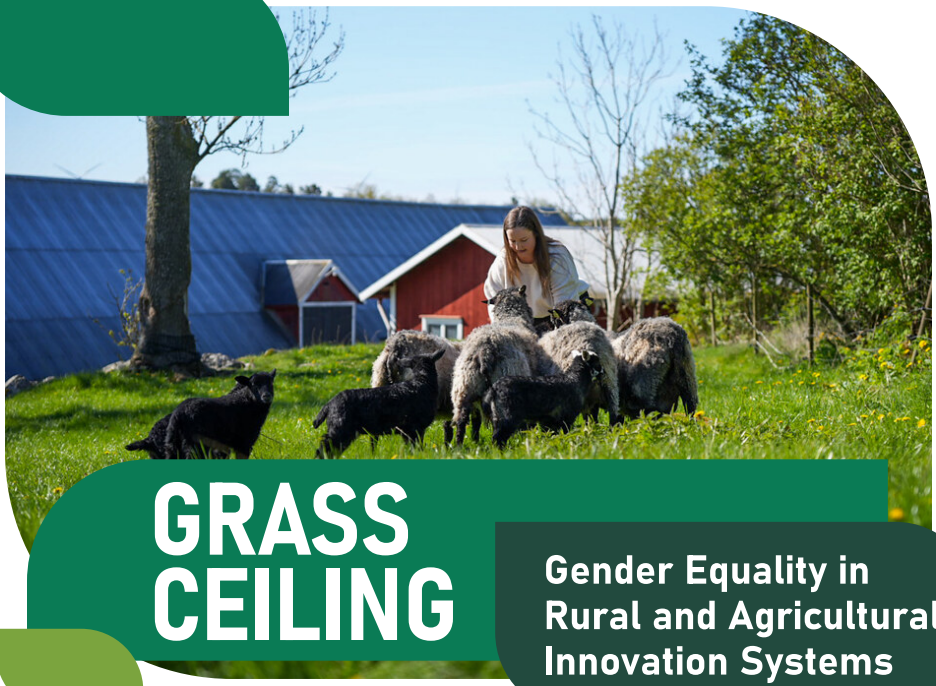
GRASS CEILING



GRASS CEILING

Gender Equality in Rural and Agricultural Innovation Systems

Coordinator's Letter

By Sally Shortall

The GRASS CEILING broken by women innovators

The European Union's commitment to gender equality, established in the Treaty of Rome (1957), has been reinforced through decades of policies and initiatives. Yet inequalities persist, particularly in agriculture and rural development. Women continue to face limited access to land, finance, training, and decision-making, while bearing most unpaid care responsibilities; barriers that restrict their opportunities and slow Europe's socio-ecological transition.

GRASS CEILING was conceived to respond to this gap. Funded under the Horizon Europe programme, the project set out to strengthen the position of women in agriculture and rural innovation by making gender equality an integral part of rural policy and practice. Our vision was twofold: to create environments where women could drive socio-ecological transitions through innovation, and to generate evidence and tools that help policymakers and stakeholders make rural systems more inclusive, resilient, and gender-responsive.

Since its launch in early 2023, GRASS CEILING has brought together researchers, practitioners, and, most importantly, rural women innovators from across Europe through our network of Living Labs. These participatory spaces became the beating heart of the project, sites of learning, experimentation, and empowerment. Across the eight national Living Labs, women came together to exchange experiences, test ideas, and co-create pathways for sustainable rural development. The results have been both inspiring and transformative.

Through this process, participants strengthened their technical and entrepreneurial capacities while building confidence, recognition, and solidarity. They described the Labs as transformative environments, trusted spaces where they could articulate challenges, structure ideas, and co-create solutions. They valued the opportunity to share experiences, exchange knowledge, and develop a sense of community that became a catalyst for action. Many expressed the wish to sustain and expand these networks, recognising that collaboration and mutual support are the roots of lasting change.

The lessons from GRASS CEILING extend far beyond the project itself. They show that innovation in rural areas is not only about technology or productivity, but about people, social capital, collective resilience, and a shared sense of belonging. When women are given recognition, resources, and the right environment, they become powerful agents of transformation, leading initiatives in sustainable agriculture, biodiversity preservation, renewable energy, and circular economies.

As we bring GRASS CEILING to a close, our work continues to resonate with the future. The knowledge, networks, and policy insights generated through this project will serve as stepping stones toward the International Year of the Woman Farmer in 2026, declared by the FAO **(Food & Agriculture Organization of the United Nations)**. This global milestone provides a unique opportunity to amplify the voices of women who are already shaping the future of Europe's rural areas, and to ensure that gender equality remains at the core of the green and digital transitions.

