GRASS CEILING

D5.1

Report with policy recommendations on inclusive transition policies for farming and rural areas

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AFCO: EU Agri-Food Chain Observatory
AI: Artificial Intelligence
AKIS: Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems
BISS: Basic Income Support for Sustainability
BMI: Business Model Innovation
CAP: Common Agricultural Policy
CEAP: Circular Economy Action Plan
CEPS: Centre for European Policy Studies
CF: Cohesion Fund
CLLD: Community-Led Local Development
CIS-YF: Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers
CoR: Committee of the Regions
CRISS: Complementary Redistributive Income Support for Sustainability
CSRs: European Semester country-specific recommendations
DG AGRI: European Commission Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
DG EMPL: European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DG JUST: European Commission Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers
DG REGIO: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
DNSH: Do No Significant Harm
DoA: Description of Action
EAFRD: European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EBAF: European Board for Agriculture and Food
ECA: European Court of Auditors
EESC: European Economic and Social Committee
EGS: European Gender Strategy
EIA: Equality Impact Assessment
EIGE: European Institute for Gender Equality
EIP-AGRI: European Innovation Partnership for Agriculture
EPSR: European Pillar of Social Rights
ERDF: European Regional Development Fund
ESIF: European Structural Investment Funds
ESF: European Social Fund
EU: European Union
F2F: Farm to Fork
FADN: Farm Accountancy Data Network
FemAI: the female achievement index
FemDI: female disadvantage index
FEMM: European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality
FSDN: Farm Sustainability Data Network
GDP: Gross Domestic Product
JRC: Joint Research Centre
JTF: Just Transition Fund
LAG: Local Action Group
LEADER: Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rural
LGBTQ+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, with the "+" representing other sexual orientations and gender identities beyond those listed.
LL: Living Lab
LTVRA: Long-term Vision for Rural Areas
MFF: Multiannual Financial Framework
NGEU: Next Generation EU
NRRPs: National Recovery and Resilience Plans
OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OP: Operational Programme
PAR: participatory action research
PMEF: Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
SDG: Sustainable Development Goals
SGIs: Services of General Interest
SMEs: small and medium sized enterprise
STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
SWOT: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats method
TEU: Treaty on European Union
TFEU: Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
TSI: Technical Support Instrument
UN: United Nations
WP: Work Package

Executive summary

Deliverable 5.1 *'Report with policy recommendations on inclusive transition policies for farming and rural areas'* **presents the policy recommendations developed within the GRASS CEILING project**, a Horizon Europe initiative aimed at addressing the structural inequalities and systemic barriers rural women face in agriculture and innovation across Europe. These recommendations **outline a comprehensive and forward-looking roadmap to advance gender equality in rural areas throughout the European Union.**

The **recommended actions are grounded in extensive research, participatory engagement through the European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas, and co-creation processes carried out across nine participating countries.** This work, **conducted between June 2024 and June 2025**, reflects a collaborative and inclusive approach to inform policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. They are intended **to inform EU, national, and regional policy frameworks in the current and forthcoming programming periods, particularly in the context of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the post-2027 reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the articulation of the Vision for Agriculture and Food and the review of the EU Gender Equality Strategy.**

The report begins with a detailed review of the **European policy framework for gender equality** (Chapter 2). It assesses EU legal foundations, strategic developments, and the integration of gender perspectives across sectoral policies. Chapter 3 synthesises **project findings on gender dynamics in agricultural innovation and policymaking**, covering existing data and knowledge on rural women and women farmers; foresight analysis and future scenarios for women-led innovation; gender norms within Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS), and insights from cross-lab peer learning and benchmarking of EU and national policies.

These findings underscore the persistent gender disparities in rural and agricultural contexts. Rural women remain significantly underrepresented in areas such as farm ownership, leadership, and policymaking, with their vital contributions—particularly in informal, ecological, and community-driven innovation—frequently overlooked. Structural barriers continue to impede their full participation, including unequal access to land, credit, infrastructure, childcare, tailored advisory services, and unequal parental leave. These challenges are compounded by deeply ingrained gender norms and institutional biases that marginalise women's roles and restrict their opportunities. Moreover, the lack of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data hampers effective policy development and accountability, as existing data often lacks the detail necessary to reflect the lived realities of rural women.

Chapter 4 presents **insights from the European Policy Forum on women-led innovation**, including expert interviews, stakeholder feedback, and dissemination activities.

At the core of the deliverable is a **roadmap for action (Chapter 5**) designed to operate across **short, medium-, and long-term timescales,** aligned with **key milestones** in **2025, 2030**, and **2035**, and they are structured **around 7 interlinked focus areas**: legal and policy frameworks, financial support, data

and monitoring, innovation, knowledge exchange, governance, and cultural change. These recommendations call for a fundamental shift from soft law to binding commitments on gender equality, reinforced by dedicated investments, clearer accountability mechanisms, and recognition of women's contributions beyond traditional agricultural roles.

The proposed roadmap begins with **legal and policy reforms**, advocating a shift from soft commitments to binding obligations on gender equality within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and other EU funding instruments. It calls for the coherent implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, particularly regarding maternity and paternity leave—ensuring paid, mandated parental leave across Member States. Furthermore, it recommends the development of a cohesive EU-wide framework to improve access to affordable childcare, tailored to diverse national contexts. **Inclusive finance** is a key priority, emphasising gender-responsive budgeting and the creation of targeted funding streams to support women's entrepreneurship, care infrastructure, and innovation. To ensure accountability, the framework advocates for institutionalising **gender-disaggregated data collection** and embedding gender metrics within all rural development monitoring systems. It also **redefines innovation** to include and support women-led socio-ecological initiatives such as care farming, sustainable food systems, and community-based enterprises. **Strengthening knowledge and capacity** is essential, with recommendations to develop mentorship programmes, reform Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS), and promote gender-inclusive training. The **governance** pillar calls for enforcing gender quotas and embedding participatory decision-making structures in rural institutions. Finally, the framework underscores the need for **cultural transformation** through public awareness campaigns and education initiatives aimed at challenging gender stereotypes and fostering inclusive rural narratives.

Summary of the GRASS CEILING recommended actions

2025		2030				2035	
Action	Description	Action	Description	Action	Description	Action	Description
L.1	Establish Women in Agriculture Platform	L.7	Enforce legal gender targets	D.4	Build gender-disaggregated data systems	L.20	Operationalise Rural Vision gender flagship
L.2	Utilise CAP simplification for gender	L.8	Gender in post-2027 EU programming	D.5	Integrate gender variables into major EU monitoring systems	L.21	Develop Rural Women Statutes
L.3	Align CAP and Gender Strategy	L.9	Gender-responsiveness CAP	D.6	Comprehensive EU gender monitoring	L.22	Train land officials, promote rights
L.4	Gender mainstreaming in European Pillar of Social Rights Social Pillar	L.10	Strengthen CAP guidance and oversight	D.7	Use gender tracking in post-2027 National Single Plans	L.23	Integrate gender in demographic policies
L.5	Articulate Women's Rights Action Plan	L.11	Integrated entrepreneurship support programmes	D.8	Gender impact assessments	L.24	Gender in housing strategies
L.6	Gender in Generational Renewal Strategy	L.12	Extend social conditionality rights	I.6	Support Rural Innovation Labs	F.8	Invest in rural social infrastructure
F.1	Dedicated funding for rural women	L.13	Adapt Care Strategy for Rural	I.7	Gender in Smart Specialisation Strategies	F.9	Tailored family support services
F.2	Gender consultation for CAP planning	L.14	Map rural essential services	K.2	Women in Agriculture Platform for capacity building	F.10	Multifunctional rural service centres
D.1	Commissioners report gender impact annually	L.15	Mandatory parental leave and childcare services	K.3	Train institutions and civil servants on gender	F.11	Bridge rural digital divide
D.2	Integrate gender variables in EU observatories	L.16	Guarantee equal land access and ownership	K.4	Design AKIS inclusive and with gender balance	F.12	Gender-responsiveness public & private funding
D.3	Promote gender evaluation practices	L.17	Adopt shared farm ownership laws	K.5	Mentor women in agriculture and entrepreneurship	D.9	Rural proofing with gender lens
I.1	Redefine innovation concept with gender lens	L.18	Expand rural women pension options	K.6	Promote agriculture equally with STEM fields	D.10	Foresight tools with gender view
I.2	Gender in climate transition plans	L.19	Improve rural women social protection	G.2	Inclusive EU fund governance	D.11	Benchmark gender equality regularly
I.3	Articulate Start-up & Scale-up Strategy for rural	F.3	Mandate gender budgeting and targets	G.3	Enforce gender quotas in governance	D.12	Data on underrepresented rural groups
I.4	Targets for EIP-AGRI gender groups	F.4	Develop gender-sensitive finance tools	C.2	Challenge gender stereotypes media	I.8	Document socio-ecological innovations
I.5	Women-led Innovation Focus Groups	F.5	Design rural-focused financial tools	C.3	Gender-sensitive education in different curricula	I.9	Support peer-led innovation models
K.1	Union of Skills & Quality Jobs for rural women	F.6	Gender equality in public contracts	C.4	Awareness campaigns for equality	K.7	Institutionalise rural Living Labs
G.1	Inclusive Monitoring Committees required	F.7	Support young rural women			K.8	Revise extension services and training systems
C.1	Include rural women in EU EGS					K.9	Promote women in innovation
						G.4	Cross-directorate policy coordination
						G.5	Develop Rural Democracy Index
						C.6	Mandatory gender certification for services

Source: Own elaboration

01 Introduction and methodological approach

Since its inception in 2022, **GRASS CEILING Horizon Europe project has been dedicated to creating an environment where women can lead socio-ecological transitions, developing innovative responses to environmental and social challenges while enhancing the resilience of rural areas and communities**. The project adopts a **multi-layered and participatory approach to formulating policy recommendations and influencing policy**. This process integrates evidence from multiple work packages and actively involves stakeholders across levels.

This deliverable presents a **comprehensive set of policy recommendations formulated within the framework of Work Package 5 on Co-creation of recommendations and tools** for policy and knowledge and innovation systems that boost women's role in the sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas.

The project and this report are not limited to a binary approach (male/female); instead, they consistently integrate **a broader understanding of gender identities and intersectionality throughout their analysis**. In practice, the incorporation of a gender perspective is often reduced to a focus on women, especially farmers' wives or smallholder women farmers, without examining structural inequalities or including a broader understanding of gender identity (Shortall, S., 2010).[1]

This **deliverable is structured into six sections**. Preceding this introduction and methodological approach are a list of acronyms and abbreviations, and an executive summary of the key findings and policy recommendations. Section 2, which follows this introduction, presents the reader with the broader European policy framework for gender equality. Section 3[2] synthesises the project's findings on gender dynamics in agricultural innovation, while Section 4 presents insights from the European Policy Forum for Women-Led Innovation. This deliverable concludes with a series of recommendations identified at national and European level. In such a way, Section 5 offers a roadmap to advance gender equality in rural areas across the European Union. It builds on extensive research, stakeholder engagement, and policy dialogue, and is structured around seven interconnected Focus Areas that together reflect the key dimensions of inclusive rural transformation. Each Focus Area articulates a set of specific policy needs, emerging policy opportunities, and a proposed course of action. The final Section 6 includes legal and scientific references.

The process of development of the policy recommendations spanned from June 2024 to June 2025

[1] Shortall, S. (2010) *Women working on the farm: how to promote their contribution to the development of agriculture and rural areas in Europe*. European Parliament, Brussels. IP/B/AGRI/IC/2010_090 https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/publications/women-working-on-the-farm-how-to-promote-their-contribution-to-th

[2] This section (Section 3) presents key research findings from Work Packages 1 to 4. The full list of references supporting this synthesis is available in the corresponding deliverables, which can be accessed at https://www.grassceiling.eu/results-resources/deliverables/ and in *section 6.2. Scientific and other publications of interest* in this report.

(Month 18 to Month 30) of the project, and **was structured around four interlinked phases** (Discovery, Development, Assessment, and Proposal), each building upon outputs from previous project stages and incorporating stakeholder feedback:

- **Discovery Phase**: Focused on reviewing relevant sources, as well as insights from GRASS CEILING's earlier work packages (WP1–WP4), this phase laid the foundation for evidence-based policymaking by identifying gaps, trends, and barriers in existing systems.

  In particular, the development of this deliverable has been guided by the outcomes of the following project deliverables: **Deliverable 1.1** offers a policy brief on the available data regarding rural women and women farmers, providing a foundation for further policy action. **Deliverable 1.2** explores megatrends and foresight related to rural women-led innovation, highlighting future opportunities and challenges. **Deliverables 2.1** and **2.2** synthesize existing knowledge and gender norms in rural innovation and Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS), revealing barriers and areas for improvement. **Deliverable 3.1** provides methodological guidelines and training for the Living Labs (LLs) in nine countries, empowering local actors to lead socio-ecological initiatives for women. **Deliverables 3.2** and **3.3** focus on the operational outcomes of these labs, sharing early-stage findings and cross-lab learning. **Deliverable 4.2** benchmarks gender integration within EU and national agricultural policies, and **Deliverable 4.3** benchmarks legal frameworks for land transfer. Finally, **Deliverable 6.8** presents practice abstracts, offering a detailed analysis of the position of women in EU agriculture and rural areas, providing actionable insights for future policy and intervention strategies.

  In addition, EU investment policy (EU Cohesion/ Regional Policy) but also macro policies such as, the European Semester and the Better Regulation, and global Frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have been explored to extract main recommendations.

- **Development Phase**: Building on the findings generated throughout the project, this phase focused on articulating policy insights. It involved expert consultations and participatory exchanges through the European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas.

- **Assessment Phase**: Policy priorities were tested and refined in workshops with stakeholders across policy, academia, and civil society. This ensured that the proposals were both context-sensitive and feasible.

- **Proposal Phase**: The final phase focused on integrating the findings into a cohesive set of policy recommendations or roadmap, intended both to inform the current deliverable and to serve as a resource for future policy-making and public consultation processes.

The work has been conducted by AEIDL in collaboration with various Project Partners across the project, including South East Technological University (SETU); Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP); European Environmental Bureau (EEB); COPA-COGECA; University of Pisa (UNIPI), and national stakeholders. This work will be complemented by a forthcoming deliverable on policy tools, scheduled for completion in December 2025.

02 A Union of Equality: understanding the European framework for gender equality and the future directions

Chapter 2 of this deliverable reviews the European framework for gender equality, examining its legal foundations, institutional developments, and future directions within the evolving EU policy landscape.

Gender equality is a foundational value of the European Union, deeply rooted in its legal and institutional architecture. However, implementation remains uneven across sectors and Member States and gender mainstreaming often lacks enforceability, and rural women remain largely invisible in key strategies (Arribas & Carrasco, 2003; EIGE, 2017b; EP, 2019; FAO, 2022; Shortall, S., 2015).[3]

Many studies have questioned the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming (Daly, 2005; Perrons, 2005; Walby, 2005; Shortall 2010; Bock 2010)[4]. While there is a commitment to gender

[3] Arribas, G.V. and Carrasco, L. (2003) Gender equality and the EU – an assessment of the current issues. *EIPASCOPE* 2003(1): 1–9. Available at: http://aei.pitt.edu/834/1/scop2003_1_3.pdf
European Institute for Gender Equality (2017b) Gender in agriculture and rural development https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-agriculture-and-rural-development?language_content_entity=en
European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, Kovačićek, T., Franić, R. (2019) The professional status of rural women in the EU, European Parliament, 2019
https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861/185854
FAO (2022) Gender, agriculture and rural development in Europe and Central Asia – Brief overview of regional trends and challenges. Budapest. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc2763en
Shortall S. (2015) Gender mainstreaming and the Common Agricultural Policy. Gender Place and Culture, 22(5), 717-730 https://eprints.ncl.ac.uk/231404

[4] Daly, M. (2005) Gender Mainstreaming in Theory and Practice Social Politics Vol. 12 No. 3 pp. 433-450 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249293739_Gender_Mainstreaming_in_Theory_and_Practice
Perrons, D. (2005) Gender mainstreaming and gender equality in the new (market) economy: an analysis of contradictions Social Politics Vol. 12 No. 3 pp. 389-411 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249293708_Gender_Mainstreaming_and_Gender_Equality_in_the_New_Market_Economy_An_Analysis_of_Contradictions
Walby, S. (2005) Gender Mainstreaming: Productive tensions in theory and practice Social Politics Vol. 12 No. 3 pp. 321-343 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255653597_Gender_Mainstreaming_Productive_Tensions_in_Theory_and_Practice
Shortall, S. (2010) *Women working on the farm: how to promote their contribution to the development of agriculture and rural areas in Europe*. European Parliament, Brussels. IP/B/AGRI/IC/2010_090 https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/publications/women-working-on-the-farm-how-to-promote-their-contribution-to-th

Bock, B.B. (2010) Personal and social development of women in rural areas of Europe. European Parliament, Brussels IP/B/AGRI/IC/2010_089
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/50200282_Personal_and_Social_Development_of_Women_in_Rural_Areas_of_Europe

mainstreaming in theory, in practice there is little evidence of its execution.

From its early emphasis on equal pay to its current intersectional and holistic approach, the EU's renewed commitment, under the 2024–2029 Commission[5], introduces a roadmap for action. A Union of Equality remains an active project, one requiring continued, coordinated, and inclusive effort across all levels of governance.

2.1. Foundations of gender equality in EU policy

The European Union has long been committed to promoting **gender equality as a core value, embedded in its treaties, legislation, and policy frameworks**. Over the decades, this commitment **has evolved from a focus on equal pay to a comprehensive approach addressing systemic inequalities across all areas of life**. This chapter provides an overview of the EU's legal and policy architecture for gender equality, highlights key institutional developments, and explores future directions, including emerging priorities from now on and within the new EU programming framework post 2027.

Equality stands as a foundational value of the European Union (EU), deeply embedded in its legal and institutional framework. This is explicitly articulated in **Articles 2 and 3(3)** of the **Treaty on European Union (TEU)[6]**, which affirm the Union's commitment to combatting discrimination and promoting equality, including between men and women. The **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)[7]** further embeds these principles in **Articles 8, 10, 19, 153, and 157**, while **Articles 21 and 23** of the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union[8]** confirm the commitment to non-discrimination and gender equality.

Article 157 TFEU, a legacy from the 1957 Treaty of Rome, originally focused on the principle of equal pay. Over time, its scope has broadened, requiring all Member States to ensure equal remuneration for male and female workers for equal work or work of equal value. **Article 153(1) TFEU** authorises the Union to support and complement Member State actions in ensuring equality in employment and labour market opportunities.

Institutionally, the **European Commission** has played a central role. As early as 1981, it established the **Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men**. In 1996, gender mainstreaming became a central policy tool following the Commission's communication on incorporating equal opportunities into all EU policies. The **Inter-service Group on Gender Equality** was also formed to coordinate and promote mainstreaming efforts, culminating in the endorsement of gender mainstreaming through the **Amsterdam Treaty of 1997[9]**.

[5] European Commission 2019-2024 https://commission.europa.eu/about/commission-2024-2029_en
[6] Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) (2012) Official Journal of the European Union C 326/13. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF
[7] Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (2012) Official Journal of the European Union C 326/47. Available at: eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT
[8] Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000/C 364/01). Official Journal of the European Communities, C 364/1, dated 18 December 2000. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf
[9] Treaty of Amsterdam amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties establishing the European Communities and certain related acts (1997) Official Journal C 340, 10/11/1997 P. 0001 – 0144. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/ams/sign/eng

2.2. Strategic development: 2000–2025

The EU's Gender Equality Strategy has evolved through successive five-year plans. The **Community Framework Strategy on Gender Equality (2001–2005)**[10] set a comprehensive roadmap, followed by the **2006–2010 Roadmap**[11], which emphasised a dual approach: integrating gender perspectives across all policies and deploying targeted measures. The subsequent **2010–2015 Strategy**[12] addressed issues from economic independence and pay gaps to gender-based violence and women's global rights.

The **Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016–2019**[13] built on prior strategies and was influenced by the **UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, particularly **SDG 5 on gender equality**. The Commission focused on labour participation, pay gaps, decision-making, combating violence, and global advocacy. Between 2014 and 2019, Věra Jourová was the EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers, and Gender Equality.

The most recent framework, the **Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**[14], introduced a more holistic and intersectional approach. It rests on six pillars: eliminating violence and stereotypes, fostering gender equality in the economy and leadership, integrating gender across policies, ensuring funding, and promoting equality globally. This strategy is operationalised through a **dual approach**: gender mainstreaming and targeted interventions, guided by **intersectionality**[15].

In this framework, the Commission proposed binding pay transparency measures. The Pay Transparency Directive[16] was adopted in 2023. The new rules would help to ensure that the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value, enshrined in the Treaty since 1957.

Other important milestones were the adoption in 2022 of Directive on gender balance in corporate boards[17], a new EU-wide work-life balance rights[18] for parents and carers and the European Care Strategy[19], linked to new targets on early childhood education and care to enhance women's labour

[10] Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Towards a community framework strategy on gender equality (2001-2005) (COM(2000) 335 final). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52000DC0335

[11] Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A Roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010 (COM(2006) 92 final) Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legissum:c10404

[12] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 21 September 2010 - Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015 (COM(2010) 491 final). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52010DC0491

[13] European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (2017) *Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019*, Publications Office, 2016, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/454429

[14] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (COM/2020/152 final). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152

[15] https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1050

[16] Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms. Available at: Directive - 2023/970 - EN - EUR-Lex

[17] Directive (EU) 2022/2381 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 November 2022 on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures. Available at: Directive - 2022/2381 - EN - EUR-Lex

[18] European Commission (2022) Work-life Balance Initiative https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/rights-work/labour-law/working-conditions/work-life-balance_en

[19] European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, *European care strategy – For carers and care receivers*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/858795

market participation.

To bolster institutional capacity, the EU appointed Helena Dalli as a European Commissioner for Equality (2019-2024), established a **Task Force for Equality**[20], and integrated gender perspectives into its **Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2021–2027**[21], including ESF+, ERDF, and InvestEU.

2.3. Mid-term assessment and sector-specific integration

The **European Court of Auditors (ECA) report**[22], released in **2021, highlighted that progress towards gender equality in the EU budget was too slow**, despite the EU's stated commitment. The ECA found that the European Commission had not sufficiently fulfilled its obligation to integrate gender equality into the design and implementation of spending programmes. The report emphasised the need for thorough gender impact assessments for all EU funding programs and systematic data collection for each gender.

The **2023 mid-term review** of the **Gender Action Plan III (2021–2025)**[23] affirmed the positive outcomes of the EU's dual strategy, with **85% of new external actions** aiming to have gender equality as a significant or principal objective by 2025. The plan promoted integration of gender considerations into emerging policy areas such as the **green transition** and **digital transformation**. A notable innovation is the broader use of the **'Women in Digital' scoreboard**[24].

The **2024 Report on Gender Equality**[25] stressed that **work-life balance policies**, supported by **the directive in European Union law on work–life balance for parents and carers**[26], are key to closing gender gaps in employment and earnings (European Commission, 2024c). These initiatives are informed by demographic shifts and aim to encourage men's involvement in caregiving roles. Furthermore, the EU has, since 2019, developed the broad outlines of a EU Demographic toolbox for action, bringing together initiatives at EU and national level including the use of ESIF to help revitalise areas with decreasing, aging or out-migrating population (European Commission, 2023c)[27], given that there is a gender dimension in demographically declining areas most prominently by way of masculinisation of rural areas on the one hand (Curtale et al. 2025)[28],

[20] The Task Force on Equality of the European Commission - European Commission

[21] Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/765 of 29 February 2024 amending Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L_202400765

[22] European Court of Auditors (2021) Special report 10/2021: Gender mainstreaming in the EU budget https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/gender-10-2021/en/

[23] Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council EUGender Action Plan (GAP) III – An ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action (JOIN/2020/17 final). Available at: eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0017

[24] Women in Digital | Shaping Europe's digital future

[25] European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (2024c) *2024 report on gender equality in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/401813

[26] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/1158/oj/eng

[27] European Commission (2023c) *Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action* (COM(2023) 123 final). Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/publications/communication-demographic-change-europe-toolbox-action_en

[28] Curtale, R., Stut, M., Alessandrini, A., Deuster, C., Batista e Silva, F., Natale, F., & Dijkstra, L. (2025). Outlook and demographic perspectives for EU's rural regions: A modelling-based exercise (JRC Working Paper No. JRC140514). *Publications Office of the European Union.* Retrieved from https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC140514

something still overlooked by EU policies (Pazos-Vidal, 2022)[29]. An important aspect of analysis is assessing access to essential services and proximity to critical infrastructure. These metrics uncover significant spatial inequalities that traditional administrative boundaries often conceal (Dijkstra & Jacobs-Crisioni, 2023)[30]. The European Commission increasingly views this as a crucial area for policy intervention (European Commission, 2024m)[31] particularly in relation to transport poverty (European Commission, 2024n)[32].

In recent EU Council meetings (April[33] and May[34] 2024), Member States explored enhancing **women's representation in decision-making** and **financial independence**, drawing on insights from the **European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)**. Proposed actions include integrating gender in economic legislation, combating **economic gender-based violence**, and improving **sex-disaggregated data collection**.

This year, the **2025 report on gender equality in the EU[35]** particularly pointed out that the Commission is increasingly focusing on the mental health challenges faced by the farming community, recognising the specific factors affecting well-being in rural areas within agricultural and rural policy. The report concluded that continued and coordinated action at all levels remains essential to close gender gaps, address emerging challenges, and ensure lasting progress towards gender equality across the EU (European Commission, 2025g).

2.4. Gender equality in agriculture and rural development

Women play a vital but often under recognised role in the EU's **agricultural and rural development sectors** (EIGE, 2017a)[36]. The **Common Agricultural Policy**, a significant part of the EU budget, did not originally address gender. Earlier frameworks, such as **regulation[37] to support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) in the programming period 2007-2013**, required representation of rural women in Local Action Groups, while the 2014–2020 EU Common Provisions Regulation[38] mandated gender equality through

[29] Pazos-Vidal, S. (2022) "Emptied Spain" and the limits of domestic and EU territorial mobilisation. *Revista Galega de Economía*, 31(2), 1-28. https://doi.org/10.15304/rge.31.2.7

[30] Dijkstra, L., Jacobs-Crisioni, C. (2023) Developing a definition of Functional Rural Areas in the EU. JRC Working Papers on Territorial Modelling and Analysis No 11/2023, *European Commission*, Ispra, JRC135599. Retrieved from JRC Publications Repository - Developing a definition of Functional Rural Areas in the EU

[31] European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (2024m) *Report on access to essential services in the EU: Commission staff working document*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/447353.

[32] European Commission (2024n) *Transport poverty: Definitions, indicators, determinants, and mitigation strategies*. Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. https://doi.org/10.2767/0662480

[33] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8947-2024-REV-1/en/pdf

[34] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/epsco/2024/05/07/

[35] European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (2025g) *2025 report on gender equality in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/5262357

[36] European Institute for Gender Equality (2017a) Gender in agriculture and rural development https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-agriculture-and-rural-development?language_content_entity=en

[37] Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32005R1698

[38] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European

Articles 7, 55, and 110, integrating it into ex ante evaluations and monitoring. The **regulation[39] on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) for 2014-2020** also permitted thematic sub-programmes specifically for women, embedding gender as a cross-cutting objective in CAP's Pillar II. However, several scientific analyses have shown that the effectiveness of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) in addressing gender equality has been limited, inconsistent, or in many cases, entirely absent from implementation and impact assessments (Bock, B.B., 2015; Shortall, S., 2008; and Hansen, H., & Teuber, R., 2010).[40]

However, the **2023–2027 CAP[41]** marked a paradigm shift through its **new delivery model**, which allows Member States to integrate **gender equality within CAP Strategic Plans** involving CAP direct payments (Pillar I) and rural development (Pillar II). **The current Specific Objective 8 (SO8)** of the CAP promotes gender equality, employment, and social inclusion in rural areas. Further details on how Member States have addressed gender across various Strategic Objectives, including the design of gender-sensitive criteria, are provided in *Section 3.6 (project benchmarking exercise)* and *Section 4.2 (European Policy Forum results)* of this deliverable.