The women of GRASS CEILING are not only breaking the "grass ceiling"; they are cultivating new ground for future generations to grow, lead, and thrive. As we look ahead, our task is to sustain their momentum, nurture their in-novations, and keep building an inclusive and sustainable rural future for women, for com-munities, and for Europe as a whole.

Professor Sally Shortall
GRASS CEILING Project Coordinator

Scientific Results

Scientific research lies at the core of GRASS CEILING's mission. It provides the evidence base needed to shape more inclusive, effective, and equitable agricultural and rural development policies. Understanding gender dynamics in these sectors is essential to ensure that women's contributions, needs, and innovation potential are fully recognised in policymaking and practice.

GRASS CEILING has united an interdisciplinary team of experienced and emerging researchers from across Europe — spanning sociology, rural studies, geography, economics, and innovation studies. Together, they have advanced the scientific debate on gender equality and women-led innovation in rural contexts, contributing to a growing body of knowledge that bridges social science and practice.

From the beginning, the project committed to producing high-quality, peer-reviewed outputs. Through **participatory action research**, knowledge has been co-created with women innovators, practitioners, and policymakers within the Living Labs, ensuring that scientific findings are grounded in real experiences and are locally relevant.

Comparative analyses, policy reviews, and cross-country research have strengthened the evidence base for integrating a **genuine gender perspective** into rural policies and innovation systems. A strong commitment to **open science** underpins this effort — with research outputs made accessible through institutional repositories, OpenAIRE, and the project's online platforms and training resources.

By connecting research with practice, GRASS CEILING has not only expanded scientific understanding of gender and innovation but also supported the design of **more gender-responsive policy frameworks**, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable future for rural Europe.

Beyond Academia

In addition to peer-reviewed outputs and conference presentations, GRASS CEILING has also reached audiences beyond the scientific community. The project's results — and the stories of the women innovators behind them — have been featured in **non-scientific media outlets** across Europe, raising awareness of women's essential roles in agriculture and the socio-ecological transition.

29 Deliverables

13 Milestones

5 GRASS CEILING Events

20 Participations in external events

3 Articles published in scientific journals

Scientific Results >> Publications

EU Level

Shortall, S. (2025) 'Breaking the grass ceiling: Gender inequality in agriculture', Open Access Government, 47(1), pp. 430–431. doi:10.56367/oag-047-12106.

This publication highlights GRASS CEILING's comprehensive approach to advancing gender equality in agriculture and rural development through Living Labs, policy analysis, and research. It reveals how women-led innovation drives environmental sustainability, rural vitality, and socio-ecological transition.

Dabkiene, V. et al. (2025) 'From glass to grass ceiling: Addressing gender barriers in Agricultural Innovation', Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 212, p. 123957. doi:10.1016/j.techfore.2024.123957.

This study explores how gender norms shape innovation in Lithuanian agriculture, revealing both enduring barriers and emerging opportunities. It provides valuable guidance for policymakers seeking to promote equality and unleash the potential of women innovators in rural transformation.

GRASS CEILING (2025). Synthesis report presenting the experiences of rural women innovators across Living Labs.

Based on the insight into the specific women-led innovation co-created collectively in the Living Labs with the women innovators and through interactions with stakeholders, as well as the follow-up with individual women. Analysis and comparison of the specificity of women-led innovation in and across the nine Living Labs, identifying the drivers and hurdles they experienced experienced, as well as specific needs for support to optimise their performance and impact.

Shortall, S. and Meredith, D. (2024). The mirage of research and research expertise: Reflections on leading Horizon Europe bids. doi.org/10.1111/soru.12497

This article draws on experiences from the Horizon Europe projects GRASS CEILING and Safe-Habitus, exploring the challenges of multi-actor research and stakeholder collaboration. It offers strategies for coordination and engagement, reflects on the balance between research and funding priorities, and concludes with recommendations for future coordinators and a call for stronger mentoring and open dialogue.

GRASS CEILING (2023). Synthesis report on gender norms and barriers in (A)KIS.

Based on nine European case studies, this report identifies persistent gender norms shaping agricultural innovation systems. It highlights how women's creativity and community focus contrast with structural inequalities — and how targeted training, networking, and digital tools can foster more inclusive innovation ecosystems.

National Level

GRASS CEILING (2024, 2025). Practice abstracts.

Key datasets and indicators on women's agricultural and rural activities across nine European countries, alongside policies supporting women's empowerment. They include national summaries and a comparative EU-level analysis, providing valuable evidence to inform gender-responsive policymaking in rural development.

Further scientific publications will be released after the end of the project!

Living Labs

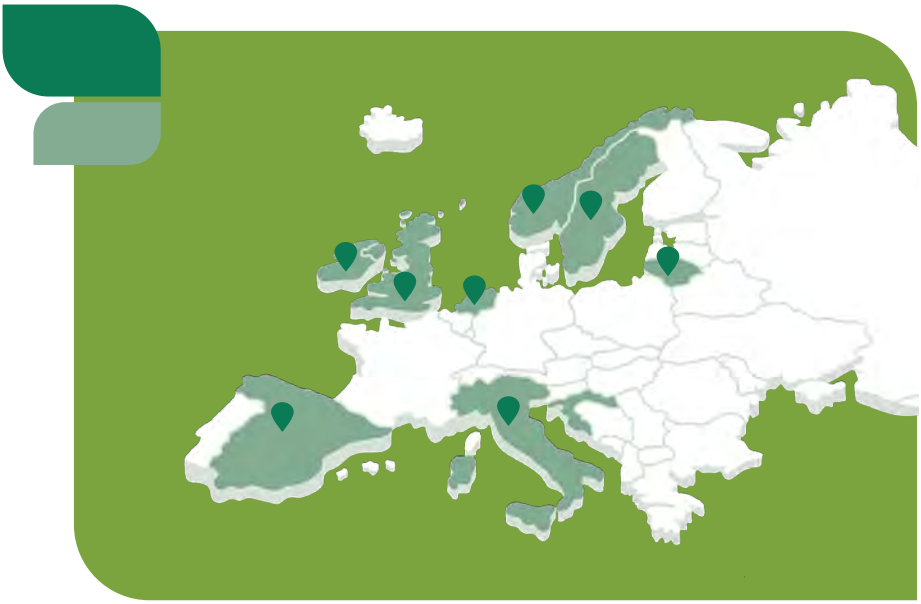
Results and learnings

The Living Labs are the beating heart of GRASS CEILING. Across nine European countries, these multi-actor spaces empowered women innovators to lead change in agriculture and rural areas, focusing on sustainable and socio-ecological practices.

The GRASS CEILING Living Labs brought together more than seventy rural women to explore and strengthen their capacity for innovation. Designed as participatory, women-centred spaces, the different Living Labs offered a mix of interactive group sessions, field visits, peer exchanges, and targeted stakeholder engagement. Some Labs also complemented these activities with individual mentoring, creating a blend of collective learning and personalised support that responded to the realities of rural women's lives.

Through hands-on workshops and iterative innovation exercises, participants clarified ideas, tested solutions, and advanced projects ranging from sustainable farming and local food production to social, cultural, and community-based initiatives.

The Living Labs documented progress through case studies and shared insights on the support women require to succeed. Outcomes not only strengthen women's capacities, but also inform policy and practice, ensuring that interventions in agriculture and rural development are inclusive, effective, and reflective of women's real contributions and needs.



Living Labs

Good Practices

>> Good practices identified by the Living Labs

1. Design flexible, participant-centred sessions that adapt to women's real needs and innovation stages.
2. Combine face-to-face meetings with hybrid formats to foster trust, peer learning, and continuity despite geographic dispersion.
3. Include ongoing mentoring and online communication channels to provide continuous support beyond formal sessions.
4. Involve diverse participants in age, experience, education, and farm type to enrich discussions and showcase different forms of leadership.
5. Integrate multi-actor stakeholder engagement, including public administrations, associations, cooperatives, and academics, to connect practice with policy.
6. Use hands-on activities, field visits, and practical training to link theoretical knowledge to actionable solutions.
7. Encourage reflection on innovation as economic, social, and environmental, highlighting women's contributions and strengths.
8. Promote network-building and cooperative approaches to enhance visibility, confidence, and collaborative problem-solving.
9. Ensure long-term sustainability by maintaining and expanding networks, supporting knowledge sharing and replication.
10. Address systemic barriers by highlighting the need for participatory policies, better rural services, digital access, and work-life balance support.

Croatia

Living Labs results and learnings

Launched in 2023, the Croatian Living Lab brought together eight inspiring women innovators from the Adriatic region — an area rich in natural beauty and tradition but challenged by depopulation and limited infrastructure. Over three years, they took part in design thinking training, built strong networks with rural stakeholders, and developed innovative ideas to strengthen their communities. Through shared learning and collaboration, these women enhanced their skills, confidence, and capacity to drive sustainable rural change.

Meet the innovators

Birgit Boljun Čujo
Olive farmer

Silvija Terlević
Cattle farmer

Vesna Jakić
Textile designer

Marijana Svetić
Food farmer and wood craft

Jasminka Grškovi
Teacher and wool craft

Ana Kovačić
Food farmer

Tatjana Klepo
Olive farmer

Ines Dundović
Food farmer

Activities

Over nine full-day meetings, including several meetings hosted directly within participants' local communities, the innovators engaged in practical workshops, peer exchanges, and discussions with policymakers and experts. These sessions provided valuable opportunities to strengthen business strategies, develop innovations, and build lasting networks.