Despite this progress, the CAP does not mandate **targeted interventions for women**, instead leaving it to Member States to design gender-sensitive plans and interventions. This underscores the need for deeper engagement and structured programming, as the special report[42] of the **European Court of Auditors** has noted a lack of gender mainstreaming in direct payments (Pillar I of CAP Strategic Plans).

Pillar II of the CAP has devoted at least 5% of its funding to non-farming rural development, in what is known since 2014 as Community Led Local Development (CLLD) and prior to that as the LEADER initiative. The European Court of Auditors' (2022) landmark and highly critical report[43] on

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Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2013/1303/oj/eng

[39] Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32013R1305

[40] Bock, B. (2015) Gender mainstreaming and rural development policy: the trivialisation of rural gender issues. Gender, Place & Culture,22(5),731–745. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271752275_Gender_mainstreaming_and_rural_development_policy_the_trivialisation_of_rural_gender_issues

Shortall, S. (2008). Are Rural Development Programmes Socially Inclusive? Social Inclusion, Civic Engagement, Participation, and Social Capital: Exploring the Differences. Journal of Rural Studies. 24. 450-457 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/223899984_Are_Rural_Development_Programmes_Socially_Inclusive_Social_Inclusion_Civic_Engagement_Participation_and_Social_Capital_Exploring_the_Differences

Hansen, H., & Teuber, R. (2010). Assessing the impacts of EU's common agricultural policy on regional convergence: sub-national evidence from Germany. *Applied Economics*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227357589_Assessing_the_impacts_of_EU's_common_agricultural_policy_on_regional_convergence_Sub-national_evidence_from_Germany

[41] Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1305/2013 and (EU) No 1307/2013. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/2115/oj/eng

[42] European Court of Auditors (2021) Special report 10/2021: Gender mainstreaming in the EU budget https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/gender-10-2021/en/

[43] European Court of Auditors (2022) LEADER and community-led local development facilitates local engagement, but additional benefits still not sufficiently demonstrated (Special Report No. 10, 2022). Publications Office of the European Union. https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR22_10/SR_Leader_EN.pdf

LEADER/CLLD expressed concerns about the integration of gender dimension in both **the representativeness and decision-making processes of Local Action Groups."**
The 2019 European Parliament **study on the professional status of rural women in the EU**[44] stressed that women and girls are central to the sustainability of rural households and communities, improving rural livelihoods and overall well-being, but their role and significance is often overlooked. Rural women face greater challenges in achieving equality compared to their urban counterparts.

Additionally, the European Commission study[45] on funding for EU rural areas stressed that under cooperation, LEADER strategies contribute to fostering young people and women's opportunities for entrepreneurship and jobs in rural areas, improving local infrastructure and services. The CAP targeted the promotion of social inclusion and cohesion, gender equality and social infrastructure via 2014-2020 measures M07 village renewal and M19 LEADER/CLLD, particularly women's empowerment (European Commission, 2024d). However, various scientific references highlighted that these programmes were well-intentioned but, in practice, reinforced existing male-dominated leadership structures and overlooked women's everyday work and caregiving contributions. Thus, gender disparities in governance and decision-making remained, compromising long-term inclusion unless paired with gender-specific safeguards (Shortall and Marangudakis, 2024).[46]

The **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)**[47], adopted in 2021, set a strategic vision to 2040 with a **dedicated flagship** on women in rural areas. The **2024 evaluation of LEADER**[48] confirmed its contribution to **female labour participation** and **rural social inclusion** (European Commission, 2024a).

In 2024, the European Commission **report**[49] **on the LTVRA: key achievements and ways forward** described how EU policies contribute to social inclusion, gender equality, climate and environment, digitalisation, education, health, culture, and industry among other policy aspects. The report consolidated key priorities raised by EU institutions and stakeholders, framing critical questions for future rural policy development. These include addressing the challenges of **depopulation and structural transitions**, tailoring **targeted interventions** to diverse rural needs, and enhancing **financial support** through improved synergies across EU, national, and regional funds. Stakeholders also emphasised the need to strengthen **territorial tools** like CLLD/LEADER, improve **monitoring and**

[44] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608868/IPOL_STU(2019)608868_EN.pdf
[45] European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (2024d) ADE, CCRI, CREA, RegioGro, ÖIR, Münch, A., Gorny, H., Badouix, M., Gaugitsch, R., Dwyer, J., Katarina Kubinakova, K., Beck, M., Van Bunnen, P., Mantino, F.Brkanovic, S., (2024) *Study on funding for EU rural areas – Final report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2762/901111
[46] Shortall, S. and Marangudakis, V. (2024) Power and culture: Understanding EU policies on agriculture and gender equality. Sociologia Ruralis. 64. 10.1111/soru.12475 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/soru.12475
[47] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 (COM/2021/345 final) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021DC0345
[48] European Commission (2024a) Evaluation of the impact of LEADER towards the general objective "balanced territorial development" https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cmef/rural-areas/evaluation-impact-leader-balanced-territorial-development_en
[49] European Commission (2024b) Report on The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward COM(2024) 450 final https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0463e1b8-ec1f-11ee-8e14-01aa75ed71a1/

assessment, and simplify access to support for beneficiaries. The report calls for better **institutional coordination**, potentially through an EU rural strategy, and urges support for national and regional rural action plans. Finally, it stresses the importance of more **policy-relevant rural data**, gathered without adding to administrative burdens (European Commission, 2024b).

The **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas has been complemented by the Vision for Agriculture and Food[50], which despite its title includes a dedicated section on rural policies beyond agriculture** (European Commission, 2025a). The Visions vow that in 2025, the Commission will introduce an updated EU Rural Action Plan[51], integrating various projects, initiatives, and actions from multiple EU policies to align with new European priorities post-2027. The rural proofing principle, including territorial impact assessments, will be further developed and adequately funded at the EU level. The Rural Pact, established in 2021 to facilitate cooperation with stakeholders, will be enhanced to better support dialogue and engagement with civil society and rural communities in both implementation and policy discussions. Additionally, the Commission will take steps to combat the spread of disinformation in rural areas.

The **Rural Observatory[52]**, set up to improve data on rural regions, is expected to further enhance **gender-disaggregated data analysis**. Meanwhile, to join forces and monitor EU regional gender equality, in October 2021 the European Commission's **Joint Research Centre** (JRC), in collaboration with the **Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy** (DG REGIO), released two complementary indices[53]: **the female achievement index (FemAI) and the female disadvantage index (FemDI)** (European Commission, 2021b).

2.5. Gender dimension of EU policies beyond CAP

While the focus of GRASS CEILING is as set out in the HORIZON-CL6-2022-COMMUNITIES-01-01 - Boosting women-led innovation in farming and rural areas cluster call[54], is primarily CAP, EGD, F2F and the LTVRA, it is important to factor in, at least in general terms, other relevant policies. This includes the EU's main investment tool, Cohesion or Regional Policy, as well as wider macro-level frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the European Semester, and the Better Regulation agenda.

A range of critical literature highlights a consistent gap between the EU's formal commitment to gender equality and the actual implementation of gender-sensitive measures across these broader policies. Despite rhetorical and legal commitments, gender integration often remains instrumental, serving primarily economic efficiency goals rather than aiming for structural change. As a result, gender mainstreaming tends to be superficial, frequently overlooking systemic inequalities (Rubery,

[50] European Commission (2025a) A Vision for Agriculture and Food Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations. COM(2025) 75 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0075
[51] https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan_en
[52] https://observatory.rural-vision.europa.eu/?lng=en&ctx=ROBS
[53] European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (2021b) Mapping the glass ceiling: The EU regions where women thrive and where they are held back https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/maps/gender-equality-monitor_en and Female achievement and disadvantage indices
[54] Boosting women-led innovation in farming and rural areas | Programme | HORIZON | CORDIS | European Commission

2017; McSorley & Campbell, 2016; European Parliament, 2023).[55]

Cohesion Policy

In terms of regional policy, **EU's Cohesion Policy** plays an important role in promoting gender equality, particularly through measures related **to employment, social inclusion and education.** This policy amounts to one third of the EU budget (2021-2027 period), slightly over the total CAP expenditure, and it is the main driver for Territorial Cohesion in Europe, particularly through its investment part the **European Structural and Innovation Funds (ESIF**), most **notably the European Social Fund (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**. A notable example of asymmetries within the MFF is the **allocation of more funds to rural development beyond farming in Cohesion policy, €45.6 billion**[56] than in rural development policy itself (€24.6 billion), which is 8% of CAP expenditure[57] (European Commission, 2024b). However, while 5% of EAFRD-which currently accounts for about one third of CAP expenditure- supports non-farming rural development, **only €750m from Cohesion Policy funds go to Community Led Local Development (CLLD) in both rural and non-rural areas,** compared to €7.7 billion from CAP via the LEADER-CLLD programme[58] (European Commission, 2023i).

The mainstreaming of gender equality is a horizontal cross-cutting principle for all cohesion policy investments, as opposed to gender targeting. This has been programmed essentially under **Policy Objective 4, "A more social and inclusive Europe" in the Common Provisions Regulation[59]** governing all ESIF. Measures are categorised under three gender equality dimension codes: 01 – Gender targeting (100 %); 02 – Gender mainstreaming (40 %) and 03 – Gender-neutral (0 %)[60].

When it comes to gender equality ESIF supports, over 30% (EUR 110 billion) of all cohesion policy investments (incl. the Just Transition Fund JTF) will support gender equality in the 2021-2027 period, either through direct "*gender equality measures* or *gender mainstreaming*"[61] (European

[55] Rubery, J. (2017) The triumph of instrumental over equality policy in European employment policy. Canadian Journal of Development Studies. 38 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321028915_The_triumph_of_instrumental_over_equality_policy_in_European_employment_policy
McSorley, L., & Campbell, J. (2016). EU Cohesion Policy: growth or cohesion? The case of gender mainstreaming. In N. F. Dotti (Ed.), *Learning from Implementation and Evaluation of the EU Cohesion Policy: Lessons from a Research-Policy Dialogue* RSA Research Network on Cohesion Policy . https://researchonline.gcu.ac.uk/en/publications/eu-cohesion-policy-growth-or-cohesion-the-case-of-gender-mainstre
European Parliament (2023) The gender dimension in cohesion policy https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739381/EPRS_ATA(2023)739381_EN.pdf

[56] Kah S, Georgieva N. & Fonseca, L. (2020). Research for REGI Committee– EU Cohesion Policy in non-urban areas, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels. Retrieved from: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/652210/IPOL_STU(2020)652210_EN.pdf

[57] European Commission (2024b) Report on The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward COM(2024) 450 final https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0463e1b8-ec1f-11ee-8e14-01aa75ed71a1/

[58] European Commission (2023i) *Cohesion 2021-2027: forging an ever stronger Union - Report on the outcome of 2021-2027 cohesion policy programming*. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/reports/2021-2027-programming-outcome/report-outcome-2021-2027-cohesion-policy-programming-part1.pdf

[59] Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1060

[60] https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gender-budgeting/tracking-system?language_content_entity=en

[61] European Commission (2023j) Cohesion policy: supporting gender equality | Cohesion Open Data

Commission, 2023j). This concerns, inter alia, measures related to employment, social inclusion and education. This means that the most dedicated support to gender policies can be found in ESF+ where about 84bn EUR have been *programmed* for gender investments. The **ESF+ supports** gender equality through targeted objectives that promote work-life balance, gender-sensitive labour market policies, access to care services, and the reduction of gender stereotypes. Some examples of specific objectives are: ESO4.11 Equal access to quality social and healthcare services; ESO4.3 Genderbalanced labour market institutions or ESO4.8 Active inclusion and employability. Member States can use ESF+ funds to improve women's participation in the workforce, improve access to affordable and accessible care services and tackle gender stereotyping. The **ERDF supports** gender equality through both mainstreaming and targeting across diverse objectives. Funding is directed toward research and innovation, SME competitiveness, renewable energy, and sustainable mobility.

The **EU's 9th Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion (2024)**[62] underlines that while progress towards achieving gender equality in the EU is visible, women still face barriers, as reflected in the gender pay gap, the many fewer women than men in leadership positions and the many more women than men who carry the burden of unpaid care work. Gender inequality also hampers economic and social development. Increasing the number of women in employment tends to raise productivity as well as further innovation and diversity in the workplace. Increasing the participation of women is crucial to tackling skill shortages in the context of a shrinking population of working age.

Gender-responsive budgeting

Gender-responsive budgeting tools[63] were piloted for the first time in the EU's 2023 and 2024 budgets (European Parliament, 2025b). In June 2022, with its proposal[64] for the 2023 EU budget, the Commission presented its methodology and pilot application in the 2021 budget. The methodology was applied to all 48 funding programmes (including programmes financed under Next Generation EU) and repeated, without modification, for the 2024[65] and 2025[66] budgets.

The Commission's marking method is based on the approach already applied for tracking EU spending on climate and biodiversity, as well as on the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation**

[62] European Commission. (2024). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the 9th Cohesion Report* (COM(2024) 149 final).

[63] European Parliament (2025b) *EPRS - European Parliamentary Research Service.* Gender-responsive budgeting: State of play and opportunities for the European Parliament's 10th term. Authors: Sapala, M., & Shreeves, R. (2025, February). Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/767228/EPRS_BRI(2025)767228_EN.pdf

[64] European Commission (2022c) Draft General Budget of the European Union – Working Document Part I: Programme Statements of Operational Expenditure, Financial Year 2023. COM(2022) 400. https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2023-eu-budget_en

[65] European Commission. (2023). *Statement of estimates of the European Commission: Preparation of the 2024 draft budget* (SEC(2023) 250). https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/dbef5fc5-7cdd-47d3-823a-cfb804861673_en?filename=DB2024-Statement-of-Estimates.pdf

[66] European Commission. (2024). *Statement of estimates of the European Commission: For the financial year 2025* (SEC(2024) 250). https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/7a0420e1-599e-4246-9131-ccb7d505d6d9_en?filename=DB2025-Statement-of-Estimates_1.pdf

and Development (OECD) **gender-equality marker**[67] and **EIGE's tracking allocations system**[68]. It involves assigning one of four scores (2, 1, 0*, 0) to each intervention. Depending on available information, tracking can be done at different intervention levels, such as project, action, or operational programme. The Commission's 2025 budget proposal reported on the results of the exercise.

While evidence for gendered ESIF investments in rural areas is difficult to establish, the 2021-2027 programming period has incorporated a novel **Gender Tracking Tool**[69]**.** Member States' managing authorities can utilise this tool to adhere to EU Cohesion policy guidelines for monitoring resource allocations on gender equality. This applies both during budget planning and the expenditure verification and evaluation stages, as part of annual performance reviews based on regular data transmission. While the use of this tool is not mandatory for Member States, it is designed to assist them in implementing the tracking mechanism outlined in Annex I, Table 7 of the Common Provisions Regulation.

Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 global objectives established by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[70]. Among the 17 Goals SDG 5 ('Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls') is the most relevant for GRASS CEILING.

Initially, EU institutions viewed this UN agenda as a compliance exercise, similar to comprehensive EU strategies like the Europe 2020 Strategy[71], designed to implement EU policies. However, with the arrival of the first von der Leyen Commission, there was a concerted effort to integrate the SDGs into its broad policy priorities.[72] This is a process that. if anything, has further entrenched under the 2nd von der Leyen Commission, which has mainstreamed these priorities even more, as outlined in the respective Mission Letters for each Commissioner[73]. Currently, the focus of the SDGs is predominantly on performance reporting, highlighting the positive impact of EU policies on the SDGs, rather than performance management, whereby EU investments are linked to progress towards meeting SDG 11 commitments.

European Semester

Similarly to the SDGs but focused on economic performance, the European Semester is an annual cycle of socio-economic and fiscal policy coordination within the European Union, established in

[67] DAC gender equality policy marker https://web-archive.oecd.org/temp/2024-02-06/369190-dac-gender-equality-marker.htm
[68] EIGE Gender budgeting https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gender-budgeting/steps-tracking-resource-allocations-gender-equality?language_content_entity=en
[69] Tool 8: Tracking resource allocations for gender equality in the ESIFs | European Institute for Gender Equality
[70] https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda
[71] Communication from the Commission EUROPE 2020 A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (COM/2010/2020 final) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52010DC2020
[72] European Commission (2020b) *Delivering on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – A comprehensive approach* (SWD(2020) 400 final). Brussels. Retrieved from: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13120-2020-INIT/en/pdf
[73] Von der Leyen, U. (2024) Europe's Choice: Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024–2029. *European Commission*. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en:contentReference[oaicite:1]{index=1}

2010 in the aftermath of the economic crisis. It aims to align the budgetary and economic policies of EU Member States with the objectives and rules agreed at the EU level. Each year, Member States must present a National Reform Programme in response to the Commission's Country-specific Reports (CSRs), which set out significant structural reforms-often extending beyond EU powers-such as pensions, healthcare, maternity leave, etc. These reforms aim to promote economic growth, job creation, macroeconomic stability, and sound public finances across the EU. Conversely, as extracted from Zeitlin & Vanhercke (2018)[74] , its EU multilevel governance structure does have direct effects on EU and domestic gender equality policies, both in terms of overlooking the, but also potentially increasing the social dimension of EU and domestic economic policies. This can help consciously or unconsciously avoid gender bias, ensuring that economic policies and structural reforms agreed at the EU level do not undermine gender equality.[75]

Better regulation

The EU Better Regulation agenda[76] is a framework designed to ensure that EU policies and laws are effective, efficient, and based on the best available evidence. The agenda includes guidelines and tools for evaluating, preparing, and managing legislation, with a focus on achieving desired impacts for society, the economy, and the environment (European Commission, 2021a). Better Regulation also seeks to promote transparency and stakeholder engagement in the policymaking process. [77]

As with the European Semester, Better Regulation can have both positive and negative bias to gender equality policies. The 2021 Better Regulation Guidelines indicate that impact assessments would be enhanced by examining, where applicable, the specific effects on gender equality; regions and types of territories (such as urban/rural areas, cross-border areas, and outermost regions, with territorial impacts) in Chapter 3 – Identifying impacts in evaluations, fitness checks and impact assessments (Tool #34); digital aspects (including interoperability); external aspects of internal EU policies; and the essential security interests of the EU (including resilience against hybrid threats).

Rural Proofing has been integrated into EU policy making via Tool #34 on Territorial Impact Assessments as a key instrument for better policy making and evaluation in rural areas, particularly as rural proofing does not involve desktop research but local stakeholder input. That said, the concept remains somewhat elusive despite the Commission's support of several initiatives and methodologies to flesh out rural proofing further in the 2024-2029 mandate (Gautisch et al., 2024; Atterton, 2022; Martino, et al. 2024; Bryce, 2024).[78]

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[74] Zeitlin, J., & Vanhercke, B. (2018). Socializing the European Semester: EU social and economic policy co-ordination in crisis and beyond. *Journal of European Public Policy, 25*(2), 149-174. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1363269

[75] Elomäki, A., & Gaweda, B. (2022). Looking for the 'social'in the European Semester: The ambiguous 'socialisation'of EU economic governance in the European Parliament. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, *18*(1). https://www.jcer.net/index.php/jcer/article/download/1227/941

[76] European Commission (2021a) *Better regulation guidelines* (SWD(2021) 305 final). Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox_en

[77] European Commission (2023a) 'Better regulation' toolbox – July 2023 edition. Retrieved from: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/9c8d2189-8abd-4f29-84e9-abc843cc68e0_en?filename=BR%20toolbox%20-%20Jul%202023%20-%20FINAL.pdf

[78] Martino, G., Miller, D., Chartier, O., Vilcu, R., Fao, E., & Zomer, B. (2024). Guidelines for the rural proofing of transition policies in

Regarding the systematic assessment of gender equality, in Chapter 3, the Tool #29 on fundamental rights, specifically addresses the promotion of equality and introduces a new non-discrimination and equality checklist that outlines the steps and questions to consider when evaluating the impact of various policy options on equality.

Moreover, the new Better Regulation Toolbox incorporates gender equality within the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where gender equality is a distinct goal. The EU's commitment to supporting SDG implementation is demonstrated by the inclusion of a new dedicated tool (Tool #19). Additionally, Tool #18 ('identification of impacts') aligns various impacts with the relevant SDGs. Each specific impact tool (Tools #21 to #36) also includes guidance for identifying the relevant SDGs and indicators.

2.6. A Union of Equality: what is expected from now?

In the context of the **renewed European Commission mandate[79] (2024–2029),** gender equality has emerged as a strategic priority across EU policy frameworks. Agriculture and rural development are increasingly recognised as critical areas where gender-transformative approaches are essential for long-term sustainability, equity, and resilience.

The **Belgian Presidency's conclusions[80]** (June 2024) highlighted the pivotal role of women in the agricultural sector and their wider contributions to social cohesion in rural areas. The conclusions stressed the importance of addressing structural barriers and enabling women's full participation in rural economies.

The EU's gender equality agenda is poised for renewed momentum during the 2024–2029 mandate of the European Commission. Under the re-elected Commission President **Ursula von der Leyen**, the political guidelines prioritise the creation of **a Union of Equality**, introducing several key initiatives including a **new Commissioner for Equality**, Hadja Lahbib, a **post-2025 Gender Equality Strategy**, and a **Roadmap for Women's Rights**, scheduled for release on **International Women's Day 2025**. These commitments seek to build on recent legislative advances, such as, pay

Europe. GRANULAR Project. Retrieved from https://www.ruralgranular.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/GRANULAR_D5.1_Guidelines_for_the_Rural_Proofing_of_Transition_Policies_in_Europe.pdf
Atterton, J., Korcekova, V., & ENRD Thematic Group Members. (2022). *A framework of rural proofing actions: Thematic group final output 2022*. European Network for Rural Development. Retrieved from https://pure.sruc.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/49866509/enrd_briefing_a_framework_for_rural_proofing_actions.pdf
Gaugitsch, R., Messinger, I., Neugebauer, W., Schuh, B., Toptsidou, M., & Böhme, K. (2022). Rural proofing – a foresight framework for resilient rural communities. *European Committee of the Regions*. Retrieved from https://www.cde.ual.es/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/QG0522139ENN.en_.pdf
Bryce, B. (2024), "Rural Proofing: Lessons from OECD countries and potential application to health", *OECD Regional Development Papers*, No. 73, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/4011899a-en

[79] European Commission (2024g) Political Guidelines 2024-2029 https://commission.europa.eu/document/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en. English version: e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en (europa.eu)
European Commission (2024h) Statement at the European Parliament Plenary by President Ursula von der Leyen, candidate for a second mandate 2024-2029 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/STATEMENT_24_3871
European Commission (2024i) Strategic agenda 2024-2029 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/

[80] https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/presidency-publishes-conclusions-on-the-future-of-agriculture-in-the-eu/

transparency while addressing enduring challenges like gender-based violence, the gender pension gap, and poverty in old age—issues that continue to disproportionately affect women.

The **Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture** was initiated in January 2024 and finalised in September of the same year. The dialogue's **final report[81] devoted a full section to gender equality and diversity, emphasizing** the importance of removing **persistent barriers for women in farming, including access to land, finance, technology, and representation in leadership**. The members of the Strategic Dialogue underscore that achieving full **gender equality is essential for** the future success of **food systems**, particularly through equal representation in leadership roles. More efforts are needed to **overcome stereotypes and enhance resilience and attractiveness in the sector**. Experts highlighted that achieving gender equality and empowerment in the food and farming sector will be highly challenging without enhancing the development of rural areas.

The **Strategic Dialogue urged** to foster inclusive rural development by ensuring that rural areas are equipped with infrastructures and services that support women in leading fruitful and dignified lives. It called on Member States to guarantee legal status for all agricultural workers, particularly women, and to ensure the full implementation of social conditionality under the CAP across the EU. The Dialogue also highlighted the importance of facilitating evidence-based policymaking through the collection and continuous assessment of comprehensive, long-term pan-European data, specifically to better understand the distinct challenges and opportunities faced by women farmers. Furthermore, it urged Member States to design, strengthen, and enforce legislation promoting equal access to and control over natural resources and production means, safeguarding women's land tenure and property rights. Gender-transformative budgeting within EU financial frameworks was identified as a critical step, alongside improving access to tailored financial services and resources for women in agriculture. The Strategic Dialogue also encouraged the promotion of women's participation and leadership in agricultural cooperatives, associations, and policy-making bodies, and advocated for strengthened European sectoral social dialogue (European Commission, 2024j).

On the 24 January 2025, **the mid-term report**[82] on **EU agricultural outlook 2024-2035** was published. Notably, it contains no mention or reference to women or gender-related issues.

The **Vision for Agriculture and Food**[83], adopted on 19 February 2025, outlines an ambitious strategy through 2040, aiming to secure a sustainable, competitive future for EU agriculture. Developed in consultation with the European Board for Agriculture and Food (EBAF)[84], that Vision builds on the Strategic Dialogue's findings, reaffirming the necessity of achieving full gender equality, particularly through equal representation in leadership roles and equitable access to land, financing, services,

[81] European Commission (2024j) Report of the Strategic Dialogue on the future of EU agriculture. A shared prospect for farming and food in Europe https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024_en.pdf

[82] European Commission (2024k) EU agricultural outlook, 2024-2035. European Commission, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, Brussels. https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/data-and-analysis/markets/outlook/medium-term_en

[83] European Commission (2025a) A Vision for Agriculture and Food Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations. COM(2025) 75 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0075

[84] European Board on Agriculture and Food https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/committees-and-expert-groups/ebaf_en

and technology.

Key initiatives announced are establishing a **Women in Farming Platform** to strengthen women's engagement. The Commission also plans to create an **EU Observatory for Agricultural Land** to enhance transparency in land transactions—an important step toward equitable land access. A **Generational Renewal Strategy** will also propose innovative measures to support young and new farmers, including women.

The **Roadmap for Women's Rights**[85], unveiled on 7 March 2025, lays out a long-term vision aligned with the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025. It addresses gender-based violence, pay equity, work-life balance, and women's political and economic participation. The accompanying **2025 Report on Gender Equality**[86] highlights persistent sectoral segregation, noting that women are overrepresented in undervalued sectors like care and education—an issue exacerbated in rural areas facing labour shortages and population ageing. In response to growing concerns around mental health in rural regions, the Commission has begun to incorporate the gender dimension into its mental health strategies for the farming community (European Commission, 2025g).

On 10 April 2025, the **FEMM Committee considered a draft opinion**[87] **on the Gender Equality Strategy 2025** presented by rapporteur Marko Vešligaj, where he calls on the Commission to present an ambitious strategy with concrete, tangible legislative and non-legislative measures in a number of key areas, such as gender-based violence, women's empowerment in the world of work, or equal representation and political participation. The draft report calls for strengthened efforts to promote gender equality by applying the principles of gender mainstreaming and intersectionality, including the integration of a gender perspective across all Commission proposals, particularly in budgetary processes. Recognising women's realities would align with broader EU goals, such as the Rural Vision 2040, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and commitments to territorial cohesion.

All of this sets the stage for the most significant policy development of 2025 and the subsequent three years of negotiations: the presentation of the EU budget, also known as the **Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2027-2034**[88]**.** Although the formal proposal is expected in July 2025, its outline has already been shared and discussed, including input from the GRASS CEILING project. The project called for gender-sensitive CAP measures, disaggregated data, inclusive rural development, and targeted support for women and underrepresented groups to ensure structural inequalities are addressed in future funding frameworks.