The design thinking approach encouraged participants to explore new solutions to local challenges, while additional training sessions on financial literacy, agritourism, digital marketing, and mental health addressed real-world needs identified by the women themselves.

Beyond structured learning, the Living Lab created an environment of trust and shared experience. Informal gatherings and community-based events fostered a sense of belonging and collective purpose, enabling women to gain visibility and recognition within their local contexts. Interactions with stakeholders—from local authorities to national institutions—opened new pathways for collaboration, advocacy, and policy engagement.

As a result, the Living Lab not only enhanced participants' technical and entrepreneurial capacities but also positioned them as active contributors to Croatia's rural development and innovation landscape.

Key highlights

Empowerment & Connection

The Living Lab became a vibrant network of mutual learning and support, where rural women built confidence, shared experiences, and strengthened their entrepreneurial and leadership skills.

Policy Impact

Collaboration with stakeholders led to the inclusion of enhanced financial support for women farm managers in Croatia's CAP Strategic Plan—raising aid by 15% for renewable energy and agricultural investments.

Expanding Influence

Participants joined national decision-making platforms, including the Women in Rural Areas working group, and took part in a visit to the European Parliament, amplifying their voices at both national and EU levels.

Ireland

Living Labs results and learnings

Located in the vibrant south-east of Ireland, encompassing the counties of Waterford, Kilkenny and Wexford, the Irish Living Lab gathered six inspiring women entrepreneurs working at the crossroads of innovation, sustainability, and community development. The Lab explored their challenges and opportunities while fostering a space for learning, collaboration, and reflection. From experienced business owners to a young aspiring entrepreneur, the participants shared a commitment to driving positive change in their rural communities.

Meet the innovators

Karen & Natalie Keane
Chocolatiers

Catherine Kinsella
Dairy producer

Gina Ryan
Network marketing and microgreens

Gail Daniels
Cow's milk soap producer

Emer Lawrence
Vertical farming

Aileen Barron
Marketing

Activities

Over three years, the Irish Living Lab provided a structured yet supportive environment for women to exchange experiences, discuss barriers, and share strategies for advancing their innovations. Seven of the nine sessions were held in person—most on the South East Technological University (SETU) campus—offering a professional setting that encouraged focused dialogue and peer learning.

The sessions allowed participants to discuss topics such as access to finance, balancing entrepreneurship with caregiving, and the limitations of current funding models. The Lab also explored how definitions of innovation and success can better reflect women's approaches—often centred on sustainability, community impact, and circular economy principles rather than rapid scaling or export growth.

A standout moment came when an established entrepreneur sold her business to the youngest participant, illustrating the Lab's role in allowing women to collaborate and support each other. The final session brought participants together with national policymakers, ensuring that women's lived experiences inform future rural and innovation policies.

Throughout, the Irish Living Lab proved to be a trusted space for solidarity and empowerment – "where I found my tribe", as one participant described it.

Key highlights

Women only learning space

Participants valued the opportunity to share experiences and challenges in a trusted, supportive environment that nurtured confidence and mutual learning.

Policy engagement

Policy engagement: Direct interaction with national stakeholders allowed women to contribute meaningfully to discussions on gender-responsive rural policies and funding models.

Empowerment through connection

The Lab fostered collaboration between generations of innovators, reinforcing the importance of peer support and visibility in women's entrepreneurship.

Sweden

Living Labs results and learnings

The Swedish Living Lab took place in Jönköping County, a region known for its "traditional gender contract" and low ranking on national gender equality indexes. While men own four out of five farms, women are more active in forestry.
Against this backdrop, the Living Lab brought together seven women farmers and forest owners to explore how gender equality, entrepreneurship, and sustainability intersect in rural Sweden.

Meet the innovators

Ulrica Björnhag
Cattle farmer

Sandra & Josefin Levinsson
Enterpeneur

Emma Hartelius
Cattle farmer

Annika Palmér Werthén
Dairy farmer

Lisbeth Karltorp
Entrepeneur

Elin Skörde
Forester

Sara Lantz
Farmer

Activities

During the project, the Swedish Living Lab became a vibrant space for collaboration, reflection, and inspiration. All sessions were held in person, and each participant hosted a visit to her own farm or forest business — a key feature that built trust, visibility, and mutual learning. Through interactive workshops and discussions, participants explored how gender equality, entrepreneurship, and sustainability intersect in everyday rural life. The sessions encouraged women to analyse their challenges collectively, share business strategies, and reflect on broader societal issues such as ownership, financial independence, and care responsibilities.