Although the EU budget has never exceeded 1.24% of the combined GDP of the EU-27 Member States—except during the COVID-19 crisis, when it temporarily rose to 2% through the EU recovery package (formally known as Next Generation EU or NGEU)—this is still relatively small compared to

[85] European Commission (2025b) A Roadmap for women's rights – Commission Communication https://commission.europa.eu/document/0c3fe55d-9e4f-4377-9d14-93d03398b434_en

[86] European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (2025g) *2025 report on gender equality in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/5262357

[87] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/product/product-details/20250404CAN74592

[88] European Commission (2025h) The road to the next multiannual financial framework Strasbourg, 11.2.2025 COM(2025) 46 final. Retrieved from: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6d47acb4-9206-4d0f-8f9b-3b10cad7b1ed_en?filename=Communication%25252520on%25252520the%25252520road%25252520to%25252520the%25252520next%25252520MFF_en.pdf

national budgets, which typically amount to around 50% of a country's GDP. However, the EU budget has a significantly higher leverage effect. However, the EU budget's leverage effect is significantly higher. Sapala and Shreeves[89] explain a number of reasons: in some cases EU fund transfers are the only source of public investment (as opposed to current expenditure such as salaries, pensions or maintenance of public infrastructure); in other cases, the EU budget is the only means of financing certain EU policies including gender equality policies; lastly, even in EU Member States with robust rural development and gender equality policies, the EU budget is often the key way to both try novel approaches and allow for policy transfer to and from other EU countries.

Therefore, the shape of the next **MFF is crucial for the implementation of the GRASS CEILING policy recommendations**. The Commission's proposal includes: (i) "A plan for each country with key reforms and investments with regional chapters where applicable" (provisionally termed National Single Plans); (ii) "focusing on our joint priorities, including promoting economic, social and territorial cohesion"; (iii) "a strengthened cohesion and growth policy with regions at its centre must be designed and implemented in partnership with national, regional and local authorities." While there is significant concern about such a radical move intended by the Commission (including the European Parliament, Committee of the Regions, EESC) the **new governance offers both challenges and opportunities for gender equality**.

As stressed by Pazos-Vidal[90] , by building on the template of NGEU and going even further than the CAP Strategic Plans have already done for the 2021-2027 period, **these new Single Plans** (even if they can be also complemented by regional single plans as also already stated by the Commission) **risk overlooking small scale, community-driven local development initiatives against achieving the large scale, economic, environmental and societal (and geopolitical) challenges faced by the EU.**

However, the potential for expanding gender policies and indeed gender budgeting is also expanded by the National Single Plans (or regional equivalent), as for the first time all EU investments in a Member State (not just CAP and Cohesion funding) need to be holistically designed and delivered. This is a great opportunity for policies that are by definition cross-cutting and intersectional, such as gender equality. Furthermore, while the EU budget has advanced priorities such as climate action, biodiversity, and gender equality, and the strengthening of its performance framework, there is still room for improvement. Despite progress, the integration of these priorities into programming can be more consistent. The revised Sustainable Investment Regulation[91] mandates that EU programmes consider the Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) principle, working conditions, and gender equality where relevant. Although, the EU performance framework is robust with meaningful indicators to monitor EU spending and results, the monitoring and reporting rules remain complex, with varying methodologies and indicators across programmes. This is why the link with the previously cited European Semester-along with the delivery of the EU SDGs and the European Pillar for Social Rights-comes into play; for the milestones and targets for delivering EU funds needs to be

[89] Sapala, M., & Shreeves, R. (2025) *Gender-responsive budgeting: State of play and opportunities for the European Parliament's 10th term*. European Parliamentary Research Service. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/767228/EPRS_BRI(2025)767228_EN.pdf767228_EN.pdf

[90] Pazos-Vidal, S. (2024) *Last chance saloon for EU Cohesion Policy post 2027*. AEIDL Policy Brief. Retrieved from https://www.aeidl.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Pazos-Vidal-2024-Cohesion-Policy-post-2027-AEIDL-Policy-Brief.pdf

[91] Regulation (EU) 2020/852 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2020 on the establishment of a framework to facilitate sustainable investment, and amending Regulation (EU) 2019/2088. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32020R0852

tied to compliance with these broad-ranging strategies.

03 Insights and evidence on gender dynamics in agricultural innovation and policy: a synthesis of project findings

Chapter 3[92] of this deliverable functions as a **bridge between the project's research outputs and the subsequent policy recommendations. The section synthesises the key insights from across the project's research, analytical and empirical workstreams to inform evidence-based policy recommendations.** Rather than reproducing the content of the deliverable analysed, it distils core findings and trends that have emerged across multiple areas of research, practice, and stakeholder engagement.

The synthesis draws from diverse sources: quantitative and qualitative data analyses, foresight and trend mapping, literature reviews, benchmarking exercises, and extensive engagement within Living Labs across nine countries. Together, these findings illuminate how gender dynamics operate in the agricultural and rural innovation landscape, highlighting both persistent barriers and emerging opportunities.

The development of each subsection has been directly informed by a set of targeted project deliverables.

Section 3.1, which maps the data landscape on rural women and women farmers in Europe, draws directly from Deliverable 1.1. This policy brief offers a critical overview of the availability, quality, and limitations of statistical data concerning rural women. It identifies substantial gaps in sex-disaggregated and rural-specific data, which constrain efforts to accurately monitor gender inequality in agricultural and rural development. The insights from this analysis are used to formulate recommendations related to improving gender-sensitive data collection and evidence-based policy monitoring.

Section 3.2 builds on the findings of Deliverable 2.1, which provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing academic and grey literature on rural women-led innovation across Europe. This research contributes significantly to understanding the processes, drivers, and structural challenges shaping women's innovation in rural contexts. These insights are essential for informing policy

[92] This section (Section 3) presents key research findings from Work Packages 1 to 4. The full list of references supporting this synthesis is available in the corresponding deliverables, which can be accessed at https://www.grassceiling.eu/results-resources/deliverables/ and in *section 6.2. Scientific and other publications of interest* in this report.

recommendations that address structural invisibility and promote tailored support for rural women as innovators and changemakers.

The exploration of emerging trends and futures in **Section 3.3 is underpinned by Deliverable 1.2**. This brief presents a foresight analysis that examines key megatrends and their implications for rural women's innovation trajectories. It identifies how structural changes are reshaping opportunities and risks for women in rural areas and provides critical context for scenario building policy recommendations aimed at enabling gender-responsive innovation ecosystems.

Insights into the gendered dynamics of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) in **Section 3.4 are drawn from Deliverable 2.2.** This synthesis report reveals the deeply embedded gender norms, institutional practices, and exclusionary mechanisms that prevent women from fully participating in or benefiting from AKIS structures. The findings inform recommendations focused on reforming these systems to become more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to diverse needs.

Section 3.5 reflects the practical and experiential learning generated through the project's Living Labs, based on Deliverables 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3. These include methodological guidelines and training resources developed for the Labs, detailed reports on their operation across nine countries, and cross-lab insights emerging from collective learning events. This evidence base highlights both the challenges and transformative potential of peer-led, participatory innovation processes for rural women, and supports recommendations that advocate for replicable, community-based approaches.

Finally, **Section 3.6 draws on the results of the project's gender benchmarking exercise presented in Deliverable 4.2, Deliverable 4.3, alongside early reflections from Deliverable 6.8 practice abstract on the European Union Women's position in EU agriculture and rural areas**. These insights feed directly into recommendations aimed at strengthening policy coherence, accountability, and gender mainstreaming across governance levels.

3.1. Mapping the data landscape on rural women and women farmers in Europe

The **statistical analysis** conducted in Work Package 1 (WP1) of the project, drawing **on Eurostat data, national datasets from nine countries[93], and grey literature, highlights substantial gender disparities in agriculture and rural employment across EU Member States**.

In 2020, the European Union (EU) had **9.1 million agricultural holdings**. Within these**, the majority (68.4%) of managers were men**. Approximately 31.6% of managers were women. Eurostat figures from 2023 highlight **persistent inequalities in rural labour markets**. The employment rate for rural women aged 20–64 was 69.7%, slightly below the EU average across all degrees of urbanisation (70.2%). However, the gender gap in part-time employment is stark: 26.5% of rural women worked part-time, compared to just 6.0% of rural men—a 20.5 percentage point gap. This reflects entrenched structural inequalities, often linked to inadequate care services and traditional gender norms and role divisions in household, where women are disproportionately responsible for care

[93] Living Labs of the GRASS CEILING's project: Croatia, Ireland, Sweden, Spain, The Netherlands, Italy, Norway, Lithuania and Scotland https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/

activities, and community roles.

Between 2010 and 2020 the EU lost 3.0 million farms. However, the number of fully organic farms in the EU more than doubled. In 2020, **almost three-quarters** (73.1 %) **of the managers of fully organic farms were males**, a higher proportion than for all the EU's farms (68.4 %). The gender imbalance among farmers was even stronger in organic farming; women farm managers represented just 26.9 % of all managers of fully organic farms compared with 31.6 % on all farms.

Rural women also face heightened risks of poverty and social exclusion. In 2023, 22.5% of rural women were at risk, compared to 20.4% of men. **Educational and agricultural training challenges further affect long-term prospects**. That same year, 13.4% of young rural women and 16.5% of young rural men had no more than lower secondary education. **In rural areas of the EU, young women are more likely to have a tertiary level of education compared to young men**, with 38.4% of women aged 25–34 attaining this level, compared to only 25.3% of men in the same age group. However, the share of rural women with tertiary education stood at 38.4%, 10 percentage points below the EU average across all areas. Early school leaving remains high, with 8.3% of rural young women and 11.2% of young men leaving education prematurely, restricting access to skilled employment.

In the agricultural sector, **women remain underrepresented in agribusiness leadership, with the largest and most productive farms still predominantly male-run**. Despite marginal improvements, systemic gaps in gender-disaggregated data obscure a full understanding of women's roles in land ownership, capital access, and decision-making within agricultural organisations.

Data scarcity is especially problematic in areas **critical to policy design, such as social security, farm diversification or innovative farming practices**.

While the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027 includes gender equality as an objective, most CAP National Strategic Plans address it only superficially—likely due to limited empirical data. **Spain provides** a promising example with recent, **gender-disaggregated data on socio-ecological farming, setting a precedent for others**. However, **EU-wide statistics often lack such detail, especially concerning women's participation in agro-ecological systems, local supply chains, and social innovation on farms, forms of alternative farming typically under-recognized in policy.**

There is also a significant **lack of data on rural women's entrepreneurship, unpaid labour, participation in Local Action Groups (LAGs), and involvement in farming cooperatives and social innovation initiatives**. Furthermore, where such data exist, they are often not publicly available or are limited to qualitative findings.

To close these data gaps, it is essential to integrate gender-specific variables into all major EU data and monitoring systems, including the Farm Sustainability Data Network (FSDN)—which replaces the former EU Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN)—the CAP Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (PMEF), the Rural Observatory, the EU Agri-Food Chain Observatory, and the Agri Sustainability Compass. It is also important that gender considerations are reflected in the upcoming EU Observatory for Agricultural Land, as outlined in the Vision for Agriculture and Food.

Finally, as part of WP1, the project analysed the EU Directive on **work-life balance for parents and carers, with a focus on maternity and paternity leave, and access to childcare** across national examples. The analysis highlighted **wide disparities in implementation across Member States** (leave duration, pay, and access to childcare), affecting the division of care and so rural women's ability to balance family and work responsibilities. Improving parental leave entitlements is essential to gender equality at work, as it enables parents to share care responsibilities at home, promotes work–life balance, supports child development and has a positive effect on women's labour force participation and wages (ILO, 2025).[94]

Summary of key messages

- Persistent **gender disparities** in agricultural and rural employment remain, with **only 31.6% of farm managers being women**.
- **High gender gap in part-time employment** (26.5% of rural women vs. 6.0% of rural men), reflecting care burdens and entrenched gender roles.
- **Rural women face greater risk of poverty and social exclusion** (22.5% vs. 20.4% for men).
- **Young women are more likely to have a tertiary level of education compared to young men**, with 38.4% of women aged 25–34 attaining this level, compared to only 25.3% of men in the same age group. However, **lower levels of tertiary education** among rural women (38.4%) compared to the EU average, with high early school leaving rates.
- **Severe underrepresentation** of women in leadership roles in large or organic farms (only 26.9% of organic farm managers are women).
- **Inconsistent and incomplete gender-disaggregated data** on:
  - Land ownership, access to capital, and decision-making
  - Unpaid labour and farm diversification
  - Participation in LAGs, cooperatives, and social innovation
- **Most CAP National Strategic Plans address gender equality superficially**, partly due to the lack of empirical data.
- **Inconsistent National maternity/paternity leave policies and childcare provision across Europe** hinder rural women's full economic participation, making it necessary to establish maternity and paternity leave policies that guarantee compulsory and paid parental leave.
- **Women remain underrepresented** in agribusiness leadership, with the largest and most productive farms still predominantly male-run.

3.2. Existing knowledge of rural women-led innovation

As part of the GRASS CEILING project, research is being conducted and **progress is being made in understanding what is already known about the processes, driving factors and challenges affecting innovation led by women in rural areas of Europe**.

Rural areas cover the majority of Europe's territory, accounting for 83% of its land and home to

[94] International Labour Organization (2025) Closing the gender gap in paid parental leaves: Better parental leaves for a more caring world of work (ILO Care Economy Brief No. 1). International Labour Organization. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/ILO%20Care%20Economy%20Brief%20-%20Closing%20the%20gender%20gap%20in%20paid%20parental%20leaves.pdf

approximately 25% of the population. Women living in these areas navigate a complex set of challenges shaped by gendered social norms, territorial inequalities, and gaps in policy attention. While rural women are a diverse group (varying in ethnicity, age, education, socio-economic background, and family roles) **they often encounter common structural barriers that limit their access to resources, services, and decision-making spaces.** These shared constraints stem from intersecting factors such as inadequate public infrastructure, gendered labour divisions, and limited institutional support, which continue to affect their full participation in rural development.

A **key finding from the literature review** conducted for Deliverable 2.1 (covering from 2014 to 2023, with older relevant sources included as needed) is that **the work of rural women continues to be largely invisible and undervalued. Their contributions to farming and local economies are often unpaid and go unrecorded in official statistics, which not only diminishes their social status but also perpetuates economic inequalities, such as the gender pay and pension gaps.** Rural women frequently perform **dual roles**—supporting the household while contributing to the farm or other rural enterprises—yet their work is rarely acknowledged in ownership or leadership structures. There is also the **significance of women's "off-farm" work** that has changed over time; it has initially supported women's financial independence but later has often become critical to the survival and sustainability of family farms. **Women's involvement is still often perceived as supplementary,** or substitutive for roles men are less interested in. This **perception, entrenched in social norms** and institutional practices, significantly restricts their access to decision-making platforms, land ownership, financial resources, and entrepreneurial networks.

Rural women across Europe also face more systemic constraints than their urban counterparts, with poorer access to essential services like childcare, healthcare, transport, and broadband infrastructure. Despite higher educational attainment in some regions, these achievements have not translated into better employment outcomes, and rural labour markets remain deeply gender-segregated. **This limits the ability of women to fully participate in or benefit from agricultural and rural development policies, which typically remain gender-blind**. The Common Agricultural Policy, for example, prioritises conventional, male-dominated farm models and largely overlooks the structural disadvantages women face, such as unequal inheritance rights, smaller landholdings, and greater unpaid care responsibilities.

Nonetheless, **there is growing evidence of rural women emerging as pivotal agents of change, particularly in the field of socio-ecological innovation.** Many women have turned to entrepreneurship not only as a means of economic survival but also as a strategic response to the limited income from traditional farming. Their innovations frequently focus on farm diversification, organic production, renewable energy, agritourism, community-supported agriculture, and care farming. These approaches often integrate social, environmental, and community objectives, indicating a broader, sustainability-oriented vision of rural development. A common driver behind many women-led innovations is the imperative to sustain the family farm and secure the well-being of their households. While these activities can generate a significant share of farm income, as shown in studies on multifunctional farming, they are still frequently framed as supplementary or marginal within dominant agricultural narratives. For many, these ventures are not aimed at growth or scale,

but at balancing income generation with community care and ecological responsibility.

The green transition must be **gender-just**. Women must be actively included in the design and implementation of agri-environmental policies, with targeted support for their leadership in sustainable, climate-resilient farming models.

Women tend to employ inclusive, networked, and collaborative innovation practices. They often participate in informal learning and mentoring, rely on local social capital, and build strong horizontal networks with peers, NGOs, and local cooperatives. This collaborative style of innovation contrasts with more individualistic or competitive models typically associated with conventional entrepreneurship. However, access to financial support remains a significant hurdle. Public enterprise managers frequently perceive women as less profitable investments, further discouraging female entrepreneurship.

Evidence from the GRASS CEILING Living Labs shows that women-led initiatives often face scepticism from public enterprise managers and funding bodies, who tend to perceive them as less commercially viable. This perception persists despite clear evidence of the creativity, economic contribution, and community value generated by women's enterprises. The project also highlights the challenges women face in accessing micro-finance and having their business models fully recognised, particularly when these are rooted in care, sustainability, or social innovation areas often undervalued in conventional funding criteria.

Another vital theme in the literature concerns the **demographic and social implications of women's presence or absence in rural communities.** The out-migration of young women seeking better employment and lifestyle opportunities in urban areas exacerbates rural depopulation and contributes to a masculinised, aging population in remote regions. Yet, where women choose to stay or return, their role in community revitalisation is fundamental. Their decision to settle in rural areas often secures the long-term residence of entire families, contributing not only to demographic stability but also to the resilience and diversity of rural economies.

The **role of women in innovation has received relatively little attention in research**, particularly in the context of rural transformation. Where studies do exist, they suggest that women-led innovation is deeply embedded in place-based knowledge, family strategies, and community ties. Their innovations often emerge out of necessity, driven by socio-economic pressures rather than formal institutional support. Furthermore, existing support structures—such as training, funding, and agricultural extension services—tend to be designed around male-dominated models of agriculture and entrepreneurship, limiting women's capacity to access and benefit from them.

Some particularly under-researched topics include the experiences of women in gendered forestry, among the Sámi and other Indigenous populations, and in crofting systems. These women face compounded challenges that intersect with ethnicity, tradition, and land tenure systems. In such contexts, women often lack visibility and influence, with inheritance and succession rules frequently favouring men, despite legal gender equality. This reinforces long-standing patterns of male dominance and restricts the transmission of land and resources to women innovators.

In conclusion, **the existing body of knowledge clearly shows that rural women are already**

engaging in transformative innovation despite significant institutional and societal barriers. Their work in diversifying agriculture, promoting environmental sustainability, and building community resilience is indispensable to the future of rural Europe. However, their potential is being stifled by a combination of structural inequality, policy blind spots, and outdated gender norms, roles and stereotypes due to patriarchal structures. There is a pressing need for policy frameworks that recognise and actively support the distinct forms of innovation women pursue. This requires **rethinking existing agricultural and rural development policies, developing gender-sensitive support tools, ensuring equitable access to land and finance, challenging and changing existing cultural norms and investing in local infrastructures that enable women to thrive as innovators**.

Summary of key messages

- **A broader and more inclusive understanding of innovation is urgently needed in agriculture and rural development.** Currently, innovation is narrowly defined—centring on technology, productivity, and profit—which overlooks the kinds of transformative practices often led by women. These include social, ecological, and community-based innovations that are essential for making agriculture more sustainable and rural areas more viable. One of our key findings is that women are frequently not recognised as innovators simply because their contributions fall outside this biased, growth-driven definition.
- **Rural women's work remains largely invisible and undervalued**, often unpaid and unrecorded in official statistics, reinforcing economic inequality and gendered social imbalance.
- **Gender norms and institutional practices** portray women's contributions as supplementary, limiting their access to land, leadership, credit, and decision-making.
- **Rural labour markets remain deeply gender-segregated**, despite educational advancements among rural women.
- **Despite efforts in EU legislation, gender inequalities still exist in the EU. Existing agricultural and rural development policies are gender-blind**, especially the CAP, which prioritises conventional, male-dominated farming models.
- **Lack of tailored support structures**—training, funding, extension services—aligned with the needs and models of women-led innovation.
- **Access to financial support is limited**, due to risk perceptions that present women as less profitable investments.
- **Women are not represented in political life**, they are mostly excluded from formal male dominated networks, and they are unable to make or influence decisions.
- **A key driver for women innovators across the studies is the necessity and the aim of maintaining the sustainability of the family farm**.
- **Critical areas remain under-researched**, including Sámi women, gendered forestry, and crofting systems, where women face compounded barriers.
- **Demographic challenges** (e.g., youth out-migration and ageing populations) are intensified by the lack of gender-sensitive rural retention strategies.
- **Women are involved in diversifying farm business, focusing on sustainability and environmentally friendly practices.**
- **Women have relevant role in rural areas as agents of change in the ecological**

transition and in the fight against depopulation.

- **Networking and collective action are key factors for** rural women to enhance their possibilities as **entrepreneurs and innovators.**
- **Business training and mentorship should be catered to women's specific needs.**
- There is a **lack of research** on farms and especially non-farm rural women's experience in leading socio-ecological innovations.

3.3. Emerging trends and futures: rural women's innovation pathways

The future of women-led innovation in rural areas is influenced by a mix of social, environmental, economic, technological, and cultural factors. **Foresight can help policymakers understand upcoming challenges and opportunities, allowing them to design inclusive and forward-thinking policies** that better support women's empowerment and innovation in rural communities.

For instance, the latest **Commission 2023 Strategic Foresight Report**,[95] expressly mentions that changes are needed so that some parts of the workforce, in particular young people, those born outside the EU, and women, are sufficiently covered by social protection systems. In addition, it highlights that the transitions will require strong European education and training systems, with an emphasis on adaptability. The availability of workers with the appropriate technical and soft skills will be crucial for the viability of the transitions and the EU competitiveness. For instance, reducing the STEM gender gap is essential for advancing green and digital technologies.

The **project's foresight work unfolded in two key phases: initially involving the 9 GRASS CEILING Living Labs and later expanding to include over 20 stakeholders comprising Living Lab co-leads, GRASS CEILING Project Partners, and members of the European Policy Forum for Women-Led Innovation**.

This **collaborative foresight exercise examined how emerging megatrends are reshaping both the obstacles and opportunities facing rural women entrepreneurs**. Participants applied structured foresight methodologies to develop future scenarios and identify the key drivers, barriers, and enablers of women-led innovation in agriculture and rural communities.

From the input gathered during the two workshops, **four scenario narratives were developed**:

- **Scenario 1 –** Shiny prospects, hidden pressures: challenges in rural renewal
- **Scenario 2 –** Rural renaissance in empty fields: a thriving yet fragile rural revival
- **Scenario 3 –** Silver linings and silver hair: adapting to rural depopulation
- **Scenario 4 –** Growing communities, shrinking support: rural resilience tested

The four scenarios co-created in the foresight workshops—ranging from revitalised rural economies under high investment, to declining communities grappling with shrinking support—reveal a shared

[95] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council 2023 Strategic Foresight Report Sustainability and people's wellbeing at the heart of Europe's Open Strategic Autonomy. COM/2023/376 final. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2023%3A376%3AFIN

desire for inclusive and community-driven models of rural innovation. Across all scenarios, women envisioned futures where access to education, services, networks, and recognition were more equitably distributed.

The most **pressing trends identified include worsening resource scarcity, climate crises, technological acceleration, continuing urbanisation, and shifting global social values. Rural women face structural constraints amplified by these forces, such as depopulation, limited infrastructure, unequal access to resources, and persistent gender norms, roles and stereotypes**. Yet, these same trends also present critical entry points for transformation. For example, while climate and environmental crises poses risks to traditional farming models, it also creates demand for sustainable practices. Similarly, while urbanisation often drains rural talent, it also opens opportunities for rural-urban linkages and new markets for digital or artisanal products.

Participants in the foresight process identified **social factors such as cultural attitudes towards gender, ageing demographics, and the "double burden" of care and work as the most impactful on their innovation potential**. Many expressed that **current rural values often devalue women's contributions, while prevailing stereotypes continue to inhibit recognition of their roles as innovators and leaders due to existing power structures rooted in patriarchal values. These continue to create structural and cultural barriers to women's full participation in crucial sectors such as agriculture. Economic and policy conditions also emerged as major determinants**, with gaps in credit access, digital infrastructure, and tailored support services continuing to hinder women's progress. However, many also demonstrated resilience and readiness to adapt, identifying connectivity, remote work, and peer learning as enablers of future innovation.

They also emphasised the importance of targeted policy reforms, especially those that address gender-specific barriers and promote visibility of women's entrepreneurship.

Crucially, **the foresight findings highlight that supporting women's innovation must be closely linked to broader rural development efforts**. Addressing foundational issues such as depopulation, service gaps, and policy blind spots is essential to reinforce and amplify women's potential as agents of rural renewal.

Summary of key messages

- **Persistent structural constraints**—such as limited access to credit, digital infrastructure, and public services—disproportionately affect rural women.
- **Prevailing stereotypes** continue to devalue women's contributions and leadership in innovation and rural economies.
- **Cultural attitudes and ageing demographics** exacerbate the "double burden" of unpaid care and economic survival, limiting time and resources for entrepreneurship.
- **Rural depopulation and service decline** increase isolation and reduce support networks, further hampering women's innovation potential.
- Rural innovation policies **fail to account for gender-specific barriers**, particularly those linked to care responsibilities, social norms, and visibility.
- **Policy** persists with inadequate integration of gender into long-term rural development and innovation planning.

3.4. Gender norms and barriers in Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS)

GRASS CEILING project explored the **gender norms and structural barriers affecting women innovators within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) across the nine European countries** in which the project has been developed: Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, Spain, and Sweden. The methodology combined focus groups with women and men innovators in rural and agricultural sectors and interviews with key AKIS stakeholders, including advisors, policymakers, support organisations, and more specifically, digital experts. By gathering insights from the different actors, the project gained a **comprehensive view of how gender norms shape women's experiences and access to innovation support**. The approach sought to reveal not only the challenges women encounter but also the informal support systems, driving motivations, and institutional factors that influence their ability to innovate within rural contexts.

Research reveals that **women face multifaceted and deeply ingrained obstacles in accessing support, recognition, and resources vital to agricultural innovation**. These barriers are not only institutional but also social, often rooted in traditional perceptions of gender roles and reinforced by both formal systems and everyday interactions. **All national reports identified gender norms inhibiting women innovators.**

Women are frequently overlooked in the agricultural sector, their work considered supplementary rather than central. This invisibility is reinforced by practices such as male-only registration for land and farming assets, and by the tendency of agricultural advisors and financial institutions to engage primarily with men. Many women report being dismissed or not taken seriously by advisors, with their ideas undervalued and their expertise questioned. In several cases, female innovators described needing to include male family members in official documentation or funding applications simply to be considered credible.

The **unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities further constrains women's capacity to engage in innovation**. Across countries, women bear a disproportionate share of childcare and household duties, limiting their time and flexibility to pursue entrepreneurial activities. This imbalance is exacerbated by a **lack of institutional support for care infrastructure**, such as flexible childcare and parental leave policies adapted to self-employed rural women. **Access to land and financial resources also remains unequa**l, with women often lacking the legal ownership or capital necessary to implement and scale their ideas. Funding mechanisms frequently favour larger, high-tech innovations, excluding the small-scale, socially embedded projects more typical of women-led initiatives.

Despite these systemic constraints, **women innovators demonstrate remarkable resilience**. Many draw on informal support systems (family, peer networks, local communities, and online platforms) to sustain and develop their projects. These networks provide essential psychological support, mentoring, and opportunities for knowledge exchange, especially in contexts where formal institutions fall short. Digital tools, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, have played a vital

role in increasing women's access to training and visibility, though rural connectivity gaps remain a challenge.

Agricultural innovation across the studied countries reveals distinct gendered patterns. The main results show that men were typically engaged in new farm technologies or production methods, looking to improve productivity or profit. Women innovators searched for ways to utilise existing resources in new ways or develop new ideas, often related to multifunctional farming. Despite these differences, there were many shared motivations between men and women. However, autonomy was mentioned as a vital motivation primarily by women innovators. It is important to notice that the motivation to innovate was often multifaceted, with multiple motivations interlocking. Women innovators identified the family as a primary support system, whereas men generally referred to like-minded colleagues. Both tended to evaluate the support systems as difficult to access in many areas. Regarding barriers, women often referred to a lack of self-confidence and are seen as more fearful of failure and generally report a lower propensity toward risk than men. Men innovators also experienced a fear of failure and discussed the impact of mental health issues. The imbalance of domestic responsibilities was identified as a significant barrier for women. Both men and women innovators mentioned ill-equipped mentors and innovation support systems as barriers. In addition, many women experienced the agricultural knowledge and innovation system as discriminatory in dismissing women and their ideas.

According to the stakeholders, **initiatives targeting women through training, finance advice, and entrepreneurship programmes, were considered essential for women**. The importance of female role models and women networks in boosting confidence was frequently mentioned. It was generally age and not gender which affected digital literacy.

Gender norms were present in the social context of women, influencing the attitudes and behaviour of the people around them. However, it is important to note that women identified their partner, family and friends as their most important support network.

Across countries, there was also ambivalence in reporting on gender specificity while worrying about reproducing gender stereotypes. This research demonstrates that gender norms and stereotypes are still inhibiting the success of women innovators.

Stakeholders and researchers alike recognise that AKIS must become more inclusive if it is to fully benefit from the diverse perspectives and approaches women bring to rural innovation. This includes improving the gender balance among advisors, promoting visibility for women innovators, simplifying access to funding for small-scale initiatives, and embedding gender sensitivity in training and institutional practices. Many respondents underline the need for a cultural transformation in agriculture-one that challenges its male-dominated structure and increases the visibility and recognition of women's contributions. This dominance is deeply rooted in the family business ideology, which often favours male inheritance to preserve ownership in the event of divorce and reflects traditional patriarchal norms that position men as primary farmers and providers, while relegating women to secondary or supportive roles. This could be achieved by offering accessible skill-focused training, providing confidence-boosting coaching, and increasing subsidies. Ultimately, overcoming these barriers requires not only policy reforms but also a shift in cultural and

intergenerational attitudes, valuing women's contributions not as exceptions but as essential drivers of rural resilience and transformation.

The **limited access to key services**, such as childcare, education, healthcare and transportation, **constrains women's agency and reinforces gendered labour divisions in rural areas**. These structural barriers not only restrict women's professional engagement in agriculture and knowledge systems but also hinder broader efforts to retain the young, family farms and skilled populations in peripheral regions. In line with these findings of the GRASS CEILING project, it is worth noting that the **recent Letta Report**[96] underscored the importance of enabling people to live, work, and thrive in their home regions, rather than being compelled to leave due to lack of opportunity. Specifically, it states: *We must strive to continue securing the free movement of people but also ensure a **"freedom to stay"***. The report calls for equal treatment and universal access to Services of General Interest (SGIs) to be guaranteed across all EU regions, especially in rural and remote areas, by ensuring full territorial coverage at affordable prices. Furthermore, the European Commission has defined this as **"right to stay"**-a concept aimed at promoting social cohesion and transparency. To support this, clear cost-determination rules must be established to enable fair access for all, particularly vulnerable populations. This reflects a broader EU policy shift toward solidarity and inclusive service provision.

Summary of key messages

- **Gender norms and institutional bias remain core barriers** to women's full participation in agricultural innovation systems across Europe.
- **Underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles** within AKIS and insufficient visibility of women-led innovation.
- **Systemic bias in institutional practices**, including male-only land registration, advisor engagement primarily with men, and funding systems favouring large-scale, high-tech (often male-led) projects.
- **Discriminatory treatment by agricultural advisors and financial institutions.**
- **Disproportionate domestic and care responsibilities** limit women's time, flexibility, and access to entrepreneurial opportunities.
- **Lack of institutional care infrastructure**, such as flexible childcare and inclusive parental leave for rural self-employed women.
- **Limited access to land ownership and financial capital**, restricting women's ability to start or scale innovations.
- **Digital access disparities** and connectivity gaps in rural areas constrain women's use of online resources and training.
- **Innovation support systems and mentorship are often ill-equipped** to support women or small-scale, multifunctional innovations.
- **Low self-confidence**, exacerbated by dismissive experiences, was a commonly reported barrier among women.

[96] Letta, E. (2024) *Much more than a market: Speed, security, solidarity*. Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU citizens. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf

- **Insufficient access to Services of General Interest (SGIs)**—such as education, transport, healthcare, and broadband undermines rural women's ability to stay, innovate, and thrive in their communities.
- **The lack of integrated, territorially sensitive policies** contributes to youth out-migration and the weakening of family farming systems, making the "freedom to stay" an uneven reality across EU regions.

3.5. Facilitating peer learning and exchange: cross-lab insights and reflections

The project involves women-innovators on farms and in rural areas who participate in our nine socio-ecological women innovator Living Labs (LL) in nine case study countries. Each Living Lab has followed an individualised approach based on the unique LL contexts, innovator requirements and socio-cultural dynamics unfolding in their LLs. Table 1 provides an overview of the GRASS CEILING Living Labs, including their country context, co-leads, thematic focus, and a brief description.

Table 1. GRASS CEILING Living Labs overview

Country	Lab co-lead	Focus	More info
Croatia	Chamber of commerce, UNIZG FAZ	Empower rural women entrepreneurs in their bioeconomy business ventures	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/croatia/info/
Ireland	Young Farmers' Association (Macra n Feirme), SETU	Agri- and rural socio-ecological innovations drawing on 'the local' through a sustainable lens	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/ireland/info/
Italy	Legacoop, CIHEAM Bari	Agro-ecological transition practices and challenges	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/italy/info/
Lithuania	VŠĮ Agri-Food Lithuania DIH, LCSS	Small farm social capital in rural areas	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/lithuania/info/
The Netherlands	Women's Committee of the Dutch Farm Union/ZLTO , WU	Women innovators and entrepreneurs	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/netherlands/info/
Norway	Oi! Trondelag Food and Drink, RURALIS	Local Food Innovations	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/norway/info/
Scotland	Scottish Crofting Federation, UNEW	Crofting (land tenure system) areas of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/scotland/info/
Spain	Cooperativas Agro-alimentarias de Espana, UVA	Innovative agri-food initiatives led by women in uninhabited rural territories in the north of the country	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/spain/info/
Sweden	Rural Sweden Jönköping, SLU	Farming, forestry and related activities	https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/sweden/info/

Source: own elaboration

The GRASS CEILING Living Labs have demonstrated that **structured, peer-led innovation environments are essential for fostering inclusive and impactful rural innovation**. Central to this approach is a commitment to peer learning and knowledge exchange, embedded across the nine national Living Labs through methodological coherence and participatory practice.

At the heart of this process is the **adoption of Participatory Action Research (PAR)**[97], which reframes all lab participants—not only the rural women innovators, but also academic and practitioner co-leads—as co-creators of knowledge.

Each lab acts as a **learning community**, convening at least three times annually over three years. These meetings are not merely forums for discussion but are guided by a shared innovation journey that includes ideation, prototyping, testing, and reflection. A consistent meeting structure and shared session plans allow labs to pursue individual goals while contributing to a collective knowledge base. The use of **Business Model Innovation (BMI)**[98] frameworks ensured that peer learning was grounded in practical, outcome-oriented processes.

Lab co-leads played a pivotal role in enabling peer exchange. As trusted intermediaries, they mentor participants individually, foster reflective practice, and share lab-specific insights across the wider network. Co-leads are also responsible for tailoring resources, capturing progress, and ensuring that the innovation ecosystem remains responsive to participants' evolving needs.

To further support transnational learning, the project integrates **annual showcase events** and ongoing digital sharing of training materials and tools.

Throughout the first year of operation, **the nine Living Labs, each situated in a unique socio-cultural and agricultural context**, have enabled women innovators to share experiences, co-create solutions, and build networks that enhance both personal and professional growth. Through facilitated learning environments led by academic and practitioner co-leads, the labs have nurtured trust, supported identity development, and enabled mutual exchange between women and multi-actor stakeholders.

In various contexts, **women entered the labs unsure if their work could be considered innovative**. However, through collaborative exercises such as identity workshops, mapping, and the sharing of personal and professional journeys, participants came to see the unique and often under-recognised value of their contributions to rural development. **The labs offered safe spaces for these reflections to unfold, supported by peer validation and the opportunity to learn from others facing similar challenges**.

Throughout the labs, the importance of adapting facilitation styles and content to the needs of participants became clear. The approach in each Living Lab was tailored based on the stage of

[97] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331183566_Participatory_Action_Research_Theory_and_Methods_for_Engaged_Inquiry

[98] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405844023051034

innovation of participants. **In contexts with more advanced innovation ecosystems, such as Norway, Spain and Ireland, lab sessions emphasised advanced training and stakeholder engagement. In contrast, in emerging innovation settings like Lithuania, greater attention was given to early-stage support, confidence-building, and basic innovation concepts.** Despite these differences, a common thread across all labs was the recognition that peer learning is most effective when participants can relate to each other's experiences and are given the time and space to engage meaningfully. Many co-leads adjusted the pace and content of sessions in real time, responding to participant feedback and co-developing activities based on what was resonating with the group.

The **presence and involvement of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) stakeholders have added a critical dimension to the learning experience**. In several labs, stakeholders evolved from passive supporters to active co-participants in the learning process. They attended meetings, facilitated training, shared feedback, and in some cases, re-evaluated their own assumptions about innovation and gender roles in rural contexts.

Informal knowledge-sharing also played a crucial role in sustaining peer exchange between formal sessions. Digital tools like WhatsApp and LinkedIn allowed participants to continue conversations, share resources, and offer encouragement. In-person meetings, wherever feasible, were preferred by most labs, with participants citing the emotional and social value of gathering in a neutral space outside their daily routines. In Scotland, for example, women arrived early to meetings to connect informally, reinforcing the importance of relationship-building to the success of the Living Lab model.

Cross-lab learning was further enhanced through project-wide initiatives such as the Brussels showcase event (September 2023), **Vilnius showcase event** (November 2024) **and regular co-lead review meetings**. These provided structured opportunities to exchange insights, reflect on lessons learned, and transfer successful practices between labs.

While many co-designed tools were developed locally, the need for better mechanisms to share and document these artefacts across labs was recognised, and future review meetings are set to address this gap. Key **insights from the implementation of Living Labs include:**

- **peer learning is most effective when embedded in a context of emotional safety, mutual respect, and shared ownership.**
- **co-leads benefit from the flexibility to adapt methodologies to their participants' stages of development and innovation maturity.**
- **stakeholders must be viewed as co-learners and enablers rather than gatekeepers.**
- **intentional efforts are needed to ensure that peer learning extends beyond individual labs and becomes part of a larger, interconnected European rural innovation ecosystem.**

The Living Labs have not only fostered innovation but also established a model of collaborative learning and exchange that has the potential to reshape how rural women are supported in innovation. As women express growing interest in maintaining these networks beyond the life of the project, there is an urgent opportunity for policy to institutionalise and scale these practices.

Summary of key messages

- **Limited formal recognition of peer learning and informal innovation pathways** in current rural and agricultural policy frameworks.
- **Disconnection between rural women and support institutions**, partly due to a lack of awareness and mutual understanding.
- **Innovation support systems often do not account for different stages of innovator maturity**, making it difficult to engage both early- and advanced-stage women innovators effectively.
- **Absence of sustained structures** to maintain learning networks and cross-lab exchanges beyond individual project timelines.
- **Underutilisation of digital tools** and platforms for structured cross-lab documentation and knowledge transfer.
- **Rigid facilitation formats** in some contexts limit flexibility to respond to participants' evolving needs and realities.

3.6. Learning from the project benchmarking exercise

3.6.1 European and national agricultural and rural policies

The benchmarking exercise undertaken in the GRASS CEILING project under WP4 provided critical insights into how EU and national policies address gender equality in rural and agricultural contexts. The analysis spanned the project nine countries (Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, Spain, and Sweden) and focused on four core policies: the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), the Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F), and the European Green Deal.

As a result, the project has produced deliverable 4.2 entitled: Synthesis report gender benchmarking European and national agricultural and rural policies.

This deliverable highlights that although many of these policy documents acknowledge the importance of gender equality, the analysis revealed a consistent gap between policy intention, design and implementation. Gender equality is often treated as a peripheral concern, mentioned in introductory sections but rarely accompanied by concrete goals, actionable measures or interventions, or dedicated resources. This lack of operational clarity has contributed to the ongoing underrepresentation of rural women in decision-making processes and their limited access to funding, training, land, and leadership opportunities. Challenges such as gender pay and pension gaps, digital exclusion, and the disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities further exacerbate the inequalities faced by rural women.

The **benchmarking exercise at national level** brought to light the fragmented and inconsistent integration of gender considerations across the national contexts. Critical shortcomings include a lack of gender-disaggregated data, absence of gender-sensitive policy analysis, and minimal efforts to support women's participation in environmentally focused innovation and entrepreneurship. In many cases, policies were found to lack an intersectional lens, failing to address the compounded disadvantages experienced by rural women due to factors such as age, socio-economic status, and

geographic isolation.

Importantly, the exercise demonstrated that meaningful progress requires a shift from aspirational language to concrete, measurable commitments. The EU Gender Equality Strategy offers a valuable overarching framework, but to ensure its impact reaches rural areas, it must be complemented by national and regional strategies that include clear accountability mechanisms and measurable targets tailored to rural realities. One effective way to operationalise the strategy at local and sectoral levels would be to require the development of a gender strategy as an ex-ante condition for accessing EU funds.

Recognising and addressing differences within and across rural populations is essential, as individuals' experiences are shaped by the intersection of gender with other factors such as age, ethnicity, migration status, sexual orientation, and family structure. Rural women often face compounded challenges due to factors such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and geographic isolation. A comprehensive approach to gender equality must consider these intersecting identities to create inclusive policies that benefit all women in rural settings.

The benchmarking process itself proved to be a valuable diagnostic tool, highlighting the need for ongoing, regular assessments to track policy impact and progress over time. It also emphasised the critical role the EU can play in fostering policy coherence and guidance to harmonise efforts, encouraging cross-national learning, and ensuring that the voices of rural women are actively included from the design to the evaluation of relevant policies.

The findings identified key obstacles and contributed to understanding information in support of the final recommendations to improve policies and programs supporting women farmers and rural women entrepreneurs. For example, due to the general lack of recognition about the depth of the problem of gender inequality and its severity, a need was identified to take coordinated actions to solve it. Furthermore, in many cases, the policies may mention the need for equality for women, but there was a general lack of goals and objectives and specific implementation plans to achieve it. The findings also lay the baseline for future benchmarking initiatives to measure the progress achieved in the coming years.

While each country presents unique challenges, several cross-cutting themes emerge that provide clear direction for future policy reform. Table 2 highlights key policy limitations, illustrated through findings from the project's national assessments, along with insights to inform future policy recommendations.

Table 2: Key policy limitations and strategic insights from national assessment in the project

Policy limitations	National examples	Policy insights
Gender considerations are often missing entirely or addressed only superficially in rural and agricultural policies.	In **Scotland**, major policies like the Agriculture Reform Route Map and the Good Food Nation Plan make no reference to women or gender, rendering women invisible in strategic decision-making. **Sweden** has no gender integration in any of the policies analysed and lacks gender-	Gender equality needs to be explicitly included across all rural and agricultural strategies, with clear objectives, actions, and outcomes. Policy language should move beyond neutrality to intentional inclusion of women's

	divided statistics altogether.	needs.
The lack of gender-specific and intersectional data prevents meaningful monitoring and evaluation of policy impacts on rural women.	**Norway** has not collected comprehensive data on the gender of farm managers, limiting its ability to tailor support effectively. In **Ireland**, there is no sex-disaggregated reporting on funding schemes, making it impossible to measure reach or impact on women.	All national programmes should collect, analyse, and report sex-disaggregated data. Gender impact assessments must be institutionalised in rural development and agricultural policy processes.
Financial schemes and business support often exclude or disadvantage rural women by imposing conditions misaligned with their business models. There is insufficient targeted support and budget allocation	In **Ireland**, enterprise supports require business expansion and export plans—criteria that often do not suit women-led rural businesses. **Croatia** reports a complete lack of access to funding, training, and mentorship for women, with no recognition of this gap as a systemic issue. In **Lithuania**, there is a lack of support for women entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas.	Design financial instruments and grant schemes with flexible eligibility that reflect the realities of rural women's enterprises. Create dedicated funding streams to support start-ups, cooperatives, and community-based ventures led by women.
Rural women's caregiving burdens, digital exclusion, and unequal access to resources are rarely acknowledged or addressed.	**Lithuania** highlights the lack of supportive measures for high childcare and household burdens on women. In **Spain**, women face difficulties in accessing land and are underrepresented in local governance. The caregiving burden is unequally distributed, yet policies do not offer reconciliation supports.	Adopt intersectional approaches that consider caregiving responsibilities, age, digital access, and geographic isolation. Policies should ensure access to universal basic services like childcare, transport, and broadband that facilitate women's participation.
Women are significantly underrepresented in rural decision-making bodies and leadership roles.	In **Croatia**, women lack meaningful participation in decision-making spaces related to rural and agricultural development. **The Netherlands** and **Spain** also note the absence of women in governance structures, which limits their influence over policy direction.	Promote women's leadership in local governance, rural advisory bodies, and agricultural institutions. Set participation quotas or targets and offer leadership training for women in rural communities.
Gendered impacts of climate change and digital transition are largely absent from national plans.	**Italy** and **Lithuania** fail to address how climate change and environmental degradation affect women differently. **Spain** identifies a lack of digital training among rural women.	Ensure environmental and digital strategies explicitly include gender perspectives. Promote digital literacy and green skills training tailored for rural women and support their leadership in ecological innovation.
Several countries express commitment to equality but fall short in translating these into concrete, measurable	**Italy** shows rhetorical support for inclusivity and equity but lacks the necessary implementation tools. **Ireland** introduces gender equality in the forewords of policies but fails to follow	Move beyond symbolic mentions of gender equality to implement measurable goals, timelines, and funding. Embed gender budgeting in all relevant national and regional

initiatives.	through with action or budget allocation.	programmes.

Source: own elaboration based on deliverable 4.2

Based on the 2024 study[99] commissioned by the European Parliament titled "Rural Areas – Levels of support and impact on competitiveness of farms", the integration of gender and women's issues into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the 2023–2027 period primarily occurs under strategic objective SO8 in the national Strategic Plans.

Some countries, such as **Austria and Portugal**, have adopted a **family-farms approach**. **Ireland and Portugal** included financial aid and dedicated knowledge transfer programmes. Ireland, in particular, applies gender-specific themes within its European Innovation Partnership (EIP) initiatives. A larger group of countries—including **Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain**—have gone beyond general support, offering a range of targeted measures. These include improved access to land, market entry assistance, knowledge-sharing opportunities, and economic diversification strategies aimed at empowering women in rural areas.

Gender-oriented strategies have also been integrated into **LEADER and Local Action Groups (LAGs)** frameworks by a broad group of Member States. This includes both Western and Eastern European countries, such as **Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Flanders, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and The Netherlands**.

In addition to incorporating gender considerations under SO8, the study shows that several EU Member States have integrated **gender approaches into other CAP SOs**. Under **SO7**, which focuses on generational renewal, Luxembourg has introduced measures that strengthen social services for farmers, including state-aid to support replacement during illness, maternity leave, or other absences. Spain, Italy, and France are supporting young rural entrepreneurs, including women, as part of their efforts to renew the farming population. Austria and Portugal contribute by providing vocational training and seminars on farm succession, with Portugal placing a specific focus on young and women farmers through intergenerational cooperation and rural revitalisation programmes.

Under **SO1**, Spain has taken a concrete step by offering direct payments with a 15% higher unit amount to female-owned farms, explicitly addressing ownership and income inequalities.
Spain has also taken action under several other objectives **(SO2 through SO9)** by promoting innovative cooperation projects outside of EIP-AGRI that involve women, thereby encouraging their participation in broader innovation and sustainability initiatives.

[99] Beck, M. et al. (2024) Rural Areas – Levels of support and impact on competitiveness of farms, European Parliament, research done for the AGRI committee, January 2024. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/747270/IPOL_STU(2024)747270_EN.pdf

Portugal provides advisory services tailored to both female and male farmers, an inclusive approach that supports capacity-building across genders. Additionally, Portugal has aligned its gender policies with the **cross-cutting objective**, offering financial instruments to improve capital access, share knowledge, and promote the active participation of women in agriculture.

However, the limited number of countries engaging in this broader integration underscores the need for stronger EU-level guidance or obligations to ensure consistent and meaningful implementation across the Union.

The benchmarking exercise of the CAP Strategic Plans Regulation[100] framework revealed that gender equality is formally acknowledged, particularly within Specific Objective 8 (SO8), which emphasises social inclusion, employment, and the participation of women in rural development.

Despite gender equality being recognised as a core EU value in Recital 33 and incorporated in several CAP provisions requiring Member States to assess gender-disaggregated data and promote women's participation in rural development, the policy largely falls short in providing actionable measures. Recital 33 explicitly calls for promoting women participation in the socio-economic development of rural areas (particularly in farming) and requires Member States to assess their situation and integrate gender equality throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of CAP interventions. Additional references include Article 6(h), which identifies gender equality and social inclusion as part of Specific Objective 8 (SO8); Article 99, which enables Member States to allocate EAFRD funds to transnational learning actions with a focus on young farmers and women in rural areas; and Article 123(k-i), which encourages informing gender equality bodies about CAP opportunities. Gender is further referenced in Article 106(3-c), mandating the inclusion of gender equality actors in partnership arrangements, and Article 108, requiring the use of gender-disaggregated data in needs assessments. However, despite these references, the absence of binding obligations or targeted funding mechanisms means that gender mainstreaming remains largely optional and inconsistently implemented across Member States.

Crucially, the new delivery model under the 2023–2027 programming period gives Member States significant flexibility, which has led to inconsistent application of gender mainstreaming. Some countries have incorporated gender into their intervention logic, but most do not include targeted interventions, budgetary allocations, or systems to track progress.

The CAP regulation at the European level does not include targeted interventions specifically for women, and access to its measures is equally available to all genders. The European Commission does not require a minimum percentage of funding to be allocated to women. Therefore, it is up to each Member State to design their CAP Strategic Plan (2023-2027) with flexibility, incorporating support for women through intervention design, eligibility criteria, and other relevant tools.

[100] Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1305/2013 and (EU) No 1307/2013. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/2115/oj/eng

In terms of the **definition of interventions and distribution of funding, in direct payments (Pillar I)**, the Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS) is arguably the most important CAP intervention to support farmer's incomes, and accounts for 51% of the total EAGF budget or 31% of the total CAP public expenditure[101]. The European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) is the largest part of the EU budget, and the majority share of it is direct payment to farmers, who are predominantly men. How this policy is socially constructed, and the gender implications, are increasingly coming under scrutiny, with the European Court of Auditors giving a damning report (ECA, 2021; (Shortall and Marangudakis, 2024)).[102]

Some Member States applied a system of payment entitlements under the Basic Payment Scheme (the income support scheme before the BISS was introduced) and can continue to do so under the BISS. The following Member States apply a payment entitlement system under the BISS: Belgium, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, and Portugal. [103]

The Complementary Redistributive Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS)[104] aims to redistribute direct payments in favour of small and medium-sized farms. It takes the form of an annual decoupled payment per eligible hectare (the first hectares) to farmers entitled to a payment under the BISS. Member States are required to allocate at least 10% of their direct payment envelope to CRISS and may differentiate support levels across hectare ranges in their CAP Strategic Plans to reflect national farm structures.

There are notable national specificities in the application of redistribution tools by Member States, including variations in the use of capping and/or degressivity, and in the practice of subtracting labour costs before applying capping or degressivity. Additionally, some Member States exclude farms above a certain physical size from receiving the Complementary Redistributive Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS), while others apply minimum thresholds for CRISS eligibility that exceed the general minimum area requirements for direct payments. Furthermore, in line with Article 29(6), thresholds or limits are applied at the level of individual members within legal persons or groups in four CAP Strategic Plans, while others apply such thresholds at the level of affiliated legal entities.

The Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers (CIS-YF) offers funding for young farmers who have newly set up a farm for the first time, for a maximum duration of five years. Member States can decide whether this financial support can be offered in the form of an annual payment per hectare or as an annual lump sum. A good practice example comes from Spain, where young

[101] European Commission. (2023). Approved 28 CAP Strategic Plans (2023-2027): Summary overview for 27 Member States—Facts and figures. https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023 06/approved-28-cap-strategic-plans-2023-27.pdf

[102] European Court of Auditors (2021) Special report 10/2021: Gender mainstreaming in the EU budget https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/gender-10-2021/en/
Shortall, S. and Marangudakis, V. (2024) Power and culture: Understanding EU policies on agriculture and gender equality. Sociologia Ruralis. 64. 10.1111/soru.12475 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/soru.12475

[103] European Commission (2023e) Direct payment: Basic income support for sustainability (BISS). Available at: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/income-support/biss_en

[104] https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-12/factsheet-income-support-criss_en.pdf

women farmers receive a 15% higher aid rate, as noted in *Section 4.2 (European Policy Forum results)* of this deliverable.

Eco-schemes, officially referred to as schemes for the climate, the environment, and animal welfare, provide financial support to farmers who adopt practices that benefit these areas. The support is delivered as an annual payment per eligible hectare. Member States are required to allocate at least 25% of their national direct payment budget to eco-schemes.

In relation to **rural development interventions (Pillar II)**, Member States can design interventions of a very diverse nature such as (a) environmental, climate-related and other management commitments; (b) natural or other area-specific constraints; (c) area-specific disadvantages resulting from certain mandatory requirements; (d) investments, including investments in irrigation; (e) setting-up of young farmers and new farmers and rural business start-up; (f) risk management tools; (g) cooperation; and (h) knowledge exchange and dissemination of information. Member States have wide flexibility to design rural development interventions tailored to promote gender equality, however, as outlined earlier in this document, the practical implementation of such interventions in CAP national strategic plans remains limited.

While the CAP Strategic Plans Regulation references the importance of women's roles and calls for gender mainstreaming, it does not proactively promote women's rights or challenge existing gender stereotypes. Instead, the implementation of gender-focused measures is left largely to the discretion of individual Member States.

The regulation includes requirements for **gender-disaggregated data collection and some procedural considerations for involving gender equality bodies in policy planning**. The Performance monitoring and evaluation framework[105] (PMEF) established a **list of indicators to help in assessing the performance of the CAP 2023-2027**. Among these, three indicators specifically include a gender breakdown:

- Impact indicator I.23 Attracting young farmers: Evolution of the number of new farm managers and the number of new young farm managers
- Impact indicator I.24 Contributing to jobs in rural areas: Evolution of the employment rate in rural areas
- Result indicator R.36 Generational renewal: Number of young farmers benefiting from setting up with support from the CAP

Social conditionality, introduced under Article 14 of the CAP Strategic Plan Regulation[106], links CAP payments to compliance with basic labour standards. However, it lacks specific provisions addressing gender-related concerns and will only become mandatory EU-wide in 2025. Only Austria,

[105] European Commission | Agri-food data portal | CAP 2023 - 27

[106] Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1305/2013 and (EU) No 1307/2013. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/2115/oj/eng

France, and Italy opted for early implementation in 2023.

The benchmarking of CAP also stressed that the policy fails to address structural issues such as the gender pay gap, care responsibilities, digital exclusion, and unequal access to land and finance, factors that critically affect women's participation in farming and rural entrepreneurship. Furthermore, although there are broad commitments to innovation, digitalisation, and climate action, these areas lack a gender lens, overlooking how women are uniquely impacted and what support they might need to lead in these domains.

The CAP also does not engage with the EU Gender Equality Strategy or propose mechanisms for aligning national actions with broader EU gender goals.

The **benchmarking of the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas[107] (LTVRA)** revealed a policy framework that offers important recognition of rural women's contributions and challenges but still lacks the specificity and structural mechanisms required to drive real change.