Five sessions included stakeholder participation — from local authorities, research institutions, and gender equality experts — creating valuable dialogue on systemic barriers and new opportunities for support. These exchanges deepened awareness of gendered dynamics in rural economies and inspired both women and stakeholders to take action. The Lab culminated in a major national event for women in farming, forestry, and rural development, gathering over 100 participants, 15 stakeholder representatives, and the Swedish Prime Minister. This landmark event celebrated women's contributions to rural sustainability and called for stronger integration of gender equality in national agricultural and forestry strategies.

Key highlights

Empowerment through exchange

Women reported renewed energy and inspiration from sharing ideas and visiting each other's businesses.

National visibility

The final event brought women farmers and forest owners to the national spotlight, attended by high-level stakeholders including the Prime Minister.

Safe and open dialogue

A women-only environment encouraged honest discussion on gender, family life, and economic equality — free from hierarchy or competition.

Spain

Living Labs results and learnings

The Spanish Living Lab was implemented across depopulated rural areas of northern Spain—regions marked by ageing populations, limited services, and economic decline. It brought together eight women farmers and livestock breeders to strengthen their innovation capacity and visibility. The Lab focused on redefining how participants understood innovation, building confidence in their entrepreneurial identities, and connecting their experiences to broader policy frameworks for rural revitalisation and gender equality.

Meet the innovators

Lucía Velasco
Cattle farmer

Amada Salas
Winemaker

Marta Lorente
Pig farmer

Ana María Olmo
Food farmer and beekeper

Laura Polo
Chicken farmer

Pilar Monferrer
Food farmer

María José Velilla
Sheep farmer

Silvia González
Food farmer

Activities

Over three years, the Living Lab combined nine participatory sessions with mentoring, training, and networking activities designed around the women's real needs. Meetings alternated between face-to-face and online formats to overcome geographical distance and poor connectivity. Each session blended thematic discussions, peer exchange, and capacity-building on topics such as barriers and opportunities for women innovators or co-creation of strategies to achieve their objectives, both personal and professional. Field visits and open dialogues with stakeholders and researchers helped bridge the gap between grassroots experience and institutional decision-making.

A key feature was the collaborative approach: participants helped design the sessions and adapted the agenda to emerging priorities. This flexibility fostered trust and ownership of the process. Through collective reflection, the women began to see themselves as innovators—valuing their contributions not only economically, but also socially and environmentally. The Lab strengthened their commitment to cooperativism, mutual support, and community-led innovation as pathways to sustainability. Continuous communication through mentoring and a WhatsApp group provided everyday support and reinforced a sense of belonging to a shared network of change-makers.

Key highlights

Redefining innovation

Participants gained recognition of their work as socially and environmentally innovative, not only technological.

Collective empowerment

The Lab built confidence, solidarity, and cooperation among women facing similar rural challenges.

Policy connection

Regular exchanges with stakeholders fostered mutual understanding and influenced local and regional strategies for gender-sensitive rural development.

The Netherlands

Living Labs results and learnings

The Dutch Living Lab gathered eight rural women from across the Netherlands, reflecting the country's small size and dispersed agricultural landscapes. Most participants were active in farming and combined their entrepreneurial ambitions with off-farm work and care responsibilities. The **Living Lab** focused on understanding the hurdles women face in developing their projects, the types of support they need, and the changes that can enable women-led innovations to strengthen the future of rural areas.

Meet the innovators

Sonja van Uden
Entrepreneur

Lonieke de Ruiter
Entrepeneur

Irene Beukeveld
Dairy farmer

Dorieke Goodijk
Dairy farmer (camels)

Albertine Ekkels
Dairy farmer

Marloes van Schaik
Dairy farmer

Ida Besten
Dairy farmer

Petra Commijs
Cattle farmer

Activities

The Dutch Living Lab ran in person across multiple locations—including several participants' farms—creating an environment where women could work on their ideas within their own rural context. The programme followed the shared GRASS CEILING methodology but added tailored components such as storytelling, personal leadership development, and training on farm family dynamics, responding to the specific needs expressed by the group. Sessions guided participants through each phase of their innovation journey, from clarifying ideas to testing, planning, and implementation.

Between meetings, each woman received individual online mentoring to deepen learning, address personal hurdles, and keep projects moving. The participants also maintained regular contact via WhatsApp, sharing resources, offering encouragement, and celebrating milestones. This continuity of exchange helped women at different stages of their innovation journey learn from one another: those with more advanced plans provided insights and confidence to those just beginning, while early-stage innovators contributed fresh perspectives and questions that enriched group reflection. Over time, the Living Lab became a supportive, motivating space that blended practical guidance with peer solidarity.