The LTVRA articulates an inclusive vision for rural areas by 2040, aiming to create stronger, more connected, resilient, and prosperous communities. It identifies gender equality as part of a broader social resilience agenda, including a dedicated flagship on Social Resilience and Women in Rural Areas. This flagship highlights the importance of entrepreneurship, women's participation in decision-making, and investments in work-life balance services such as childcare and elder care.

However, the benchmarking reveals that while the LTVRA acknowledges rural women's vulnerabilities it largely stops at diagnosis. The policy lacks detailed implementation strategies, concrete funding allocations, measurable targets, or tracking mechanisms for gender-specific outcomes. There is no reference to addressing gender pay or pension gaps, and the initiative fails to consider differentiated impacts of ageing, care responsibilities, or digital exclusion through a gender lens. Although the LTVRA supports inclusive governance and stakeholder engagement, it does not differentiate between the participation patterns or specific needs of men and women in rural development initiatives.

The **benchmarking of the Farm to Fork Strategy[108] (F2F)** highlights a significant gap between the EU's sustainability ambitions and the integration of gender equality in food system transformation. While the strategy is a central pillar of the European Green Deal[109] and sets targets for reducing environmental and climate impacts across the agri-food value chain, it lacks a gender-responsive approach.

The analysis found that the F2F strategy does not include any references to women or gender equality in its core content. Terms such as "woman," "man," or "gender" are entirely absent, and

[107] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 (COM/2021/345 final) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021DC0345

[108] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system COM/2020/381 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0381

[109] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions The European Green Deal COM/2019/640 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2019%3A640%3AFIN

there are no references to gender-differentiated impacts or roles in food systems, despite the acknowledged global significance of women's contributions to agriculture and food production.

Beyond the CAP, LTVRA, and F2F, additional benchmarking efforts at the European level, included the review of the following policies and instruments: the Biodiversity Strategy, the Circular Economy Action Plan, the Just Transition Fund and the Zero Pollution Strategy.

The **benchmarking of the Biodiversity Strategy**[110] stressed that it largely fails to incorporate a gender perspective. Despite its broad environmental goals, the strategy only minimally addresses gender considerations. Gender is briefly mentioned in the context of equality at the international level, without offering any specific, actionable measures.

The **benchmarking of the Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP)**[111] reveals a strong emphasis on environmental and economic transformation, yet it lacks any substantive integration of gender perspectives.

The **benchmarking of the Just Transition Fund**[112] **(JTF)** reveals that while the regulation acknowledges gender equality as a relevant consideration, it does not sufficiently integrate gender into its strategic framework or implementation mechanisms. The JTF is designed to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the climate transition in the EU's most affected territories, with a focus on job creation, economic diversification, and regional development.

Although the regulation includes a general statement supporting gender equality and women's labour market participation, this is not translated into concrete measures or targeted actions.

In terms of data, sex-disaggregated information is collected through output and result indicators, but this is not linked to accountability mechanisms or used to drive gender-responsive planning. Budget allocations do not include any dedicated funding for gender equality or women-specific initiatives.

The fund's connection to rural areas is also limited. Although investments in social infrastructure like childcare and elderly care are allowed if justified in territorial plans, there is no overarching strategy to address gendered needs in rural regions or promote inclusive participation in climate-related planning.

The **benchmarking of the EU Zero Pollution Action Plan**[113] highlights a critical gap in the integration

[110] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 Bringing nature back into our lives COM/2020/380 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52020DC0380

[111] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A new Circular Economy Action Plan For a cleaner and more competitive Europe COM/2020/98 final EUR-Lex - 52020DC0381 - EN - EUR-Lex

[112] Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund PE/5/2021/REV/1. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32021R1056

[113] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Pathway to a Healthy Planet for All EU Action Plan: 'Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil' COM/2021/400 final. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0400&qid=1623311742827

of gender equality within environmental and climate policies. Despite recognising that pollution disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, the policy fails to include women explicitly in this categorisation. Gender is not mentioned anywhere in the core text.

Summary of key messages

- **Gender equality is often superficial or absent** in EU and national rural/agricultural policies, mentioned in introductions but unsupported by actionable measures or funding.
- **Lack of operational mechanisms** for implementing gender objectives (e.g., no targets, indicators, or dedicated budgets).
- **National policies lack intersectional analysis**, failing to address how gender inequality is compounded by factors like age, geography, and socio-economic status.
- **Absence of sex-disaggregated data** across multiple Member States impedes monitoring and evaluation of gender impacts.
- **Financial schemes often exclude women** by requiring business models (e.g. export plans, tech investment) misaligned with women-led rural enterprises.
- **Low female representation in decision-making structures**, including agricultural governance and local development bodies.
- The majority of policies **do not integrate gender considerations**. This reflects a **systemic failure to translate gender equality principles into operational tools**. **Existing legal frameworks (e.g. CAP, LTVRA, Just Transition Fund)** reference gender equality, but lack depth and specific measures for action or enforcement and **key EU strategies (e.g. F2F, Green Deal)** fail to embed gender equality into core objectives or implementation tools.
- Critical aspects like **gender pay gaps, pension gaps, or occupational barriers** are **not addressed** at all.
- The benchmarking analysis suggests a **gap in holistic rural strategies that include women and gender-diverse populations**.
- **None** of the strategies promoting digital transformation or AI consider **gender disparities**.
- **Climate and pollution-related strategies, although central to the EU Green Deal, fail to acknowledge gender-differentiated impacts.**

3.6.2 Legal frameworks for land transfer

GRASS CEILING project explored in deliverable 4.3 how legal frameworks governing land transfer in Europe affect gender equality, particularly women's access to land in agriculture. The report benchmarks three key legal traditions: (i) **Common law** (Ireland); (ii) **Napoleonic law** (Italy), and (iii) **Allodial law** (Norway), and assesses their implications for women in farming.

Each legal system differs in structure: Common law allows for the disinheritance of children and typically privileges a single heir; Napoleonic law mandates equal division among heirs; and Allodial law, historically based on primogeniture, was reformed in Norway in 1974 to allow the eldest child (regardless of gender) to inherit farms. Despite these differences, the report finds **remarkably similar outcomes**: land and farms across all systems continue to pass primarily to men.

The **main implications for women of the three key legal frameworks that operate in Europe are**:

- The Irish Succession Act aimed to ensure fairness in inheritance, but has not significantly changed patterns of farm ownership, with nearly 90% of Irish farm holders still being male as of 2020. While the law is gender-neutral in principle, deeply embedded cultural norms continue to position men as natural heirs. This societal expectation maintains male dominance in farm succession, despite legal provisions. Non-inheriting siblings often support this tradition. Additionally, the Succession Act uses exclusively masculine language, subtly reinforcing male primacy in inheritance matters and reflecting the persistent gender bias in both the interpretation and practice of Irish land succession.
- Although Italy's Napoleonic-based legal framework mandates gender-equal inheritance, in practice, men continue to dominate land and farm ownership. The law abolished primogeniture and promoted partible inheritance, yet cultural norms persistently favour sons as farm successors. Women are often socialised to relinquish their claims to preserve farm unity, a principle that often overrides equal distribution. Despite legal neutrality, only 30% of agricultural workers are women, and their landholdings are typically smaller. Gender-biased language in legislation further reinforces male-centric expectations. Thus, cultural norms (not legal barriers) remain the primary obstacle to women's land inheritance and leadership in Italian agriculture.
- Despite Norway's 1974 reform of the Allodial Act granting the eldest child (regardless of gender) the right to inherit farmland, women remain significantly underrepresented among farm owners, comprising only 16.8% in 2020. Historically, Norwegian women were recognised as contributors to farm work, and earlier laws protected their inheritance rights. However, persistent cultural norms and family expectations continue to favour male succession. Many women forgo their legal inheritance to avoid familial conflict, reflecting a strong gap between legal equality and social practice. Additionally, the continued use of male pronouns in the legal language reinforces traditional gender roles in farming and land ownership.

Crucially, while no framework explicitly prohibits female inheritance, **social and cultural norms** remain dominant in shaping who is seen as a "natural" farmer. Legal reforms, such as Norway's gender-neutral succession law, have not significantly altered the male dominance of land ownership. Across all case studies, laws are often written using **male pronouns**, reflecting and reinforcing gendered expectations.

The report underscores the enduring influence of the **"family farm" ideology**, which prioritises continuity and economic viability over individual rights. This often leads to informal disinheritance of women and a lack of legal challenge, even when women are entitled to inherit. Women's scope to discuss individual ownership rights are hampered by the family farm ideology and this is a question that needs more attention.

The language used in all three legal frameworks analysed is still gender biased, with no reference to women in the laws on succession and land transfer. The report concludes that **legal neutrality is**

insufficient to achieve gender equality in land succession. To ensure equitable access, future policy must address **deep-rooted cultural biases**, promote gender-sensitive reform, and possibly introduce **targeted measures such as ring-fenced land tenancies** for women.

Summary of key messages

- **Similar outcomes across diverse legal systems**: Despite structural differences in Common, Napoleonic, and Allodial legal traditions, the **pattern of male-dominated land inheritance is consistent** across systems.
- **Legal neutrality does not guarantee gender equality**: Although succession laws in Ireland, Italy, and Norway are formally gender-neutral, **men continue to dominate land ownership**, showing that legal frameworks alone are insufficient to achieve equality.
- **Cultural norms outweigh legal reforms**: Deeply embedded **social and cultural expectations,** such as viewing men as the "natural" farm heirs, continue to shape land inheritance outcomes more strongly than legal provisions.
- **The 'family farm' ideology limits women's rights**: A dominant emphasis on preserving the unity and continuity of family farms often leads to **informal disinheritance of women** and discourages legal challenges, even when women are entitled to inherit.

3.6.3 Other cross-cutting EU policies and strategies

In addition to the policy assessments presented in the previous two sections, the project under WP5 also examined other relevant policies and instruments, including the Common Provisions Regulation, the EU Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Care Strategy, and the recently introduced EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy.

The **benchmarking of the current EU Common Provisions Regulation**[114], which governs the implementation of multiple EU funds including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and the Cohesion Fund, reveals a mixed picture regarding the integration of gender equality in EU policy frameworks.

On a positive note, the regulation formally recognises gender equality as a horizontal principle. It includes multiple legal references to gender mainstreaming, gender-sensitive monitoring, and the collection of sex-disaggregated data. Articles within the regulation require Member States and managing authorities to incorporate gender perspectives throughout programme planning, implementation, and evaluation. Additionally, specific intervention fields and thematic enabling conditions support work-life balance and women's participation in the labour market, particularly through access to childcare and care services for dependents.

More details can be found in *Section 2.5. Gender dimension of EU policies beyond CAP*, which reviews funding specifically dedicated to gender equality in the current programming period and outlines

[114] Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1060

the types of objectives supported.

The **benchmarking of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** [115] highlighted that while it includes a dedicated principle on gender equality (Principle 2), many other principles-such as those related to employment, wages, work-life balance, care services, and social protection-carry significant gender implications.

While Principle 2 ensures equal treatment in employment, pay and career progression, most other principles remain gender-neutral and fail to explicitly address occupational segregation or industry-specific gender dynamics. Although the EPSR framework does not include specific measures for advancing women entrepreneurs or rural women, broader EU initiatives linked to the Pillar (such as the Action Plan and Social Scoreboard) have encouraged national schemes offering tailored support, though implementation remains inconsistent across Member States. Similarly, while rural development and long-term care feature within Principles 3 and 18, the EPSR lacks a coherent long-term vision for rural regions, often treating rural challenges in fragmented terms. In terms of digital inclusion and AI, the EPSR acknowledges the urgency of digital transformation but offers limited gender-responsive measures, even as EU-level strategies such as the Digital Decade and AI Act include references to fairness and inclusion that align with the Pillar's goals. The EPSR also integrates climate objectives through its emphasis on sustainable and inclusive growth but does not explicitly address gendered climate vulnerabilities.

The **benchmarking of the EU Care Strategy**[116] shows that there is a recognition of care work is disproportionately carried out by women, particularly in informal settings. The strategy seeks to improve working conditions, raise care standards, and ensure universal access to quality care services, emphasizing social fairness and inclusion. It stressed inadequate care services have a disproportionate impact on women as supplementary or informal care responsibilities still fall predominantly on them and this affects their work-life balance and options to take on paid work. It highlights that women make up 90% of the care workforce, often in low paid, precarious jobs.

It highlights that rural and remote areas and regions with low population density are particularly affected by the lack or shortage of available care services, both early childhood education and care as well as long-term care, due to long distances or limited public transport options.

The strategy aligns with the EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, recognising the challenge of service availability in rural regions and proposing support for local service provision.

The strategy supports innovation in care delivery and **digital solutions**, but there is no deep focus on **AI or gendered digital inclusion**.

There are implicit measures targeting women, although the policy could strengthen its impact by including explicit gender-targeted goals, indicators, or quotas.

[115] European Pillar of Social Rights https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union_en

[116] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Care Strategy - COM/2022/440 final https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0440

Finally, the **benchmarking of the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy**[117], launched in May 2025, shows that it does not include specifications on the location of start-ups, with no mention of rural areas. However, with regard to women, it is noted that women entrepreneurs and investors continue to face significant barriers in accessing funding. For instance, capital investment in tech startups is still dominated by all-men founding teams, with mixed gender founding teams receiving 15% of the funding, while all-women teams receive only 3%. Strengthening women's access to funding, increasing their representation in decision-making roles in finance, and fostering female-led investment networks are critical to closing this persistent gender gap.

It also stressed that competition for qualified talent remains fierce. Cross-border mobility obstacles, notably hindrances to the recognition of qualifications, untapped academic potential, significant underrepresentation of women and limited diversity contribute to this issue.

The Commission's forthcoming initiatives, to be carried out during 2026, offer significant opportunities to enhance innovation and business adaptability across the EU. These include tailored country-specific recommendations to improve national innovation policies, a European 28th regime offering a unified legal framework for companies, and a new European Innovation Act promoting regulatory sandboxes for testing novel ideas. Additionally, the introduction of a voluntary Innovation Stress Test will help Member States assess the innovation impact of legislation, while a study on corporate restructuring aims to identify and address barriers faced by startups and scaleups across different sectors. Furthermore, the Social Economy Action Plan and its forthcoming revision (2026) will also seek to enhance support for social innovation.

Summary of key messages

- **Gender equality is formally recognised in EU policy frameworks, but implementation remains uneven.**
- The **Common Provisions Regulation** includes legal commitments to gender mainstreaming and data collection, but other frameworks like the **EPSR** and **Care Strategy** often rely on implicit references without explicit targets, indicators, or quotas.
- **Rural regions remain under-addressed across several key strategies.**
- **Upcoming EU initiatives offer opportunities to modernize innovation ecosystems.**

04 Insights from the European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and

[117] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy Choose Europe to start and scale - COM/2025/270 final - https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0270

rural areas

Section 4 presents key insights from the European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas. It outlines the Forum's objectives and structure, highlighting the diverse participation it brought together. The results of the Forum's activities are discussed across three main areas: outcomes from thematic workshops, dissemination and outreach efforts, and expert perspectives gathered through external interviews.

4.1. Objectives and participation at the European Policy Forum

The online **European Policy Forum for women-led innovation in agriculture and rural areas** plays a key role in pushing for change during and after the project's lifetime. It aims to provide a **space for engagement between project stakeholders and the wider community of external actors** related to the focus of the project. The Forum is coordinated by AEIDL (European Association for Innovation in Local Development) and COPA-COGECA in the framework of the GRASS CEILING project.

Following the integrated, transdisciplinary, and multi-level approach of the project, the Forum aims to mobilise stakeholders and provide a platform to **foster impactful dialogue** among project stakeholders and the wider community of external actors. The objectives of the Forum are:

- 1. Facilitate knowledge exchange and contribute to key GRASS CEILING research activities by bringing a pan-European perspective.
- 2. Collaboratively discuss and co-design policy recommendations and tools to promote women-lead innovation at European and national level.
- 3. Mobilise stakeholders and provide a space for engagement between project stakeholders and the broader community of external actors.

Participation have been opened up to a broad spectrum of actors, including but not limited to:

- Representatives from European institutions (e.g., European Commission, European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee, Committee of the Regions)
- Public authorities and policymakers at local, regional, and national levels
- Researchers and academic experts
- Advisors, innovation brokers, and intermediaries
- Socio-ecological leaders and grassroots innovators
- Farmers, fisherwomen, producers, and producer associations
- Business leaders and rural entrepreneurs
- Coordinators and participants of EU-funded projects (e.g., Horizon Europe, LIFE, Interreg)
- NGOs operating at local, regional, national, or European levels
- Civil society organisations across various governance levels
- Other relevant stakeholders

4.2. Results of the European Policy Forum activities

The various activities of the Forum have successfully integrated external perspectives and facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogues, contributing valuable insights to inform future EU policy directions aimed at fostering more inclusive, gender-equal, and resilient rural transitions. These activities have engaged over 200 participants from across all EU Member States and other European countries, reflecting broad and active interest.

4.2.1. Key outcomes from workshops

As part of the Forum's activities, three workshops were organised between October 2024 and March 2025, each focusing on key themes relevant to advancing gender equality in rural areas. The following section outlines the main outcomes and discussion points from these sessions.

On **7 October 2024**, GRASS CEILING launched its European Policy Forum for women-led innovation. During the **first part of the workshop, the expert contributions** converged on the need for more intentional and inclusive policy frameworks that empower women in rural and agricultural sectors. Sally Shortall emphasised that public policy must play a central role in supporting women's social entrepreneurship, which is vital for the sustainability of rural areas. She argued that private investment is unlikely to support essential services such as childcare in remote regions, given the lack of financial return, making public sector intervention indispensable. Additionally, she called for a redefinition of what success looks like in women's innovation, valuing social and community impact alongside economic outcomes.

Elena Schubert, representing DG AGRI, reinforced the idea that women are critical actors in achieving sustainable agriculture and maintaining Europe's social model. She noted the urgent need to attract more women into farming and forestry by ensuring equal opportunities and safe working conditions, while also challenging persistent gender stereotypes in the agri-food sector. Innovation, she stressed, should offer practical, scalable solutions that fully include women's contributions.

Maria Nikolopoulou from the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) addressed the financial dimension of gender inequality, advocating for an ambitious EU agenda on gender lens investing and gender budgeting. She highlighted the importance of establishing concrete targets and criteria for public funding that favour inclusivity, as well as the creation of gender-dedicated funds and the integration of gender strategies into private equity and venture capital investment frameworks. Such mechanisms are key to accelerating female entrepreneurship and ensuring that women benefit from both public and private financial ecosystems.

The team from the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) added that gender equality must be treated as a cross-cutting and multidimensional issue within sustainable development and the green transition. They pointed out that gender considerations in agriculture should align with broader climate policy initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the Fit for 55 legislative package. Coherence across policy domains is essential to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities.

In the second part of the workshops, **participants were engaged in four interactive workshops** addressing core challenges facing women in agriculture and rural innovation. Each workshop explored effective strategies and multi-level actions (national and European) to promote gender

equality in specific thematic areas. The guiding questions focused on what are the most effective strategies to (i) reduce or eliminate the impact of gender-related cultural norms and stereotypes; (ii) review and enhance gender mainstreaming in existing policies and effectively integrate into new policies (iii) monitor and analyse the situation of women in agriculture and rural areas and (iv) promote women farmers' access to appropriate financial services and resources.

- **1. Cultural norms and stereotypes:**

Participants in this group emphasised that deep-rooted cultural expectations, especially around land inheritance and leadership, continue to limit women's participation in rural innovation. While some regions reported progress, participants agreed that structural perceptions still favour male-dominated models of success. Solutions discussed included gender-sensitive education, mandatory gender balance in governance (e.g., co-chaired committees), awareness campaigns, mentorship programmes, and conditional funding mechanisms that reward inclusive practices. Public and private funding instruments were encouraged to adopt a gender lens, mirroring sustainability criteria.

- **2. Gender in the legal framework:**

Participants highlighted that despite legal frameworks promoting equality, implementation remains weak. Laws such as Spain's shared ownership law often lack enforcement mechanisms. Inconsistent data and poor compliance in farm surveys further obscure the realities of women in agriculture. The workshop called for stronger monitoring, clearer obligations tied to funding (e.g., CAP conditionality), and the inclusion of gender-sensitive criteria in both EU and national policy design, particularly in rural development and innovation instruments.

- **3. Data gaps and lack of disaggregated data:**

A critical barrier identified by the participants of this group was the shortage of gender-disaggregated data, especially regarding women's access to land, services, care responsibilities, and non-visible labour. Participants noted tensions in data collection stemming from outdated agricultural monitoring tools, reluctance among statisticians, and lack of nuanced rural indicators. Recommendations included establishing harmonised gender-sensitive indicators, improving data on rural household dynamics, and integrating social variables in statistical frameworks to inform targeted policies.

- **4. Structural and financial needs:**

This group discussed how women face structural barriers to financial autonomy, often due to cultural norms and limited access to credit. Multifunctional farming models and smaller-scale, tech-enabled farming emerged as more accessible pathways for women. Participants urged a shift in financial instruments to recognise diversified rural enterprises beyond traditional farm ownership, and to support women's entrepreneurship across sectors. Stronger financial literacy training, diversified income models, and gender-aware financial criteria in EU funds were key recommendations.

A dedicated **policy session in Vilnius (Lithuania) was organised within the annual Consortium meeting in November 2024.** AEIDL facilitated a process aimed at prioritising policy

recommendations by leveraging findings from GRASS CEILING's work packages and Living Labs, as well as the active participation of all Project Partners. Using group work, Project Partners collaboratively identified and prioritised key recommendations, implementation actions, barriers, and enablers.

To guide the prioritisation exercise, participants referred to Table 3 below, which consolidates key areas identified through desk research and findings from earlier phases of the project to inform recommendation development. The results of the discussions of Project Partners are included in Table 4 and have been used to inform the development of policy recommendations in this deliverable.

Table 3: Key thematic areas for recommendation development

Areas of work in the development of recommendations	
Cultural norms and stereotypes Care role/responsibilities; family role; leadership role; community role; behavioural expectations; employment barriers; equal opportunities; women's thinking and perspectives; recognition of the importance of the primary sector and rural areas; domains of family and women	**Gender in the existing legal framework** Intersectionality in policy design (and implementation and evaluation); gender-specific objectives; gender-neutral language in policy documents; gender sensitive approaches; integral rural development policies; parental leave regulations; land tenure regulations; just transition
Data gaps and lack of disaggregated data Data collection; tracking of expenditures related to gender equality; mechanisms for conducting gender-based assessments; CAP evaluation of successful practices across various European plans; foresight; gender-disaggregated indicators	**Employment and financial needs** Equal pay, pay gaps; pension gaps; budget allocation for measures targeted at women; gender-responsive budgeting; female entrepreneurship programmes offering financial support; micro-finances, tax incentives; access to start-up loans; social security
Female representation in decision-making Women's leadership and participation in agricultural organisations and networks; women in governance bodies	**Land and other resources access and ownership** Legal barriers, land inheritance regulations, farm ownership/managed by women, access to CAP payments based on farm ownership, shared ownership of the farm
Women-led rural innovation added value Recognition; market access; green/sustainable practices; scale of business; competitiveness; community resilience and inclusive growth; social innovation; alternative models of innovation	**Training, mentoring and network for women** Adapted/targeted advisory services; support networks; skill-building programmes; women-only knowledge transfer (KT) group; AKIS
Digitalisation and connectivity Digital inclusion; digital skills; digital infrastructure deployment; access to high-cost technology; gender-tailored digital literacy programmes; under-representation of women in STEM	**Generational renewal, involvement of young women** Community support networks; new opportunities, services and infrastructure; special support programmes for young people; recognition of the agricultural profession and the rural life

Services and infrastructures Rural services; affordable childcare, elderly and other dependent family members; healthcare; transportation; housing; social infrastructures; emergency	**Well-being and work-life balance** Parental leave; family caregivers; rural services and infrastructures; recognition of the importance of the primary sector and rural areas; work conditions; community support; isolation

Source: own elaboration

Table 4: Results of the group prioritisation exercise

Need	Barrier	Driver	Policy measure
Address cultural norms and stereotypes	Cultural and social norms, backlash against gender equality	Recognition of gender equality; redefining innovation and success	Awareness campaigns; integrate gender modules into agricultural education; support gender champions in rural communities
Bridge data gaps and lack of disaggregated data		Need for evidence-based policy	Make gender-disaggregated and intersectional data collection mandatory; integrate gender metrics in all CAP reporting and evaluations
Increase women's access to land (especially young women)	Cultural and social norms; Women representatives; Male-dominated ownership; lack of rental options	Legal reforms; Make rental land available for women; Ring fence compulsory rental land to women	Prioritise women in land redistribution; mandate gender balance in land rental schemes; offer incentives to landowners who rent to women
Support parental leave for people on farms	Cost of relief services; EU backlash against gender equality; Lack of rural childcare	Recognition of unpaid care burden; Subsidise cost of relief services; Mandate parental leave pay (at national level); social enterprises to provide childcare	Subsidise care services; introduce EU-level guidelines for farm parental leave to be mandatorily transposed at national level; fund social enterprises for rural care provision
Strengthen training, mentoring and network opportunities for women only and women in the mainstream	Cost; Time; Who is responsible? Backlash from the mainstreaming	Subsidise through Pillar II of the CAP; Promote creation of the networks through Pillar II of the CAP; Sanctions if women are not included in the mainstream	Fund women-led rural networks via Pillar II; create CAP-supported mentorship schemes for women entrepreneurs
Ensure	Lack of political will,	Introduce targets;	Introduce gender equality targets in

implementation of gender-inclusive policies (for instance CAP National Plans)	no targets or accountability	Have accountable measures; DG AGRI make it compulsory	CAP National Plans; require Member States to report on gender impacts; include sanctions for non-compliance
Increase access to microfinance and entrepreneurship support	Traditional male entrepreneurship models used; narrow success criteria	Recognise different scales of enterprise and scales of success; Educate local enterprise offices	Design gender-sensitive rural business support; adjust grant criteria to include smaller-scale or social enterprises
Invest in social infrastructure (affordable childcare, eldercare, etc.)	Assumption in rural and agricultural policy that addressing "family" issues—such as family farming, care responsibilities, or household support—automatically covers the needs of women	Better resources; Changing gender norms; Recognition of diverse care needs	Invest in social and care infrastructure; Co-fund rural childcare and eldercare centres; Integrate care infrastructure into rural and local development strategies
Promote women's representation in decision-making	Male-dominated farm unions and cooperatives	Inclusive leadership practices and representation	Mandate gender quotas in rural decision-making bodies; fund training for women in governance roles
Promotion of women innovators	Underrepresentation of women in innovation funding and leadership roles; Innovation often defined narrowly (tech/high-growth), excluding women's contributions in social, ecological, and care-based innovation; Lack of access to networks, mentorship, and R&D infrastructure; Gender bias in selection and evaluation processes		Support women-led research and pilot projects in agriculture; Establish targeted funding schemes for women-led innovation projects in agriculture, food systems, and rural services—particularly under Horizon Europe, CAP Pillar II, or LEADER; Create rural innovation hubs or incubators specifically supporting women with access to mentoring, R&D facilities, business development, and markets; Showcase successful women innovators in EU and national campaigns, events, and media to inspire others and increase visibility; Recognise and value diverse forms of innovation (e.g., social, ecological, process-based) where women are more active, not just tech-based or high-growth models.

On **24 March 2025**, the European Policy Forum on Women-led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas convened in an online **workshop with** over 110 participants from 27 countries **to discuss how public policies can better support rural women and women farmers**. Organised by AEIDL, the online session explored gender-responsive strategies in agricultural and rural development,

focusing on EU funding opportunities and policy mechanisms for the post-2027 programming period.

National case studies from Spain, Ireland, and Scotland illustrated effective gender-sensitive use of EU funds. Details on the use of funds with a gender perspective can be found in Table 5.

Table 5: National approaches to gender-sensitive funding: case studies from Spain, Ireland, and Scotland

Gender Equality in Spain's CAP Strategic Plan

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 regional Spanish Managing Authorities have fully designed gender-specific interventions, 35 out of 45 interventions incorporate gender-sensitive measures, such as requiring gender parity in LEADER group decision-making bodies, or prioritising investments in favour of women. Some regions, like Andalucia, have taken further steps, such as launching a €15M specific call for young women's inclusion in agriculture.

Spanish programme Rural Women's Challenge and the use of 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. It aimed at fostering female entrepreneurship in rural areas, supported by the European Social Fund. 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. Until 2025, 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

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 focussing on tech, productivity, and sustainability. To date, 1,338 applications received; €2.77M paid to 198 applicants. While this represents a positive step towards recognising and supporting women in agriculture, some women have raised concerns about the scheme's accessibility. In particular, the requirement that the herd number be registered in the applicant's name poses a significant barrier, as herd registration is most often held by male family members

In conclusion, there are several key measures necessary to promote gender equality in Irish agriculture. Inclusive investment schemes are important because they 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.

Women in Agriculture Taskforce in Scotland

The presentation 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.

The **roundtable discussion highlighted several key policy needs** to support women in farming and rural areas. Foremost is the integration of gender equality as a formal, measurable objective in the next Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform, including mandatory reporting, funding and clear targets.

Strengthened coordination across EU funding instruments and the application of gender-responsive budgeting are essential to ensure effective resource allocation. Panellists stressed the need for better tracking of women-focused funding, gender, social and environmental conditionalities, improved gender-disaggregated data, and reliable indicators to inform policy decisions.

Support structures such as mentoring, inclusive decision-making processes, and childcare services are critical to enable women's participation and leadership in rural development. Regulatory tools like work-life balance policies and parental leave must be reinforced. Tailored support for women in value chains, particularly in short food supply networks, is also needed, as is consideration of gender issues within Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS).

Cultural and structural barriers must be addressed, including stereotypes, digital exclusion, and limited access to land and financing. Dedicated online platforms and networks can amplify women's visibility and offer peer support.

4.2.2. Dissemination and outreach activities

In addition to the Forum workshops (included in section 4.2.1.) conducted within the framework of the project, participation and organisation of complementary events helped raise awareness of key issues and explore relevant areas such as community-led innovation, rural housing, and regional development. Notably, three of these activities stand out for their contribution to the development of well-informed policy recommendations:

- On 22 November 2023, the **European Economic and Social Committee held a thematic debate on gender equality and youth in rural areas**, organised by its Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment Section. Blanca Casares, policy expert at AEIDL, presented insights from the GRASS CEILING project, focusing on co-creating policy tools to strengthen women's roles in sustainable rural development. She highlighted the critical but often under-recognised contribution of rural women to local economies, including informal sectors. Key policy insights from that debate include integrating gender equality into the Common Agricultural Policy, supporting women's labour market participation, enhancing their role in decision-making, and expanding community-led innovation. The Council of Agriculture and Fisheries Ministers reinforced this direction, endorsing the EU Rural Action Plan and emphasising the need for better sex-disaggregated data through an expanded EU Rural Observatory.

- On 1 April 2025, the **webinar** **"Reviving Regions: Building a Future Where People Can Afford to Stay", held under the MAPINEQ Horizon Europe project**, addressed territorial and housing inequalities, with a focus on disadvantaged rural communities. The GRASS CEILING

seminar findings were presented by AEIDL, highlighting the gender-specific barriers women face in accessing housing in rural areas. These include land ownership inequalities, wage gaps, work-life balance challenges, and cultural norms tied to traditional inheritance models. AEIDL also emphasised the lack of gender-disaggregated data, which hinders the development of targeted housing policies. Experts shared best practices for local revitalisation and underscored the need for inclusive, place-based strategies. A key takeaway was the importance of integrating gender perspectives into national and regional housing policies, promoting women's access to housing and related services and infrastructure as essential for equitable regional development and stronger rural communities.

- On 9 May 2025, at the **Regional Studies Association (RSA) Annual Conference 2025, the special session "Exploring Gender Equality in Policy: Regional and Rural Perspectives"** brought together researchers and policymakers to examine how gender considerations are integrated into European regional and rural development policies. Organised by AEIDL under the GRASS CEILING Horizon Europe project, the session aimed to create a space for reflection on the needs, possibilities, and opportunities for mainstreaming gender in European regional policies. Presentations revealed persistent gender inequalities in land access, employment, and representation, particularly in rural areas, while also underscoring women's leadership in environmental stewardship, community well-being, and agroecological innovation.

  Key policy insights included the urgent need for more gender-disaggregated data, comparative studies, and robust monitoring mechanisms to inform gender-sensitive rural and regional planning. Participants called for better integration of gender in funding tools such as CAP, Cohesion, ESF, and ERDF, alongside stronger support for place-based strategies, LEADER initiatives, and Local Action Groups. The session recommended gender-responsive budgeting and the replication of successful grassroots initiatives through scalable tools and cross-regional cooperation. Community-led approaches like Living Labs were highlighted as effective models for co-creating inclusive solutions. Ultimately, gender equality was positioned not just as a matter of justice, but as essential to regional transformation and resilience.

4.2.3. Expert perspectives: insights from external interviews

This section presents key insights gathered from leading experts in agriculture, rural development, and gender equality, focusing on the critical role of women-led innovation. Through a series of five in-depth interviews, these experts offer valuable perspectives on how the European Union can strengthen its commitment to gender equality, particularly within rural and agricultural contexts. The findings highlight concrete strategies for aligning local and regional policies with the specific needs of women, while also promoting their leadership in socio-ecological innovation.

The table below presents the interviewees along with a summary of the key insights of each expert. Interviews took place between July 2024 and March 2025, conducted either via video call or through written inputs. Although the questions were tailored to each interviewee, the following were mainly addressed:

- What are the main challenges faced by women in agriculture and rural areas?
- What are the key achievements and what opportunities arise from Europe's actions on gender equality?
- What developments are expected in the Gender Equality Strategy post-2025? and in the Roadmap for women's rights?
- 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?

Each interview has been documented individually and is available in the dedicated Forum activities section online. Additional interviews may be conducted before the project concludes. Table 6 provides a consolidated summary of the expert interviews conducted to date, highlighting key insights, recurring themes, and recommendations relevant to gender equality in agriculture and rural development.

Table 6: Summary of expert interviews and key insights

Main experts' insights
Expert interviewed: Sally Shortall (University of Newcastle, GRASS CEILING project) Sally Shortall emphasised that **access to land** remains one of the most significant barriers for women in agriculture across Europe. Despite differences in legal frameworks for land transfer, cultural and **social norms** continue to disadvantage women, leading to smaller landholdings. This limits their influence in agriculture but simultaneously pushes many women toward **sustainable practices**, where smaller plots can yield higher returns through innovation. She pointed out that **rural women also face structural challenges**, including limited childcare services, poor access to microfinance, and funding models that presume male-led, export-oriented businesses. This creates obstacles for women who often pursue smaller-scale or socially embedded enterprises. Through the **GRASS CEILING project**, Professor Shortall and her team have **worked at micro, meso, and macro levels to support women-led innovation**. At the micro level, they collaborate directly with rural women in nine Living Labs; at the meso level, they analyse different policies including national CAP Strategic Plans and Rural Development Programmes to identify gaps and best practices; and at the macro level, they engage in EU policy dialogue to advocate for stronger regulatory frameworks that prioritize women's inclusion in rural and agricultural policies. She raised concerns that the EU's **Gender Equality Strategy** is aspirational but lacking enforceability. Initiatives such as gender mainstreaming, shared parental leave, and expanded childcare access are encouraged but not mandated, which results in uneven implementation. In sparsely populated rural areas, private childcare provision is unlikely, so support for **women-led community social enterprises** is essential. Professor Shortall called for **agriculture to be valued on par with STEM disciplines**, given its persistent gender inequality. She recommended integrating women's needs directly into the **core of CAP policies**. This includes making gender-responsive planning **mandatory for Member States**, supporting new women entrants into farming, and **elevating women's representation** in agricultural organisations. Ultimately, she argued that **hard law (binding regulations)** is needed, not just soft, voluntary guidelines, if the EU is to achieve real gender equality in agriculture and rural development.
Expert interviewed: Maura Farrell (Galway University, FLIARA and PREMIERE projects) Maura Farrell stressed that although women play a central role in sustaining rural communities, agriculture, and environmental innovation, their contributions are consistently undervalued and often invisible in formal policymaking and economic structures. One of the key barriers is persistent **gender bias**, especially in areas such as **land ownership, access to finance, and decision-making power**. These challenges are

further compounded by **limited access to credit, training, and new technologies**, as well as the **disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic labour**, which severely limits women's professional advancement.

She recognises the progress made through EU policies like the **Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**, the **Work-Life Balance Directive**, and gender mainstreaming efforts within **EU Cohesion Policy**. However, she reflected about the **uneven implementation across Member States**, noting that gender equality remains **mainstreamed rather than a standalone objective**, which can lead to diluted accountability and fragmented action.

Maura highlighted the importance of addressing **symbolic and indirect forms of gender-based violence** in rural settings such as exclusion from decision-making and the use of language or media that reinforces farming as a male-dominated domain. She underscores the need for **work-life balance support**, especially for women juggling roles in farming, entrepreneurship, and caregiving.

In terms of the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**, she stressed that post-2025 frameworks must ensure **gender remains a central element**, with **stronger measures to promote women's access to land, inheritance rights, leasing opportunities**, and formal leadership roles. She also recommends policies that offer **targeted support**, including **affordable childcare, pension options for older women, and flexible working arrangements**, to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and instead reflect the **diverse realities of rural women**.

Expert interviewed: Sophie Alkhaled (Lancaster University, SIMRA project)

Sophie Alkhaled emphasised the critical need for **EU and national policies to adopt a more intersectional approach to gender equality**, particularly within rural and agricultural contexts. Current frameworks often present as gender-neutral and overlook the complex ways in which race, migration status, class, religion, and age intersect with gender to shape women's experiences. She highlighted that women in rural areas are not a homogenous group, and effective support must account for their **diverse backgrounds and needs**. Drawing from her experience with initiatives such as The Growing Club, which coached socially disadvantaged women in entrepreneurship, she underscored the importance of tailored support for groups such as single mothers, migrants, and refugees.

She also pointed to the need for **stronger work-life balance policies**, noting that while there has been progress in areas like parental leave, such measures must be mainstreamed and normalised across both rural and urban settings. This would not only support women's participation in the workforce but also **promote family well-being and organisational resilience**.

From a **structural perspective, Sophie Alkhaled criticised the unequal allocation of government resources, especially in rural regions** like northern England, where weak infrastructure and limited investment hinder women-led innovation. She discussed government initiatives such as "Levelling Up" and the "Northern Powerhouse," which aim to bridge these gaps but still lack adequate focus on gender-specific needs.

Finally, she stressed the importance of **local and regional action in complementing national efforts**. Support must **go beyond financial aid to include improved infrastructure, accessible resources, and mentoring networks**. She cited the success of the Northern Power Women initiative as a model for fostering inclusive leadership and gender equality through community-led action and robust support systems.

Expert interviewed: Florence Raes (United Nations Women Brussels)

Florence Raes remarked that while the **EU Gender Equality Strategy,** and its associated instruments such as the **Gender Action Plan III**, **Global Gateway**, and directives on equal pay and work-life balance, represent substantial progress, their internal implementation across Member States remains fragmented and inconsistent. Gender equality is often treated as a mainstreamed concern, leaving it vulnerable to political

backsliding and lack of accountability. She underscored the critical need for **more inclusive and gender-responsive climate action**, particularly in rural areas where women face disproportionate burdens but also possess vital local knowledge and resilience. Raes reflected on the need of **diversification of rural economies** beyond traditional agriculture and called for greater integration of **climate resilience** into rural development strategies. Another key challenge highlighted is the **lack of access to social protection** for women engaged in informal or seasonal work especially migrants and caregivers in southern European countries. Furthermore, **access to land and finance** remains limited, and large-scale investments such as those through the Global Gateway often fail to reach rural women, risking further marginalisation. Florence Raes called for **renewed investment in women's organisations and grassroots movements**, noting that these actors played a critical role in past gains for gender equality, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. She argued that revitalising these networks is essential in the current context of democratic uncertainty and civil society restrictions. She also stressed the **economic and societal value of care work**, arguing that it must be recognised not as a cost but as a long-term public investment. Care infrastructure can drive job creation, economic growth, and gender equity. Relatedly, digitalisation and technology (such as drone-based agriculture) offer promising avenues for women's empowerment and rural retention, particularly among youth. Florence Raes advocated for stronger **North-South learning exchanges**, where Europe could adopt best practices from Latin America and Africa, especially in care policies and rural innovation. She warned against treating women solely as vulnerable actors in climate and development debates and urges greater visibility and support for their innovative solutions.
Expert interviewed: Christine Singer (Member of the European Parliament) Christine Singer highlighted the **double burden** faced by women in agriculture and rural areas: while they often manage or co-manage farms, they also carry the primary responsibility for family care. This is exacerbated by **structural disadvantages**, including **limited access to land, financial capital, professional networks, and supportive infrastructure** such as childcare and flexible working arrangements. These barriers severely constrain women's potential as entrepreneurs and innovators in the rural economy. She acknowledged the **positive impact of EU gender equality policies** so far, such as targeted funding programmes and support for women's rural networks. These initiatives have increased women's visibility and influence within the agricultural sector. However, she stressed that **further development is needed** particularly in education, access to innovation, and capital to sustain and expand this progress. Looking ahead, she anticipated that the **post-2025 EU gender strategy** will intensify efforts to reduce structural inequalities, with a focus on **social security, education, and increasing women's representation in decision-making roles**. She called for equal access to rights and resources across all Member States, supported by robust and consistent implementation through National Strategic Plans. Singer advocated for **enhanced CAP Strategic Plans** that directly respond to women's specific challenges in rural areas. This includes expanding training in **digitalisation and business management**, increasing funding for **diversification activities** like sustainable agriculture and direct marketing, and investing in **rural infrastructure**, particularly childcare and mobility services that can help women balance work and family life. She emphasised that such measures must not only be introduced but also **regularly evaluated** for their impact, to ensure the long-term integration of gender equality into agricultural and rural policy.

Source: own elaboration

05 Roadmap to advance gender equality in rural areas

Section 5 offers a comprehensive **roadmap to advance gender equality in rural areas across the European Union, aimed at policy makers with a total of 77 recommended actions**. It builds on extensive research, stakeholder engagement, and policy dialogue, and is structured around **seven interconnected Focus Areas** that together reflect the key dimensions of inclusive rural transformation. Each Focus Area articulates a set of specific **policy needs** and structural limitations, **emerging policy opportunities**, and a proposed time-bound **course of action** (with targets to 2025, 2030 or 2035).

- **Focus Area 1**: **Legal** and policy frameworks
- **Focus Area 2**: **Financial** support and investment
- **Focus Area 3**: Inclusive **data**, monitoring, and gender-sensitive evaluation
- **Focus Area 4: Innovation** for inclusive rural transformation
- **Focus Area 5: Knowledge** and exchange
- **Focus Area 6: Governance** and participation
- **Focus Area 7: Cultural** norms and gender stereotypes

Of the **total 77 proposed actions,** those **with targets set for 2025** are aligned with measures that require immediate implementation or complement initiatives announced in the European Commission's 2025 Work Programme[118]. The **2030-oriented actions** are strategically connected to the next EU programming period (post-2027), the European's Commission mandate 2024-2029, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, and the European Green Deal, together forming a robust medium-term framework for driving systemic and structural transformation. Finally, **policy recommendations and actions with a 2035 timescale** are aimed at contributing to the achievement of the EU's long-term strategic goals for 2040, as outlined in policy frameworks such as the EU Vision for Agriculture and Food, Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas and the EU's climate and environmental objectives.

Each Focus Area has been assigned a letter to label the actions:

- **L –** (focus area 1) actions supporting the integration of gender equality into binding legal instruments and strategic policy documents.
- **F –** (focus area 2) actions promoting gender-responsive budgeting, targeted funding and inclusive investment.
- **D –** (focus area 3) actions aimed at improving gender-disaggregated data, accountability frameworks, and evaluation.
- **I –** (focus area 4) actions advancing gender-responsive innovation, digital inclusion, and sustainable development.
- **K –** (focus area 5) actions fostering research, training, capacity-building, and the dissemination of good practices.
- **G –** (focus area 6) actions strengthening gender-balanced governance, institutional representation, and participatory mechanisms.
- **C –** (focus area 7) actions addressing structural biases, social norms, and the visibility of

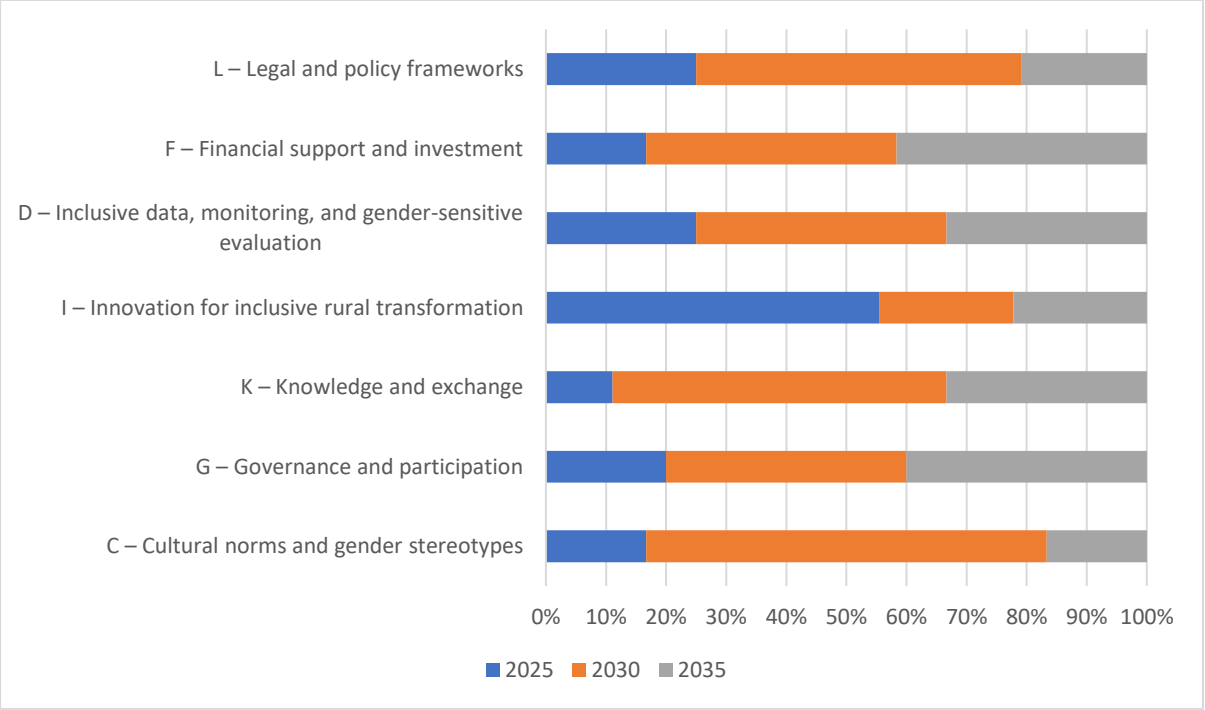
[118] Commission work programme 2025 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategy-documents/commission-work-programme/commission-work-programme-2025_en

women.

This **phased approach ensures that short-, medium-, and long-term actions are coherently sequenced and anchored within relevant EU policy cycles and funding mechanisms**. Moreover, this classification enhances **the usability of the GRASS CEILING policy proposals for diverse audiences and stakeholders,** and is designed to **inform EU, national, and regional policymaking in the current and forthcoming programming periods.**

As a result of the process, **77 actions** have been proposed, building a comprehensive **roadmap to advance gender equality in rural areas across the European Union**. These actions are structured across three implementation phases—**2025 (19 actions), 2030 (36 actions), and 2035 (22 actions)**—and address seven strategic focus areas. The most prominent focus is on **legal and policy frameworks** (24 actions), followed by **financial support and investment** and **inclusive data, monitoring, and gender-sensitive evaluation** (12 actions each). The roadmap also integrates actions promoting innovation for inclusive rural transformation (9 actions), knowledge and exchange (9 actions), governance and participation (5 actions), and tackling cultural norms and gender stereotypes (6 actions). Figure 1 shows the distribution of recommended actions.

Figure 1: Distribution of recommended actions by Focus Areas and implementation timeline



Source: own elaboration

Summary of the GRASS CEILING recommended actions

The forthcoming **EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**, due in July 2025 and negotiated until 2027, will play a pivotal role in enabling the implementation of the **GRASS CEILING policy recommended actions**. To ensure real impact, a **dedicated share of the next MFF** should be

allocated to policy instruments and programmes that actively **strengthen the role of women in rural areas.**

For **2025**, a key measure is the establishment of the **Women in Agriculture Platform**, envisioned as a hub for knowledge exchange, policy innovation, and gender monitoring. Early actions also call for Member States to utilise the **CAP amendment flexibility to introduce gender-sensitive measures** and to ensure **alignment between CAP Strategic Plans and the EU Gender Equality Strategy (EGS)**. It must be **complemented by national and regional strategies** that include clear **accountability mechanisms and measurable targets** tailored to rural realities.

Legal and administrative reforms should begin **addressing structural barriers to land access, farm registration, and social protection for rural women**. Furthermore, the roadmap recommends embedding gender into broader EU strategies, including the **revised Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Generational Renewal Strategy,** and the deployment of the **EU Roadmap for Women's Rights**.

On finances, dedicated **funding streams are proposed under the next MFF and for public consultations on the integration of gender in rural policy**. Equally important are the first steps toward building **inclusive data systems,** such as integrating gender variables into major **EU monitoring tools** and requiring **gender-focused progress reporting** from Commissioners in their annual reports to the European Parliament and Council.

In parallel**, innovation policies** should begin to **formally recognise and support women-led and socially embedded forms of innovation**, while rural governance bodies are urged **to reflect the diversity of rural populations, ensuring inclusive participation and transparency.** The roadmap proposes **formally embedding the concepts of "innovation" and "women-led innovation" in the national CAP's Strategic Plans under the section of common definitions.**

At the EU level, **gender-sensitive measures should be integrated into the Start-up and Scale-up Strategy upcoming initiatives** and other emerging innovation policies. In terms of **skills and knowledge exchange**, the forthcoming **Union of Skills and Quality Jobs Roadmap** must explicitly address the training and employment needs of rural women. This includes **recognising care and community-based work** as valuable employment, promoting access to green and digital skills, and supporting career pathways into entrepreneurship and leadership**.**

To improve governance structures, **Member States must enforce the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, ensuring that Monitoring Committees and other CAP-related decision-making bodies reflect the diversity of rural populations.** Finally, cultural and societal change must begin with **the post-2025 EU Gender Equality Strategy, which should integrate the specific realities of rural women.**

The **2030** horizon shifts focus toward embedding gender equality into structural systems and funding instruments. This includes **transitioning from soft law and voluntary approaches to binding obligations with sanctions for non-compliance**. To operationalise gender mainstreaming across policies, the EU should require the development of a **gender strategy as an ex-ante conditionality**

for accessing EU funds. The GRASS CEILING roadmap proposes mainstreaming gender objectives across all EU shared management funds in the post-2027 programming period, including CAP, ERDF, ESF+, and others. **CAP National Strategic Plans should adopt mandatory gender budgeting and develop gender-sensitive intervention logics with measurable targets and accountability frameworks both in Pillar I and Pillar II** (allocating 30% of funding in national plans to gender-responsive objectives).

Gender-sensitive criteria should be included **in redistributive mechanisms, investment support, and rural development interventions**. Support systems like entrepreneurship programmes, advisory services, and smart specialisation strategies must also integrate gender dimensions to reflect women's leadership in green and digital transitions. In terms of governance, **stakeholder consultation mechanisms should be standardized and mandatory gender quotas** introduced in agriculture and rural governance bodies. These include LEADER/CLLD groups, advisory boards, monitoring committees, cooperatives, professional agricultural organisations, committees for quality schemes, indigenous breed councils, and designation of origin (PDO/PGI) committees-all to ensure gender parity in decision-making bodies. There must be an extension of social conditionality to all beneficiaries of EU agricultural funds.

This roadmap calls for coherent implementation of the **European Social Pillar and Charter of Fundamental Rights** principles on **maternity and paternity leave policies, ensuring mandated and paid parental leave**. In addition, **improving access to childcare across Member States requires the development of a coherent and supportive EU-wide policy framework that accommodates diverse national contexts**, and enables equal participation of women and men in rural and agricultural economies. In addition, the **European Care Strategy should** be **complemented with rural realities**.

Further advances in **data systems** are proposed, with the development of comprehensive**, gender-disaggregated rural data frameworks** and a **unified EU gender monitoring system** that tracks both **policy impact and resource allocation**. The roadmap recommends leveraging existing **Gender Tracking Tools** and developing **targeted, gender-responsive financial instruments that go beyond traditional farm models**. These include microcredit, innovation vouchers, grant schemes, start-up funds, and procurement opportunities within local service delivery systems. Such instruments should be specifically designed to meet the needs and business models of **rural women innovators** — including those leading cooperatives, social enterprises, care-based businesses, care farming initiatives, local food systems, and creative industries. To ensure these tools are accessible and effective, funding criteria should be simplified and adapted to support **small-scale, socially embedded, and multifunctional innovations**, which are forms of entrepreneurship where women are often most active.

The roadmap calls for redesigning **AKIS structures** to be more inclusive by ensuring **gender-balanced representation** among advisors and institutional leadership and adapting both **training content and technical support** to meet the diverse needs of women in agriculture. It also calls for the promotion of **Rural Innovation Labs and accelerators** tailored to women innovators, and the integration of **mandatory gender training for public officials** through instruments such as the **Technical Support**

Instrument, to strengthen institutional capacity for gender-responsive policy and implementation.

To **address persistent cultural norms and gender stereotypes**, the roadmap recommends the development and implementation of **gender-sensitive communication guidelines**, the launch of **co-funded public awareness campaigns**, and **investment in confidence-building initiatives**. It also calls for the integration of **gender-sensitive education and training modules** into agricultural and territorial development curricula.

By **2035**, the focus turns toward consolidating long-term transformation through structural and cultural change. Actions aim to **operationalise the flagship commitments in the EU's LTVRA**, **including the setting targets and the monitoring systems specifically focused on women**. **Institutional mechanisms**, such as regional Statutes of Rural Women, should be adopted to provide **legal recognition, support services, and financial tools tailored to women's needs**. A strong emphasis is placed on **addressing intersectional gaps in access to land, housing, infrastructure, and care**, as well as on **integrating gender considerations into national demographic, innovation, and digital strategies**. Public investment must respond to the differentiated needs of rural women through inclusive infrastructure and multifunctional service centres. **Digital connectivity and literacy** are recognised as critical enablers, ensuring that women can participate in new economic sectors and innovation ecosystems. **Foresight tools and rural proofing** mechanisms will be essential for embedding gender into long-term policymaking. At the EU level, **new governance structures are envisioned that link DG AGRI, DG EMPL, DG JUST, and others to align agricultural and rural development with broader social and equality goals.** Finally, **capacity building and certification in gender equality will become standard requirements for all rural development institutions**, ensuring that inclusive service delivery is embedded across the policy cycle.