Key highlights

Stepwise progress and shared growth

Women advanced through the innovation process at different paces, but a structured approach, combined with mutual support, boosted both project development and personal confidence as entrepreneurs.

Stakeholder sessions that opened doors

Invited experts—from ministries, banks, communications, personal leadership and farm family dynamics—offered valuable insights, though participants noted the need for more personalised business advice.

A strong, gender-aware peer network

Open discussions about gender norms, recognition, and rural expectations strengthened the group's solidarity and determination, reinforcing the importance of women-only spaces for learning and leadership.

Italy

Living Labs results and learnings

The Italian Living Lab was established in the Puglia region, within the hilly and rocky landscape of the Bio-Distretto delle Lame—a national park and UNESCO Global Geopark. Rooted in the principles of organic and sustainable development, the area embodies collaboration among farmers, social innovators, and cultural actors committed to reconnecting urban and rural spaces. The Living Lab supported eight women innovators from diverse professional and personal backgrounds, guiding them through a process of reflection, collaboration, and empowerment.

Meet the innovators

Miriam Del Re
Free range poultry farmer

Francesca Sardano
Social cooperativist worker

Annalisa Pellegrini
Essential oils producer

Liliana Tangorra
Art teacher and cultural entrepeneur

Letizia Cuonzo
Organic EVO producer

Marilena Ciocia
Social cooperative worker

Rosangela Belifemmine
Bookseller and cultural disseminator

Catia Scarimbolo
Trainer and producer in performing arts

Activities

The Italian Living Lab unfolded entirely through face-to-face sessions in various locations, including participants' farms, workplaces, and local institutions. Activities were designed around a flexible and adaptive structure that responded to participants' evolving needs and levels of experience. Group workshops combined collective reflection and peer learning with hands-on exercises on innovation design, business development, and sustainability planning.

Individual mentoring sessions provided personalised guidance between meetings, helping women clarify goals, strengthen their projects, and gain confidence in their entrepreneurial skills.

Encounters with local stakeholders, including experts, policymakers, and representatives of the Bio-Distretto delle Lame, enriched the process with practical advice and new networking opportunities. Informal exchanges—supported by digital cooperative tools—kept the dialogue active, allowing participants to share insights and overcome challenges together.

This integrated and participatory approach turned the Living Lab into a safe and stimulating environment for learning, experimentation, and mutual growth.

Key highlights

Empowerment and visibility

Participants became more self-aware of their innovation potential, and the group was later integrated into a regional project on rural–urban reconnection.

Collaborative learning

Peer exchanges and mentoring created a trusted, inclusive environment that encouraged creativity, confidence, and mutual support.

Stakeholder engagement

Targeted sessions with experts and policymakers provided women with valuable knowledge, networks, and access to opportunities for funding and training.

Norway

Living Labs results and learnings

The Norwegian Living Lab brought together seven women innovators from the Trøndelag region—Norway's agricultural heartland—to strengthen their resilience and collaboration within the local food sector. The Lab focused on established entrepreneurs working across farming, marine sector, tourism, and hospitality, offering a supportive space for reflection, peer learning, and strategic dialogue with key stakeholders.

Meet the innovators

Kari Øye
Marine health products business owner

Sissel Langørgen
Dairy farmer

Marthe Kilen
Pastry chef

Torunn Bjerkem
Cultural farm manager

Anita Galåen
Farm CEO

Jenny Domås
Cultural farm manager

Liv Aas Bogen
Craft brewery manager

Activities

The Living Lab hosted nine sessions, including seven in-person meetings and two held online. Activities combined structured discussions, and workshops tailored to participants' needs, including one farm visit. Each woman presented her business case, shared challenges, and received collective feedback from peers and experts, fostering a cycle of reflection and solution-oriented learning.

The sessions explored themes such as business sustainability, market positioning, and long-term resilience—key concerns for women already running mature enterprises. Rather than focusing solely on product development, the Lab emphasised strengthening participants' capacity to adapt to change and maintain motivation as established innovators.

Stakeholders from across the food value chain, academia, and public agencies were invited to contribute expertise, though the usefulness of sessions varied depending on their understanding of the women innovators' level of experience and needs. The flexible and participatory structure of the Lab ensured that each session evolved according to participants' priorities, enabling targeted discussions and mutual recognition among equals. Through this process, women built a trusted professional network that valued experience-sharing as much as innovation itself.

Key highlights

Peer-driven learning

Women reported renewed energy and inspiration from sharing ideas and visiting each other's businesses.