2025		2030				2035	
Action	Description	Action	Description	Action	Description	Action	Description
L.1	Establish Women in Agriculture Platform	**L.7**	Enforce legal gender targets	**D.4**	Build gender-disaggregated data systems	**L.20**	Operationalise Rural Vision gender flagship
L.2	Utilise CAP simplification for gender	**L.8**	Gender in post-2027 EU programming	**D.5**	Integrate gender variables into major EU monitoring systems	**L.21**	Develop Rural Women Statutes
L.3	Align CAP and Gender Strategy	**L.9**	Gender-responsiveness CAP	**D.6**	Comprehensive EU gender monitoring	**L.22**	Train land officials, promote rights
L.4	Gender mainstreaming in European Pillar of Social Rights Social Pillar	**L.10**	Strengthen CAP guidance and oversight	**D.7**	Use gender tracking in post-2027 National Single Plans	**L.23**	Integrate gender in demographic policies
L.5	Articulate Women's Rights Action Plan	**L.11**	Integrated entrepreneurship support programmes	**D.8**	Gender impact assessments	**L.24**	Gender in housing strategies
L.6	Gender in Generational Renewal Strategy	**L.12**	Extend social conditionality rights	**I.6**	Support Rural Innovation Labs	**F.8**	Invest in rural social infrastructure
F.1	Dedicated funding for rural women	**L.13**	Adapt Care Strategy for Rural	**I.7**	Gender in Smart Specialisation Strategies	**F.9**	Tailored family support services
F.2	Gender consultation for CAP planning	**L.14**	Map rural essential services	**K.2**	Women in Agriculture Platform for capacity building	**F.10**	Multifunctional rural service centres
D.1	Commissioners report gender impact annually	**L.15**	Mandatory parental leave and childcare services	**K.3**	Train institutions and civil servants on gender	**F.11**	Bridge rural digital divide
D.2	Integrate gender variables in EU observatories	**L.16**	Guarantee equal land access and ownership	**K.4**	Design AKIS inclusive and with gender balance	**F.12**	Gender-responsiveness public & private funding
D.3	Promote gender evaluation practices	**L.17**	Adopt shared farm ownership laws	**K.5**	Mentor women in agriculture and entrepreneurship	**D.9**	Rural proofing with gender lens
I.1	Redefine innovation concept with gender lens	**L.18**	Expand rural women pension options	**K.6**	Promote agriculture equally with STEM fields	**D.10**	Foresight tools with gender view
I.2	Gender in climate transition plans	**L.19**	Improve rural women social protection	**G.2**	Inclusive EU fund governance	**D.11**	Benchmark gender equality regularly
I.3	Articulate Start-up & Scale-up Strategy for rural	**F.3**	Mandate gender budgeting and targets	**G.3**	Enforce gender quotas in governance	**D.12**	Data on underrepresented rural groups
I.4	Targets for EIP-AGRI gender groups	**F.4**	Develop gender-sensitive finance tools	**C.2**	Challenge gender stereotypes media	**I.8**	Document socio-ecological innovations
I.5	Women-led Innovation Focus Groups	**F.5**	Design rural-focused financial tools	**C.3**	Gender-sensitive education in different curricula	**I.9**	Support peer-led innovation models
K.1	Union of Skills & Quality Jobs for rural women	**F.6**	Gender equality in public contracts	**C.4**	Awareness campaigns for equality	**K.7**	Institutionalise rural Living Labs
G.1	Inclusive Monitoring Committees required	**F.7**	Support young rural women			**K.8**	Revise extension services and training systems
C.1	Include rural women in EU EGS					**K.9**	Promote women in innovation
						G.4	Cross-directorate policy coordination
						G.5	Develop Rural Democracy Index
						C.6	Mandatory gender certification for services

Focus Area 1: Gender integration within legal and policy frameworks

Focus Area 1: Gender integration within legal and policy frameworks
POLICY NEED: Strengthen the integration of the gender perspective into legal and policy frameworks in a mandatory manner. While the European Union has promoted a multidimensional approach to gender (from fundamental treaties to the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025), progress in sectors such as agriculture and rural development remains uneven. Women continue to face limited access to land, credit, and agricultural support, which undermines their participation in rural transitions and weakens the resilience of rural communities. Legal barriers, including inheritance laws and entrenched cultural norms, often favour male succession, excluding women from land ownership or reducing them to smaller, less productive holdings. This restricts their economic autonomy and limits access to Common Agricultural Policy support, particularly for young women and new entrants. Many rural development institutions lack the capacity to effectively integrate gender perspectives into policy design. Compounding these challenges is the ongoing decline and restructuring of rural areas, which has disproportionately impacted women by reducing employment opportunities, weakening public services such as childcare and transport, and accelerating the out-migration of young women. These shifts diminish the viability of rural life for women and constrain their roles as economic and social actors. Additionally, disparities in maternity and paternity leave policies, along with insufficient access to affordable childcare, hinder equal participation in rural economies, as caregiving responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on women, limiting their ability to engage in employment, entrepreneurship, and leadership. It is necessary to establish maternity and paternity leave policies that guarantee mandatory and paid parental leave.
POLICY OPPORTUNITIES: ▪ The next **EU Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF) **is crucial for the implementation of the GRASS CEILING policy recommendations**. The Commission's proposal includes: (i) **A plan for each country with key reforms and investments with regional chapters where applicable (provisionally termed National Single Plans**); (ii) "focusing on our joint priorities, including promoting economic, social and territorial cohesion"; (iii) "a strengthened cohesion and growth policy with regions at its centre must be designed and implemented in partnership with national, regional and local authorities." By building on the template of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) — and going even further than what the CAP Strategic Plans have achieved for the 2021–2027 period — the new Single Plans risk overlooking small-scale, community-driven local development initiatives. This is especially concerning given the focus on addressing large-scale economic, environmental, societal, and geopolitical challenges across the EU. While the Commission allows for the complementing of these plans with regional Single Plans, this flexibility may not be sufficient to safeguard grassroots innovation and inclusion However, **the post-2027 programming period for EU funds — through the new National Single Plans (and their regional equivalents, where applicable) — presents a critical policy opportunity**. Whether implemented as a single strategic document (as proposed by the Commission) or as a common strategic framework aligning all EU programmes under shared management (as advocated by the European Parliament, CoR, and EESC, inter alia), these plans offer **Member States the chance to embed gender equality as a strategic priority**. They also provide a framework to measure

performance and ensure accountability for the impact of both EU and domestic policies on gender equality in rural areas. As the successors of the present 2021-2027 programmes for the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF), and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) are negotiated in 2026 and 2027 , there is a unique window to advance targeted support for rural women.

- The **Political Guidelines for the European Commission 2024-2029** emphasise the **importance of building a Union of Equality**. In this political context, the **designation of the new European Commission** (2024–2029), with Hadja Lahbib appointed as **Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management and Equality**, presents a policy opportunity to reinforce gender equality as a standalone priority within broader EU agendas. The non-legislative initiatives, including the Roadmap for Women's Rights (March 2025), and the forthcoming update of the European Gender Equality Strategy, and the post-2025 LGBTIQ Equality Strategy, offer timely entry points to address persistent gender-based disparities such as the pay and pension gaps, old-age poverty, and gender-based violence. Moreover, based on the mission letters, the Commission's focus on **boosting labour market participation for women and young people,** particularly in **regions facing demographic decline,** opens a space for **integrated, gender-responsive policies that support work-life balance, economic empowerment, and territorial cohesion**.

- **The Commission work programme 2025** announced **a new action plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, a Union of Skills, Quality jobs roadmap and next Consumer Agenda 2025-2030.**

- The progressive **integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** into the European Commission's policy priorities, especially under the von der Leyen Commissions, offers a key opportunity to align CAP and rural development policies with broader sustainability and social equity objectives.

- The **revised Sustainable Investment Regulation**[119] mandates that EU programmes consider **the Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) principle, working conditions, and gender equality where relevant.**

- The **final report of the Strategic Dialogue on the future of farming and food in Europe**, titled *"A Shared Prospect for Farming and Food in Europe"* offered a strong mandate for embedding gender equality and diversity at the heart of EU agri-food policy. This report included a specific section for Gender equality and diversity. The members of the Strategic Dialogue emphasise that achieving full gender equality is essential for the future success of food systems, particularly through equal representation in leadership roles.

- Following on from the Strategic Dialogue, the **EU Vision for Agriculture and Food** presents a timely policy opportunity to position women as central actors in the transition toward sustainable, innovative, and inclusive agri-food systems. The development of this long-term vision up to 2040 offers a

[119] Regulation (EU) 2020/852 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2020 on the establishment of a framework to facilitate sustainable investment and amending Regulation (EU) 2019/2088. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32020R0852

strategic foundation for gender-responsive policy actions and programmatic interventions. Initiatives such as **the Women in Farming platform** can elevate the visibility and leadership of women in agriculture, while **the Generational Renewal strategy** provides a vehicle to address barriers faced by young and new female farmers in accessing land, finance, and training. Furthermore, **the EU Observatory for Agricultural Land** can play an important role in improving gender-disaggregated data and monitoring equitable land access, ensuring that land governance frameworks reflect the needs and rights of women in farming. In addition, despite its title, it includes a dedicated section on **rural policies beyond agriculture**.

- The **CAP 2023–2027** includes gender equality as an objective, providing a policy anchor to drive more inclusive data and programme development. The CAP 2023–2027 presents a strategic opportunity to mainstream gender equality beyond its current focus under **Specific Objective 8 (SO8**) to promote employment, growth, gender equality, including the participation of women in farming, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, for instance under **SO7 (Generational Renewal)**, **SO1 (Viable Farm Income)**, **Cross-Cutting Objective (XCO) on modernisation** and others.

  The **Complementary Redistributive Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS),** which is designed to provide higher per-hectare income support to smaller farms, can be strategically aligned with gender-sensitive eligibility criteria. Similarly, the voluntary application of degressivity and capping, or the possibility to Member States to reduce payments to large farms and reallocate the savings, presents an opportunity to direct more resources toward women farmers and family-run farms. With 22 Member States expecting a rise in CAP result indicator R.6 compared to 2020, and an EU-wide average of 15% higher direct payments per hectare for smaller farms, this mechanism can be strategically leveraged to support women farmers.

  The **Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers (CIS-YF)** can be targeted to women. Spain allocates a 15% higher unit amount to be paid to women who are farmers under specific conditions.

  Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy offers flexible tools to support gender-sensitive rural development, yet remains underutilised by most Member States, highlighting untapped potential to advance gender equality in rural areas. In practice, gender-sensitive measures and criteria can be established in different interventions: **Environmental, climate-related and other management commitments (ENVCLIM); Natural or other area-specific constraints (ANC); Area-specific disadvantages resulting from certain mandatory requirements (ASD); Investments, including investments in irrigation (INVEST); Setting-up of young farmers and new farmers and rural business start-up (INSTAL); risk management tools; Cooperation (COOP); and Knowledge exchange and dissemination of information (KNOW)**

  The emphasis on inclusive governance within the LEADER initiative presents a valuable opportunity to advance gender equality in rural development. In the current programming period, 12 Member States explicitly refer to the involvement of women in LEADER decision-making processes, there is a growing foundation to build on. This momentum can be leveraged to institutionalise women's participation in Local Action Groups (LAGs), strengthen their leadership roles, and ensure that rural development strategies reflect their priorities and experiences.

- The **CAP simplification packages allow for the amendment of Strategic Plans up to twice per year**. This flexibility can be leveraged to redesign CAP

interventions to better support women's roles in sustainable agriculture and rural development, including targeted support interventions and tailored advisory services. In addition, the Commission CAP simplification package, presented in May 2025, a key deliverable from the Vision for Agriculture and Food, included (i) the **annual lump-sum payment limit for small farmers will be increased from €1,250 to €2,500; (ii) a new simple funding mechanism will offer lump-sum grants of up to €50,000,** aimed at helping small farmers improve the competitiveness and sustainability of their operations.

- **Member States** have the opportunity to **develop and/or strengthen national and regional policy frameworks that address demographic challenges**. These may build upon existing guidance for the management of EU Funds with a demographic perspective, as well as the EU Demographic Toolbox. Key areas of focus—such as brain drain, depopulation, a just transition, smart rural development, and generational renewal—are particularly relevant starting points for rural innovation measures. These measures should integrate a gender perspective, recognising that women's contributions to settlement, entrepreneurship, and community participation are fundamental to the stability and demographic revitalisation of rural areas.

- The implementation of the **Roadmap for Women's Rights** and the forthcoming update of the **European Gender Equality Strategy post-2025** present a timely policy window to mainstream gender-responsive and intersectional approaches across all EU policy domains. This opportunity is particularly relevant for addressing the needs of women in rural areas, regions experiencing demographic decline, and sectors at the heart of the green and digital transitions. These strategies should place a strong emphasis on supporting work-life balance through investments in care infrastructure, flexible employment models, and adequate parental leave policies.

  The EU public **consultation for the European Gender Equality Strategy post-2025** is currently open until 11 August 2025, and the project will take advantage of this opportunity to submit feedback.

- The **Long-term Vision for Rural Areas for 2040,** structured around the goals of making EU rural areas stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous, offers a strategic policy opportunity to advance gender equality by positioning women as central actors in rural transformation. In **stronger** rural areas, this would mean actively supporting women's participation in local governance and community leadership, recognising their role in social cohesion. In terms of **connectivity**, it would be important to ensure that rural women have equal access to digital infrastructure, skills training, and public services, enabling their engagement in remote work, digital entrepreneurship, and e-services such as health and online education.
  In **resilience**, it presents an important opportunity to integrate women more fully into environmental stewardship and sustainable agriculture, especially in the context of the **European Green Deal**. Women often play a crucial role in adapting family farms, managing natural resources, and sustaining local food systems. In **prosperous** rural areas, the LTVRA calls for economic diversification and inclusive growth conditions that would require targeted support for women's entrepreneurship, access to finance, business networks, and childcare infrastructure that enables active labour market participation.

- The **EU Rural Pact** (renewed until at least 2027) offers a governance platform to involve women's organisations and rural stakeholders in co-creating

policies that respond to gender-based inequalities. The **Rural Observatory** serves as a tool to improve data collection and monitoring and should prioritise sex-disaggregated indicators to inform more effective policymaking. It should be noted that the GRASS CEILING project created a specific Rural Pact Community Group for Women in rural areas two years ago, which now has more than 100 members. In addition, as part of Work Package 5's work on policy, work will continue on deliverable 5.2 on policy tools and a proposal for gender-sensitive indicators that can strengthen the Rural Observatory.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2025)

- **Action L.1** As announced in the Vision for Agriculture and Food, establish the **Women in Agriculture Platform.** GRASS CEILING recommends that this platform be ambitious in scope and designed as a **hub for good practice exchange and policy innovation**. It should function as an **observatory**, **policy lab**, and **knowledge centre. It should have** a **specific mandate to identify, document, and disseminate gender-sensitive approaches** in agricultural and rural development policies and beyond. It could support the **coordination of a network of gender focal points** across Member States. **The Platform** would include the following **tools:** A **digital repository** of good practices, case studies, and policy tools; **Guidelines for integrating gender perspectives** in CAP Strategic Plans, LEADER programmes, local rural development strategies and regional and national strategies related to access to finance and markets, climate adaptation and agroecology, gender-responsive research in food systems and land use, digitalisation, and capacity building. The Platform will also offer **training modules** for agricultural advisors and public administration staff; as well as a **matrix of gender impact indicators** to evaluate related policies.

- **Action L.2** Encourage Member States to **fully utilise the biannual amendment flexibility** provided under the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) simplification package.** This flexibility should be used to **integrate and update gender-sensitive measures in interventions, as well as to incorporate new conditions for lump-sum payment and grants for small farmers.**

- **Action L.3 Strengthen coordination between the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and EU Gender Equality Strategy (GES)** by requiring that **national CAP Strategic Plans include mandatory gender indicators, reporting mechanisms**, and **clear accountability structures**. This requirement should apply to the renewal of the EGS in 2025 and thereafter as a requirement in the new draft CAP post-2027.

  At the same time, the post-2025 EU Gender Equality Strategy should be made more ambitious by **explicitly incorporating rural and agricultural dimensions**. It would include combating gender-based violence in isolated areas and promoting rural women's entrepreneurship. It must also recognise and support informal and agricultural work, which is often unprotected and undervalued, by ensuring access to social security, parental leave, and other benefits. Closing the digital divide is also crucial and requires sustained investment in broadband infrastructure and digital literacy initiatives tailored to rural communities.

  The EU GES offers a valuable overarching framework, but to ensure its impact reaches rural areas, **it must be complemented by national and regional**

strategies that include clear accountability mechanisms and measurable targets tailored to rural realities. To operationalise gender mainstreaming across rural development, the EU should require the development of a **gender strategy as an ex-ante conditionality** for accessing EU funds, an approach already used in **Horizon Europe** for research organisations.

- **Action L.4** As part of the **new Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights** (end 2025), the Commission would ensure that a **gender perspective is fully integrated** across all proposed measures. This includes systematically assessing the gender impact of policy actions related to employment, social protection, education and training, and work-life balance.

- **Action L.5** Publish **an Action Plan to give effect to the EU Roadmap for Women's Rights**, setting out clear objectives, timelines, and measures to advance gender equality across all EU policy areas. The Commission should publish it before the end of the year 2025.

- **Action L.6 Integrate gender equality and intersectionality as core pillars of the forthcoming EU Generational Renewal Strategy (**second half of 2025). This requires recognising and addressing the specific barriers faced by women and marginalised groups, such as limited access to land, capital, inheritance rights, training, and social protection **to ensure inclusive and sustainable renewal of the farming population.**

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2030)

- **Action L.7 The EU must transition from soft law to binding legal instruments, including** sanctions for non-compliance, with regard to the **integration of gender in legal frameworks.** A critical step forward would be for the European Commission to require Member States to report on how they have met gender-related targets, with financial consequences, such as reduced payments, for insufficient progress. This would strengthen accountability and ensure that gender commitments translate into measurable action.

- **Action L.8 Institutionalise gender equality as a strategic objective in the post-2027 programming period by embedding it into National Single Plans and/or regional equivalents. Ensure that all EU funds under shared management** (across planning, implementation, and performance tracking) **are gender-responsive**, including the successors to ESF+, ERDF, EAFRD, EAGF, and EMFAF, whether through a single strategic document or a common strategic framework.

- **Action L.9 Establish gender equality as a cross-cutting obligation in post-2027 CAP Strategic Plans, aligning with potential changes in fund governance under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**. This must apply to what at present are defined as **both Pillar I (direct support)** and **Pillar II (rural development)**. To ensure effectiveness in the new programming period, Member States should adopt a **gender-sensitive intervention logic, transform delivery models** and allocate a **dedicated gender equality budget**. Building on the model of the EAFRD thematic sub-programmes from 2014–2020, future CAP interventions could include a **dedicated thematic package targeting women**, specifically designed to

address their needs and priorities. Alternatively, **gender-responsive criteria** can be systematically embedded across mainstream interventions to ensure that support mechanisms actively promote women's participation and leadership in agriculture and rural development.

- The **Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers (CIS-YF)** should include **mandatory gender-sensitive components**, drawing on existing good national practices—e.g., Spain's 15% payment top-up for women farmers. These good practices should be shared across Member States and integrated into broader **generational renewal strategies**, with an intersectional gender lens.
- Apply **gender-sensitive eligibility criteria** to redistributive mechanisms such as **Complementary Redistributive Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS)**, **degressivity** and **capping**. These mechanisms can disproportionately benefit women-led small farms. Additionally consider tools such as subtracting labour costs before applying capping or degressivity, in order to **recognise unpaid family labour**-often carried out by women-in direct payment calculations.
- **Mainstream gender across all rural development interventions**, including the following ones:
  - **ENVCLIM**: prioritise women-led sustainable practices.
  - **ANC** and **ASD**: provide tailored support to women in constrained or marginal areas such as women farmers operating in mountain regions, outermost areas, or sparsely populated rural zones.
  - **INVEST**: create investment incentives for women-owned farms and rural businesses; Investments in social infrastructure (e.g., childcare, eldercare).
  - **INSTAL**: offer start-up packages and mentoring for young and first-time female entrepreneurs.
  - **Risk Management**: develop low-barrier insurance schemes for women-led micro-farms.
  - **COOP and KNOW**: support cooperation projects and AKIS systems that foster women's innovation and participation in rural transitions. training and knowledge exchange with a gender-inclusive focus.
- Furthermore, **Member States should institutionalise women's participation** in **Local Action Groups (LAGs)** by ensuring **gender parity in decision-making bodies** and extend this requirement to **Monitoring Committees** to promote inclusive governance throughout CAP delivery.
- Finally, **gender-specific outcomes must be tracked and reported** by all Member States through **gender-disaggregated indicators** embedded in CAP monitoring systems. The European Commission and DG AGRI should integrate **gender-sensitive performance metrics** into CAP evaluations and **link them to funding conditionalities**, ensuring measurable progress and accountability across the EU.

- **Action L.10** Strengthen **EU-level guidance and oversight to ensure Member States implement gender-sensitive CAP policies**. Promote cross-national learning by identifying, documenting, and disseminating good practices in design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation—drawing on successful models such as the Scottish Women in Agriculture Taskforce, and Spain's Rural Women's Challenge. Various examples of CAP programming, as well as non-CAP programming, are detailed below.

- **Action L.11 Promote the establishment of integrated entrepreneurship support programmes and national or regional** Women in Agriculture Taskforces to empower rural women. Draw on proven models such as Scotland's Women in Agriculture Taskforce, and Spain's *Desafío Mujer* Rural

initiative, to institutionalise gender equality through targeted funding, training, mentoring, and structural support.

- **Action L.12 Extend social conditionality** to all beneficiaries of EU agricultural funds to ensure comprehensive labour rights protection.

- **Action L.13** The **European Care Strategy must be adapted to consider rural** infrastructure limitations, such as transportation and staffing as well as the development of community-based care models that are affordable and accessible. Moreover, rural women's active participation in local governance should be fostered, and all EU data collection related to gender equality must include rural–urban disaggregation to properly reflect territorial disparities and inform targeted policy solutions.

- **Action L.14 Conduct a comprehensive EU-wide mapping of the availability and accessibility of essential services in rural areas,** led by Member States and the European Commission. This should build on existing tools such as Functional Rural Areas and include indicators like travel time to services and transport poverty.

- **Action L.15 Implement coherently the European Social Pillar and Charter of Fundamental Rights principles on maternity and paternity leave policies, ensuring mandated and paid parental leave**. In addition, to **improve access to childcare across Member States**, develop a **coherent and supportive EU-wide policy framework that accommodates diverse national contexts**, enabling equal participation of women and men in rural and agricultural economies.

  As a good practice, **Sweden provides a** strong **model for equitable parental leave and childcare support**. Parents can take 18 months of paid maternity or paternity leave and have the statutory right to paid leave when children are sick – all financed through the tax system. Parental benefit is paid out for one child for 480 days (approximately 16 months). In addition, Sweden has a **universal childcare system** that is highly subsidised, with capped parental costs and widespread availability, including in less densely populated areas.

- **Action L.16** Ensure **equal legal and administrative access to land, investments, and farm registration** by **eliminating structural and institutional barriers that disproportionately affect women**, such as male-only land titles or restrictive inheritance practices. The **EU Observatory for Agricultural Land (pilot phase starting in July 2025) should support the information process for policymaking on farmland regulation and generational renewal including gender perspective.** In addition, Member States should reform national legislation and administrative procedures to guarantee that women have **equal rights to own, lease, and manage agricultural land**, access investment support, and register farms in their own names. This includes simplifying registration processes, language promote quality, raising awareness of women's legal rights, and training public officials to implement gender-equal land governance frameworks.

- **Action L.17 Promote the adoption or adaptation of shared ownership laws, such as Spain's shared ownership law (Ley de Titularidad Compartida)** which offers a valuable model, granting co-ownership status to women who work on family farms, enabling them to access CAP payments, social

security rights, and investment schemes.

- **Action L.18** Expand **pension options for older rural women**, particularly those who have worked in informal, unpaid, or seasonal roles.
- **Action L.19 Improve access to social protection**, including sickness, parental, and unemployment benefits, by adjusting eligibility requirements to reflect women's employment patterns in rural contexts.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2035)

- **Action L.20 Operationalise the LTVRA flagship on women** by attaching targets, funding, and clear monitoring frameworks to its goals to 2040. Ensure that **future rural development priorities are guided by the questions outlined in the European Commission's report *'The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas:* *key achievements and ways forward'* and that all areas of action explicitly integrate gender-specific considerations.**
- **Action L.21**: Encourage **the development of institutional mechanisms such** as **Statutes of Rural Women-as seen in Spanish regions like Andalucía (2024)[120]; Castilla-La Mancha (2019)[121] and the Basque Country (2015)[122]**-to provide a legal and policy foundation for promoting gender equality in rural areas through recognition, support services, and targeted financial tools.
- **Action L.22** Provide **training for local land registry offices on gender-equal land ownership practices** and implement public awareness campaigns to promote the rights and contributions of rural women in agricultural and community life.
- **Action L.23** Member States should **develop and strengthen national and regional policy frameworks that address key demographic challenges** (such as brain drain, rural depopulation, generational renewal, and just transition) by systematically **integrating a gender perspective**. Building on existing EU guidance on demographic-sensitive use of funds and the EU Demographic Toolbox, these frameworks must recognise and support **women's essential role in settlement, entrepreneurship, and community life** as drivers of rural revitalisation.
- **Action L.24 Ensure national and regional housing strategies integrate gender perspectives by promoting women's access to secure, affordable housing and related infrastructure** (e.g., transport, healthcare, digital connectivity).

[120] Spanish regional law: Ley 5/2024, de 13 de noviembre, del Estatuto de las Mujeres Rurales y del Mar de Andalucía. https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2024-25455
[121] Spanish regional law: Ley 6/2019, de 25 de noviembre, del Estatuto de las Mujeres Rurales de Castilla-La Mancha. https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2020-1533
[122] Spanish regional law: Ley 8/2015, de 15 de octubre, del Estatuto de las Mujeres Agricultoras. Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco. https://www.boe.es/buscar/pdf/2015/BOE-A-2015-11599-consolidado.pdf

Focus Area 2: Gender-responsive financial support and investment

Focus Area 2: Gender-responsive financial support and investment
POLICY NEED: There is a critical need to advance gender-responsive financial support and investments to address persistent economic disparities affecting women in rural areas. These disparities, including the gender pay and pension gaps, continue to reinforce long-standing inequalities. Rural labour markets remain highly gendered, with women overrepresented in part-time and precarious employment, often linked to ongoing caregiving responsibilities and traditional roles. The significance of women's "off-farm" work is frequently overlooked, and many face higher risks of poverty and social exclusion compared to men, alongside lower levels of tertiary education and high early school leaving rates in some regions. These patterns contribute to a cycle in which women's labour (whether in farming, caregiving, or community development) remains undervalued, underpaid, and often invisible in official statistics. EU financial instruments such as the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for agriculture and rural development have historically lacked targeted allocations or gender-transformative budgeting for gender-specific programmes or beneficiaries. While the Common Provisions Regulation for 2021–2027 introduces a number of formal requirements such as treating gender equality as a horizontal principle, involving gender equality bodies in programme design (Article 6), and applying non-discriminatory and gender-sensitive selection criteria (Article 67), implementation remains uneven. Moreover, despite these provisions, gender-sensitive indicators, monitoring systems, and enabling conditions are still not systematically applied. A significant limitation is that 90% of ESIF (ESF+, ERDF, JTF) investments are classified as "gender mainstreaming" rather than "gender targeting," indicating a lack of focused action specifically addressing gender inequalities. The diffuse approach makes difficult to assess the real impact on gender equality, especially in rural areas where identifying ESIF interventions is already challenging. As a result, it becomes nearly impossible to determine how much of the investment in rural areas actually supports gender-related outcomes.
POLICY OPPORTUNITIES: ▪ The next **EU Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF) **is crucial for the implementation of the GRASS CEILING policy recommendations**. Allocating a **dedicated share of the next MFF to policy instruments that strengthen the role of women in rural areas**-by supporting their participation in sustainable development, innovation, and community resilience-would be a key funding mechanism. The National Single Plans offer significant potential to advance gender policies and gender budgeting. For the first time, all EU investments in a Member State—not just CAP and Cohesion funding—must be holistically designed and delivered. This presents a valuable opportunity to embed cross-cutting and intersectional policies, such as gender equality, across all investment areas. ▪ In particular, the **upcoming CAP programming period post 2027** presents a strategic policy window at both EU and national levels to embed gender-responsive approaches, mandatory gender budgeting and interventions. Preparatory work is expected to begin in 2025 with a European public

consultation, followed by a first draft legislative proposal from the European Commission in 2026.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2025)

- **Action F.1 In the context of the 2025–2027 negotiations on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the European Commission and Member States** should allocate a **dedicated funding envelope from 2027 onwards to strengthen the role of women in rural areas.**

- **Action F.2 The European Commission, and, at their respective levels, the Member States, should launch a dedicated public consultation explicitly focused on the support needed for integration of gender equality in rural development.** This consultation should gather input from a diverse range of stakeholders, including rural women's organisations, gender equality bodies, farming associations, and civil society. The findings should inform the design of the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the National Strategic Plans and/or regional equivalents, and broader rural policy frameworks to ensure they are inclusive, gender-responsive, and aligned with the EU's equality commitments.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2030)

- **Action F.3** Member States should **prioritise rural women's empowerment** by embedding **mandatory gender budgeting (30% of the new National Single Plans and/or regional equivalent)**, establishing **clear accountability mechanisms**, **gender targets** and integrating **gender impact indicators**. Targeted measures should include **support for women's entrepreneurship**, **access to finance and services**, and the development of **inclusive innovation ecosystems** that reflect the lived experiences and leadership of women in rural, agricultural, and coastal communities. It can introduce **performance-based funding conditionality**, tying a portion of EU rural investment to demonstrable progress in reducing gender gaps in employment, education, access to finance, and leadership.