Resilience and sustainability

The Lab supported women in strengthening business longevity, adaptability, and self-confidence as innovators.

Trusted network

Regular meetings built a lasting space of mutual respect, validation, and collaboration across the local food sector.

Lithuania

Living Labs results and learnings

Lietuvos socialinių mokslų centras

AgriFood DIH Lithuania

The Lithuanian Living Lab united eight rural women farmers and entrepreneurs from across the country to strengthen their capacity for innovation in agriculture and local food production. The participants represented diverse activities—from organic vegetable growing and beekeeping to mushroom cultivation, herbal products, and culinary heritage—and shared a commitment to improving their businesses and contributing to their local communities.

Meet the innovators

Lina Vyšniauskaitė
Food farmer

Eglė Valuckaitė -Stašauskienė
Food farmer

Daiva Šinkevičienė
Food farmer

Rasa Prusakova
Food farmer

Justė Jankauskienė
Food farmer

Rūta Aliukonienė
Dairy farmer

Justina Kočetova
Local food producer and shop owner

Ina Grecka
Food farmer

Activities

Over the course of the project, the Living Lab served as both a learning platform and a support network for women at different stages of their entrepreneurial journey. Through a series of in-person meetings, hands-on workshops, and tailored mentoring sessions, participants explored topics such as business planning, digital technologies, branding, and leadership in agri-food sectors.

The Lab adopted a flexible, participant-driven approach, adjusting the content to real needs as they emerged. Practical sessions and expert consultations helped participants move from ideas to implementation, fostering creativity and confidence to test new methods and approaches. Stakeholders—including researchers, policymakers, and community representatives—joined selected sessions, providing valuable insights into funding opportunities, local cooperation, and gender perspectives in agriculture. This interactive and inclusive environment encouraged peer learning and continuous dialogue, supported by online communication channels that sustained the group's collaboration between meetings.

By the end of the process, participants reported a greater sense of empowerment, a stronger professional network, and a renewed belief in their ability to shape the future of rural innovation in Lithuania.

Key highlights

Innovation in action

Women developed and refined new products and business ideas, guided by expert input and peer feedback.

Flexible learning environment

A participant-centred structure ensured that sessions met real needs and fostered confidence.

Growing community of practice

The Living Lab created lasting networks for collaboration, mutual support, and future innovation.

Scotland

Living Labs results and learnings

The Scottish Living Lab gathered eight women crofters and early-stage entrepreneurs from across the Highlands and Islands to explore the challenges and opportunities of rural innovation. Focused on the unique context of crofting—a small-scale and legally distinct form **of** farming—the Lab aimed to help women recognise their entrepreneurial potential, develop their ideas, and gain confidence as innovators within remote and often isolated environments.

Meet the innovators

Beth Rose
Crofter and entrepeneur

Rhionna Mackay
Entrepeneur

Haley Shepherd
Crofter and seed producer

Yvonne White
Crofter and livestock breeder

Jennifer Hart
Crofter and goat farmer

Jennifer Grant
Crofter and illustrator

Aoife Gould
Farmer

Karis Beattie
Crofter and entrepeneur involved in community work

Activities

Throughout the project, participants met mainly in person in Ullapool, travelling long distances—often involving ferries and overnight stays—to connect, learn, and collaborate. The Living Lab provided a trusted space for sharing ideas, testing products, and discussing business models tailored to crofting life.

Mentoring sessions were a key feature, offering one-to-one guidance that blended personal development and practical business coaching. Through workshops and discussions, the women explored diversification strategies, sustainability practices, and the balance between paid work, crofting, and innovation.

The sessions emphasised peer learning, with participants offering feedback on each other's projects and identifying shared barriers, such as limited access to markets, funding, and infrastructure. Despite these challenges, the group demonstrated resilience and creativity, developing small-scale innovations that combined environmental awareness, community benefit, and financial sustainability. The Living Lab became a rare and valued space for connection—both personal and professional—where women could exchange knowledge, build confidence, and find solidarity in their shared experiences of rural entrepreneurship.

Key highlights

Empowering women crofters

Mentoring and peer learning helped participants recognise themselves as entrepreneurs and gain confidence in their business ideas.

Innovation through necessity

Women developed creative, diversified business models to sustain crofting livelihoods and strengthen local economies.

Community and connection

The Living Lab reduced isolation and built lasting networks for collaboration across Scotland's remote rural regions.

Policy Recommendations

European Policy Forum: driving change for women-led innovation

6 Policy Workshops
>100 participants
Engagement from 27 Member States
Policy makers, advisors, academics

3 Showcase Events
>100 participants
Presentation of case studies
Sharing of knowledge and recommendations

Report with policy recommendations on inclusive transition policies for farming and rural areas: Roadmap, 77 actions, 7 focus areas

Policy Toolkit

Policy brief on megatrends and foresight on women-led innovation in rural areas (University of Pisa)

Stay with us!

The European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agri-culture and rural areas from the GRASS CEILING Horizon Europe project continues its work within the *Rural Pact Community Group of Women in Rural Areas.*

The European Policy Forum for Women-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas has been one of GRASS CEILING's most significant achievements.

Coordinated by AEIDL (European Association for Innovation in Local Development), and supported by Copa-Cogeca, the Forum brought together policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and rural women innovators to discuss how to make agricultural and rural policies more inclusive and gender-responsive.

Through a series of collaborative dialogues and co-creation sessions, participants identified barriers and opportunities for women-led innovation across Europe.

The Forum not only amplified the voices of women innovators but also co-developed policy recommendations and practical tools to address gender bias within agricultural and rural governance systems.

By connecting diverse stakeholders, the Policy Forum strengthened the link between research and policymaking, ensuring that the lessons from GRASS CEILING contribute to shaping a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient future for Europe's rural communities.

GRASS CEILING MOOC

>> Strenghtening rural innovation through gender-smart learning

Learn. Discover. Lead change for sustainable rural futures.

A free online course designed to equip participants with the knowledge and tools to advance gender equality and women's leadership in agricultural and rural development.

Through expert presentations from experienced lecturers, real-life examples and inspiring stories, you will discover how women are shaping rural economies and leading creative solutions for sustainable development across Europe.

This course is divided into five modules that explore how gender, leadership and innovation intersect – offering ideas, tools and approaches you can apply in your own work, studies or community.
Learn at your own pace and take the next step towards building fairer, more innovative rural systems.

→ **Join now!**
www.grassceiling.eu/mooc/

Course structure & modules

- **Module 1:** Women's Role in Agriculture, Rural Economies and Communities
- **Module 2:** Understanding Gender Norms and Drivers of Women-led Innovation
- **Module 3:** Supporting Women-led Innovation to Sustain Rural Areas
- **Module 4:** Innovating for Women in Food Systems
- **Module 5:** Recommendations and Tools for Inclusive Innovation Systems

Who is this course for?

This course is designed for everyone working towards fairer and more innovative rural systems.

- **Rural actors**
- **Decision-makers**
- **Educators and researchers**
- **Support organisations**
- **Anyone interested**

Why join the GRASS CEILING MOOC?

Learn at your own pace. Gain new perspectives. Strengthen your impact.

- **Free and open to all**
- **Certificate of completion**
- **Flexible and easy to follow**
- **Practical and relevant**

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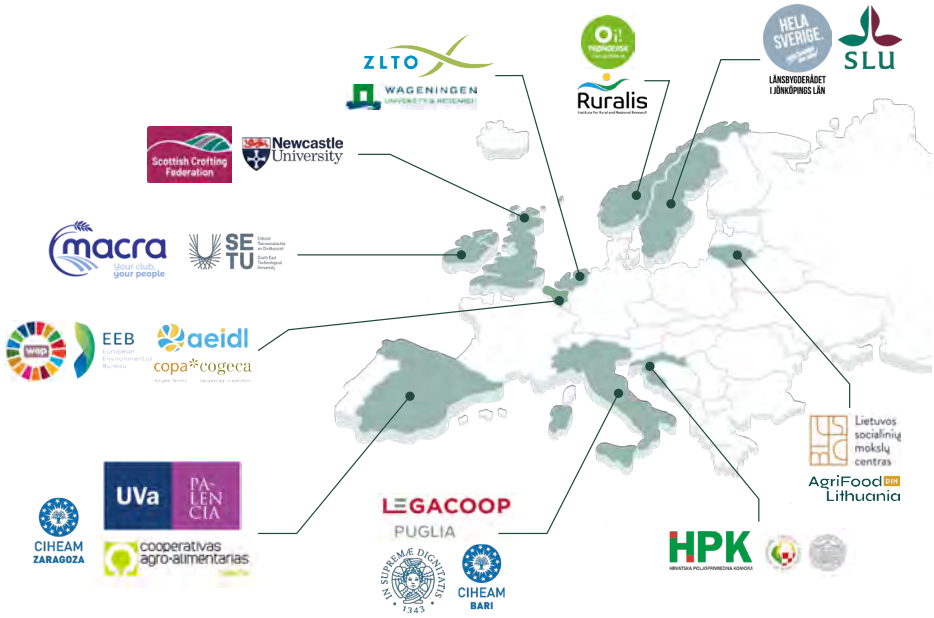
Gender Equality in Rural and Agricultural Innovation Systems



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