- **Action F4. Develop gender-sensitive support tools**, such as funding schemes, and entrepreneurship programmes adapted to women's innovation pathways. To **develop gender-responsive funding schemes, the EU's recent piloting of gender-responsive budgeting tools in its 2023–2025 budgets marks a key opportunity to embed gender equality into financial planning**. Based on the OECD gender-equality marker and EIGE's tracking allocations system methodologies, the Commission's gender-marking system enables tracking across all funding programmes, including those under Next Generation EU. In rural development, the 2021–2027 programming period introduced a Gender Tracking Tool for Member States to monitor ESIF resource allocations. While its use is optional, it aligns with EU Cohesion Policy guidelines and offers a practical way to integrate gender analysis into budget planning and evaluation.

  The EIGE's Gender Tracking Tool can also serve as a valuable resource for reporting under the European Semester (e.g., country reports), the Social

Scoreboard used to track the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the European Commission's annual Gender Equality Report. Additionally, it offers a practical way to track progress toward national gender equality targets and international commitments, including SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment.

- **Action F.5** Develop **targeted, gender-responsive financial instruments beyond traditional farm models** such as microcredit, innovation vouchers, grant schemes, start-up funds, and procurement opportunities within local service delivery systems, that are specifically designed to meet the needs and business models of **rural women innovators**, including those leading cooperatives, social enterprises, care-based businesses, care farming, local food systems, creative industries, etc. To ensure these tools are accessible and effective, funding criteria should be simplified and adapted to support **small-scale, socially embedded, and multifunctional innovations**, which are forms of entrepreneurship where women are often most active.

- **Action F.6 Include gender equality criteria in all public investment and service delivery contracts.**

- **Action F.7 Introduce targeted measures within the EU Generational Renewal Strategy** to support young women in farming and rural entrepreneurship, including gender-sensitive start-up aid, mentorship schemes, flexible care solutions, and inclusive advisory services.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2035)

- **Action F.8 Allocate targeted public funding and investment to address service gaps in rural areas, based on the outcomes of the EU-wide mapping of essential services** (Action L.14). Prioritise underserved communities through gender-responsive and socially inclusive infrastructure development in areas such as transport connectivity, digital access, healthcare, education, and care services. Integrate **gender-responsive infrastructure planning into local and regional development strategies**.

- **Action F.9** Develop **tailored childcare and family support services** that reflect the specific needs of rural women, especially those who are self-employed or work in family-based agricultural settings. Ensure that parental leave policies are adapted to rural realities, enabling equal caregiving responsibilities and supporting women's full participation in rural economies.

- **Action F.10** Promote the **establishment of multifunctional rural service centres, or "one-stop shops,"** that provide consolidated access to essential services in both physical and digital formats.

- **Action F.11** Address the rural digital divide by **expanding broadband infrastructure** and **promoting digital literacy** for women of all ages, ensuring their full participation in the digital economy. This must be accompanied by targeted efforts to **build women's capacity to engage in digital innovation**, access online services, and benefit from smart and green agricultural technologies. Invest in **digital infrastructure, tailored training programmes**, and **remote work opportunities** to enable rural women to access new markets, join innovation networks, and lead in emerging sectors.

Additionally, strengthen **cross-country learning systems** to scale inclusive digital practices and innovations across rural Europe.

- **Action F.12** Require **both public and private funding instruments to adopt and apply gender-responsive criteria**, making inclusivity a core condition for access to loans and investments, aligned with the standards used for environmental sustainability benchmarks.

Focus Area 3: Inclusive data practices, monitoring and gender-sensitive evaluation frameworks

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POLICY NEED: To ensure rural development policies are equitable and responsive, it is essential to promote inclusive data practices and gender-sensitive evaluation frameworks that incorporate disaggregated data reflecting the diverse needs of different population groups. A key limitation is the persistent lack of gender-disaggregated and rural-specific data, which restricts accurate analysis and policy formulation. Although macro-level data may be available, detailed information about women's roles and needs at farm and community levels remains scarce. This challenge is further intensified by the absence of gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation systems, which limits accountability and the ability to track progress effectively. Without comprehensive sex-disaggregated data, particularly at local and regional levels, policy interventions tend to be gender-blind, overlooking structural inequalities and failing to acknowledge the full range of women's contributions and experiences in rural contexts. There is a critical need to include gender-disaggregated data in the ex-post evaluations of CAP Strategic Plans. Without such data, it is impossible to accurately assess the effectiveness of targeted support measures or to evaluate whether CAP interventions are reaching and benefiting women in agriculture and rural areas.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES:

- The **transition from the Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN) to the new Farm Sustainability Data Network (FSDN)** presents a strategic opportunity to systematically integrate gender variables into EU agricultural data systems.
- The **EU's recent introduction of gender-responsive budgeting tools** in the 2023–2025 budget cycle presents a critical window for embedding gender equality into financial planning. Based on the OECD's gender-equality marker and EIGE's tracking allocation system methodologies, the Commission's gender-marking system enables tracking across all funding programmes, including those under Next Generation EU. In rural development, the 2021–2027 programming period introduced a **Gender Tracking Tool** for Member States to monitor the successor of today's ESIF resource allocations. While its use is optional, it aligns with EU Cohesion Policy guidelines and offers a practical way to integrate gender analysis into budget planning and evaluation.
- **Further development and application of indices such as the female achievement index (FemAI) and the female disadvantage index (FemDI).**

- **The use of Better Regulation-including territorial and gender impact** assessment-is essential for policy design For GRASS CEILING, it is particularly relevant that both the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the Vision for Agriculture and Food include rural proofing as a key instrument for better policymaking and evaluation in rural areas. This is especially important because rural proofing relies not on desktop research, but on input from local stakeholders.

- The Commission work programme 2025 includes a new measure to foster a sense of common ownership by all institutions regarding implementation of rules and policies**.** As part of this **each Commissioner will present an annual progress report on enforcement and implementation to their respective European Parliament committee and Council configurations.**

- Emerging EU initiatives, such as the **EU Observatory for Agricultural Land** and the **Agri Sustainability Compass** (the latter recently published), can embed gender dimensions from the outset.

- **Foresight tools and scenario planning** can help embed gender perspectives in long-term rural and innovation strategies.

- **Benchmarking tools prove effective** in **diagnosing** gaps and can be institutionalised for regular evaluation of gender progress.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2025)

- **Action D.1** To ensure that gender equality is systematically integrated into EU policymaking and implementation, **all Commissioners should include a dedicated section on gender impact and mainstreaming efforts in their annual progress reports to Parliament Committees and Council configurations** (at the end of 2025 and every year).

- **Action D.2 Integrate gender-specific variables** into major EU data and monitoring frameworks such as:
  - Farm Sustainability Data Network (FSDN).
  - Rural Observatory.
  - EU Agri-Food Chain Observatory (AFCO).
  - Agri Sustainability Compass.
  - Women in Digital' scoreboard.

- **Action D.3 Promote evaluation with gender perspective in the annual reports and ex-post evaluations.** An example could be the Evaluation report with a gender perspective in Catalonia[123] focused on the impact of the 2014-2022 Rural Development Programme (RDP) of Catalonia on the

[123] https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/publications/evaluation-report-gender-perspective-catalonia_en

promotion of gender equality. Another interesting example is that the Swedish Ministry of Agriculture together with the Swedish Board of Agriculture, instigated their own evaluation to consider gender implications of how the CAP operates.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2030)

- **Action D.4** Develop comprehensive **gender-disaggregated data systems, data collection and monitoring**. Improved data collection and public access to gender-disaggregated statistics at both national and EU levels, that is **also broken down** by the types of **degree of urbanisation (rural areas),** would enable targeted policy interventions to support women's empowerment in rural areas and the agri-food sector. Some areas where disaggregated information is required include, for example: Organic farming; Cooperatives; Local Action Groups; Rural and female entrepreneurship; AKIS; Rural household dynamics; Unpaid labour and care responsibilities; Business support; Access to Services; Civic engagement; Social Trust; Social Isolation; Sense of belonging; etc. For instance, **encourage replication of successful models**, such as Spain's gender-disaggregated data collection in socio-ecological farming, to inform national and EU-level rural policies.

- **Action D.5 Integrate gender-specific variables** into major EU data and monitoring frameworks such as (complementing D.2):
  - Upcoming CAP Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (PMEF) beyond the existing impact indicators (I.23 Attracting young farmers and I.24 Contributing to jobs in rural areas) and result indicator (R.36 Generational renewal).
  - Social Progress Index (SPI).
  - Upcoming EU Observatory for Agricultural Land.

- **Action D.6 Develop a Comprehensive gender monitoring EU framework**, which would require the European Semester Country Reports and National Reform Programmes to specifically assess the gender impact of Member States' structural reforms, the implementation of the EU Strategy for Gender Equality, the Gender Equality Index, the "social scoreboard" as a tool for monitoring the European Pillar of Social Rights, the annual report on gender equality and progress towards SDG 5 ('Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'), thus providing a comprehensive framework that brings together gender-based sectoral interventions, but also, for the first time, cross-sectoral accountability for progress towards gender equality at EU and national level, in both social and economic policies.

- **Action D.7 Integrate gender tracking and gender earmarking into the programming and performance frameworks of the post-2027 National Single Plans and/or regional equivalents to ensure effective monitoring and allocation of resources for gender equality objectives**:
  - *In the design or programming phase:* **an earmark of at least 30% of gender-based intervention**; definition of milestones and targets to measure outcomes (as the Commission will press for EU finance linked to achieving broader societal outcomes) in line with the Comprehensive EU Gender Monitoring Framework.
  - *In the design or programming phase, a* ***comprehensive Gender Tracking tool*** should be made compulsory for all EU programmes under shared management (such as CAP, Cohesion Policy, and the Social Climate Fund). Managing Authorities should use this tool to monitor how EU funds

are allocated with respect to gender equality, clearly distinguishing between gender-targeted and gender-mainstreamed interventions across all degrees of urbanisation.
    - *In the implementation and monitoring phase: an **Interactive tool*** (building upon the existing Cohesion Open Data Platform/Cohesion, EU Farm Subsidy database) to monitor gender interventions and the specific location of such interventions. This is to be publicly available but also contribute to the above Comprehensive Gender Monitoring Framework.

- **Action D.8** The post 2027 successors of the **European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)** management should include **gender impact assessments** (including ex ante and ex post period), gender audits and define specific **gender equality targets**. Embedding **gender analysis in budget planning, expenditure tracking, and performance reviews** will help ensure that public investments address structural gender inequalities and improve the visibility and impact of funding on women in rural and agricultural areas. It is important to improve and expand the use of gender-responsive budgeting in all EU funding instruments, supporting its effective implementation through EU technical assistance, capacity building and regular evaluations.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2035)

- **Action D.9** Establish, **under the Better Regulation architecture**, a comprehensive and **compulsory rural proofing** mechanism for formulation and evaluation of EU policies that includes a disaggregated assessment of impact in rural women. Such assessment should integrate the expertise provided by both the dedicated Rural Pact Community Group[124] on Rural Women and the new Women in Agriculture Platform (see Action L.1).

- **Action D.10 Integrate foresight tools and scenario planning** methodologies to systematically embed gender perspectives into long-term rural development and innovation strategies.

- **Action D.11 Institutionalise benchmarking tools** to regularly assess gender equality progress and identify persistent gaps across rural sectors.

- **Action D.12 Address gaps in research and data**, particularly regarding underrepresented groups (e.g., Indigenous women, women in forestry, fisheries, aquaculture, crofting, pastoralism, environmental stewardship, and agri-food processing) to inform inclusive policymaking.

[124] https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/groups/community-group-women-rural-areas_en

Focus Area 4: Innovation for inclusive rural transformation

Focus Area 4: Innovation for inclusive rural transformation
POLICY NEED: To drive inclusive rural transformation, innovation policies must be fundamentally redefined to reflect the full spectrum of rural women's contributions and broaden the concept of innovation beyond conventional technological and market-driven models. Current frameworks often prioritise top-down, capital-intensive innovations, overlooking the social, ecological, and place-based innovations where rural women are most active, such as multifunctional farming, agroecology, care-based enterprises, community food systems, and circular bioeconomy practices. These forms of innovation are not only vital for environmental sustainability and social cohesion, but also for achieving the EU's broader goals on climate neutrality, biodiversity, and the Sustainable Development Goals. Women entrepreneurs and investors continue to face significant barriers in accessing funding. For instance, the new EU Strategy for Start-ups and Scale-ups pointed out that capital investment in tech startups is still dominated by all-men founding teams, with mixed gender founding teams receiving 15% of the funding, while all-women teams receive only 3%. Competition for qualified talent remains fierce. Cross-border mobility obstacles, notably hindrances to the recognition of qualifications, untapped academic potential, significant underrepresentation of women and limited diversity contribute to this issue. Rural women's leadership remains largely invisible in mainstream R&I agendas, with limited research, funding, and institutional support dedicated to recognising or scaling their impact. Existing innovation support structures—including training programmes, mentorship schemes, and funding instruments—are frequently designed around male-dominated, farm-centric models, thereby excluding or underserving women innovators whose approaches are more collaborative, small-scale, and community-oriented.
POLICY OPPORTUNITIES: ▪ **For the next MFF, the Commission is proposing a new approach through country-specific plans (provisionally referred to as *National Single Plans)* which will outline key reforms and investments aligned with shared EU priorities, including economic, social, and territorial cohesion.** This represents a strategic opportunity to **mainstream innovation and women-led innovation** across key policy instruments, notably the **CAP Strategic Plans, Cohesion Policy**, **Social Climate Plans, Just Transition Plans** and **Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)** ▪ **The Commission work programme 2025 included a first set of Omnibus proposals** that simplify various pieces of legislation, alongside a record number of initiatives with a strong simplification dimension. They will contribute to achieving the goal **of reducing administrative burdens by at least 25%, and by at least 35% for SMEs. It refers to the creation of a new category of small mid-caps with adapted requirements. Other measures will facilitate the implementation of the InvestEU programme and the European Fund for strategic investments, such as simplifying reporting and boosting investment.** The work programme highlights the need to support growing businesses by addressing key challenges faced by EU start-ups and scale-ups, such as access to finance, infrastructure, data, talent, and entry into new markets. This work will lay the foundation for a future **Innovation Act to be**

proposed later in the Commission's mandate. To help innovative companies invest and grow across the single market without being held back by 27 different national legal systems, the Commission will work towards creating a simplified, optional 28th legal regime.

- **Within the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy, the Commission announced a few initiatives foreseen in 2026**. It will propose **country-specific recommendations** through the European Semester process **to improve innovation policy and simplify the business environment in Member States**. The Commission will propose **a European 28th regime which will provide a single set of rules for companies**. The Commission will propose a European Innovation Act which will also promote regulatory sandboxes, to allow innovators to develop and test new ideas. The Commission will propose **a voluntary 'Innovation Stress Test' by Member States**, consisting of recommendations for Member States to systematically assess the potential impact on innovation when preparing new or revised national legislation. The Commission will launch **a study to assess whether and how the way corporate restructuring is organised and regulated at both EU and Member State levels creates obstacles for startups, scaleups and innovative companies. This study will focus on how these regulations affect** business adaptation and innovation across different sectors of the economy, using firm-level data.

- **The post-2027 reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) presents a critical opportunity to broaden the concept of innovation and formally embed it within the common elements and definitions of national CAP Strategic Plans.**

- The **Social Economy Action Plan and its forthcoming revision** (2026) will also seek to enhance support for social innovation.

- **The Horizon Europe, and the CAP's EIP-AGRI initiative** offer important entry points for promoting and integrating support for women-led, community-based innovations.

- The development of **National Social-Climate Plans** in 2025 offers a timely policy opportunity to embed gender equality into the social dimension of climate action. By actively supporting women's participation in the green and digital transitions, these plans can help ensure that climate policies are both socially inclusive and effective in addressing structural inequalities.

- **Climate change and sustainability goals** create demand for alternative farming, renewable energy, and community-based innovations, sectors where women are already active.

- **Growing evidence of women's leadership in socio-ecological innovation**.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2025)

- **Action I.1 Redefine innovation frameworks and concept at EU and national levels** to recognise and support social, ecological, and community-based

innovations, particularly those led by rural women, including in multifunctional farming, agroecology, care farming, and sustainable food systems. The terms innovation and women-led innovation should be formally included, at least, within the section **on common definitions in future CAP Strategic Plans**, thereby broadening the understanding of innovation beyond technological or market-based approaches and ensuring their eligibility for funding, technical support, and policy recognition. This redefinition should explicitly recognise the diverse forms of innovation driven by rural women and place-based entrepreneurship. To ensure legitimacy and inclusivity, this expanded concept of innovation should be subject to public consultation in 2025, alongside the SWOT analyses that inform national Strategic Plan design. This will enable better coordination of interventions (Pillars I and II of the CAP) in the Plan, using these concepts as criteria.

- **Action I.2 Embed gender equality objectives in National Social-Climate Plans by 2025,** including targeted measures to support rural women's participation in the green and digital transitions, and to fund innovations that contribute to climate resilience and social cohesion.

Action I.3 Integrate a gender perspective into the EU Start-up and Scale-up Strategy related initiatives expected in 2026 (country-specific recommendations, a European 28th regime, voluntary 'Innovation Stress Test', a study to assess the extent to which corporate restructuring is organised and regulated at EU and Member State levels creates obstacles for startups, scaleups and innovative) by introducing targeted measures to support women entrepreneurs, including those in rural areas. This should include dedicated funding instruments, mentorship and accelerator programmes for women-led start-ups, and gender-sensitive criteria in public procurement, investment screening, and innovation support schemes. There is a need to advocate for a **rural women entrepreneur lens** in the simplification measures, ensuring that the needs of care-based, multifunctional, and cooperative enterprises (where women are active —are explicitly addressed in efforts to reduce administrative burdens, improve investment tools, and refine SME definitions, including the **new *small mid-cap* category**.

- **Action I.4** Encourage Member States to set **targets or quotas for women-led or gender-balanced new Operational Groups under EIP-AGRI** as well as monitoring the current situation of its composition.

- **Action I.5** Establish dedicated **Focus Groups on women-led innovation** in rural and agricultural contexts within the **EU CAP Network Support Facility for Innovation & Knowledge Exchange (EIP-AGRI)**. These groups should identify, document, and promote innovative practices led by rural women—across sectors such as agroecology, care farming, food systems, and social entrepreneurship—while informing future policy, funding priorities, and advisory services. This can be coordinated with the **Women in Agriculture Platform.**

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2030)

- **Action I.6 Operationalise the LTVRA flagship Stronger, focused on empowering rural communities, improving access to services and facilitating social innovation. This can be achieved by promoting regional Rural Innovation Labs/Incubators/Accelerators, that** specifically support women as innovators in agriculture, food systems, ecological transitions, non-farm and care-based innovators, and social entrepreneurship.

- **Action I.7** Ensure that post-2027 **Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)** explicitly **integrate gender equality and women's participation** in regional innovation ecosystems. This includes embedding gender-responsive priorities in S3 governance structures, priority-setting processes, and funding criteria. By 2030, all Member States and regions should be required to demonstrate how their S3 strategies support inclusive innovation (particularly in relation to the **twin green and digital transitions)** and leverage the **contributions of women in rural and regional development**.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2035)

- **Action I.8 Establish cross-sectoral research and data initiatives to document rural women's roles** in socio-ecological innovation, feeding evidence into national innovation strategies and the EU's Gender Equality Strategy and Rural Vision for 2040.
- **Action I.9** Support the development of **peer-led innovation ecosystems and Living Labs** (e.g. modelled on GRASS CEILING), which foster inclusive knowledge exchange and collaboration, and integrate these approaches into mainstream rural innovation policies.

Focus Area 5: Knowledge and exchange

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POLICY NEED: To support inclusive and locally driven rural transformation, there is a need to develop robust networking, capacity-building, and peer-led innovation ecosystems that foster collaboration and knowledge exchange within rural and agricultural communities. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of gender-sensitive approaches, significant gaps remain in training and capacity-building among rural development practitioners and policymakers, many of whom lack the tools and knowledge to conduct gender analysis or design, implement, and evaluate inclusive programmes effectively. Initiatives such as the Living Labs in the GRASS CEILING project demonstrate the transformative potential of women-led innovation when nurtured in inclusive, community-based settings. However, such approaches are still marginal within mainstream policy frameworks and require greater institutional support and integration to become widely impactful.
POLICY OPPORTUNITIES: - The **Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality**[125] in EU Member States is a key initiative of the European Commission aimed at fostering the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and good practices among EU Member States. Through structured dialogue and peer learning, the programme supports the implementation of effective gender equality policies across Europe. It focuses on both policy-level measures and practical, real-world

[125] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/who-we-work-gender-equality/mutual-learning-programme-gender-equality_en

examples, addressing opportunities as well as implementation challenges. Central to the programme are the **Exchange of Good Practice Seminars**, organised several times a year, which bring together governmental representatives, independent experts, and relevant stakeholders to discuss priority topics aligned with the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025.

- The Commission work programme 2025 announced a **Union of Skills and Quality jobs roadmap.**
- **Growing interest in community-led, inclusive innovation models** aligns with women's approaches to entrepreneurship and socio-ecological care.
- **Inclusive and collaborative innovation styles** used by women (e.g., peer learning, informal mentoring, cooperative networks) align with community-driven rural development goals.
- **Female role models and women's networks** are seen as crucial for building confidence and encouraging participation.
- **Cultural and generational change momentum**, with awareness that agriculture needs to shift away from male-dominated models.
- **Stakeholder recognition** of the need for gender-inclusive AKIS structures, with growing consensus on reforms.
- **Existing national initiatives** offering tailored training, finance advice, and entrepreneurship support for women show promise and can be expanded.
- **Living Labs show strong potential as incubators of grassroots innovation**, tailored to diverse rural contexts and women's lived experiences.
- **Involving AKIS stakeholders as co-participants** in Living Labs helps bridge gaps between institutions and rural women, creating feedback loops and mutual learning.
- **Peer learning models create emotionally safe, relational spaces** that support confidence-building, identity development, and mutual exchange.
- **Digital and informal knowledge-sharing tools** (e.g., WhatsApp, LinkedIn) successfully extend learning beyond formal sessions. The **digital tools and platforms** have proven effective in providing visibility, access to training, online communities and networking.
- **Locally co-designed tools and methodologies** (e.g., spidergram, innovation networks) offer replicable models across regions and countries.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2025)

- **Action K.1 Ensure that the forthcoming Union of Skills and Quality Jobs roadmap, as announced in the Commission Work Programme 2025, explicitly addresses the needs of rural women by integrating a gender and territorial perspective**. This includes promoting access to quality training, upskilling, and reskilling opportunities in emerging green and digital sectors, recognising care-based and community-rooted work as valuable forms of employment, and supporting pathways into entrepreneurship and leadership. The roadmap should prioritise inclusive labour market strategies that reflect the diversity of rural economies and actively contribute to closing gender gaps in employment, pay, and working conditions.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2030)

- **Action K.2** Develop a **Women in Agriculture Platform** as announced in the Vision for Agriculture and Food, building upon the methodologies already tested in the EU Rural Pact, current EU CAP Network and EIP-AGRI in order to achieve synergies between gender based agricultural and beyond agricultural best practices (see more detail in Action L.1)

- **Action K.3 Strengthen the capacity of government institutions, agencies and advisors** by providing targeted training and resources for policymakers and practitioners to prioritise gender equality, conduct gender analysis, and design inclusive and gender-responsive programmes. It would follow the logic of the **Technical Support Instrument (TSI**) and would **imply** i**ntegrating mandatory gender training modules** into at least CAP and Cohesion Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies, rural development practitioners, and advisory services, focusing on: Gender analysis methods (e.g., sex-disaggregated data use, intersectional analysis); Gender-responsive budgeting and programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation; Inclusive stakeholder engagement and participatory planning; Tools and guidelines (gender checklists for CAP interventions or Cohesion measures; sample gender indicators for monitoring and evaluation, templates for conducting gender impact assessments); Accountability mechanisms such as publishing annual progress reports on gender integration.

- **Action K.4 Design AKIS structures to become more inclusive**, ensuring gender balance quotes among advisors and institutional leadership.

- **Action K.5 Mentorship programmes and leadership training** for women in agriculture, environmental stewardship, community well-being, agroecological innovation, digitalisation and business management. Also, for **financial literacy training** tailored to rural women, with a focus on entrepreneurship, cooperative development, and sustainable income diversification. As previously indicated, it could be integrated into KNOW interventions under Pillar II of the CAP, AKIS, regional and national strategies or task forces, as well as entrepreneurship programmes for rural women.

- **Action K.6 Promote agriculture as a domain equal in societal importance to STEM disciplines** by investing in research, education, and innovation programmes that recognise and address persistent gender inequalities in the sector.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2035)

- **Action K.7 Institutionalise Living Lab models** as part of rural innovation policy, with dedicated funding and support structures to maintain them beyond project cycles.

- **Action K.8 Revise extension services and training systems** to reflect the realities and needs of rural women, rather than defaulting to male-dominated paradigms.

- **Action K.9 Promote visibility and leadership of rural women entrepreneurs and women innovators** through recognition programmes, awards, innovation narratives, policy forums, communication campaigns, etc.

Focus Area 6: Rural governance structures

Focus Area 6: Rural governance structures
POLICY NEED: To enhance rural governance and make it more inclusive and transparent, it is essential to foster participatory decision-making that engages a wide range of stakeholders (particularly women and other underrepresented groups) while reflecting the full diversity of rural populations and strengthening coordination across local, national, and EU levels. Current governance structures often fail to reflect the diversity of rural populations, and women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions and policymaking bodies. This lack of representation limits their influence over decisions related to planning, budgeting, and programme implementation, resulting in policies that overlook their priorities and contributions. Strengthening inclusive governance requires not only formal mechanisms for stakeholder engagement but also targeted efforts to build the capacity and visibility of underrepresented groups within decision-making spaces.
POLICY OPPORTUNITIES: ▪ The **European Code of Conduct on Partnership for the European Structural and Investment Funds**[126], adopted in 2014, sets out principles and standards to ensure meaningful participation of stakeholders in the design, implementation, and monitoring of EU-funded programmes. In line with these principles, **Article 10** of the Code highlights good practices in the formulation of **rules of membership and internal procedures** for monitoring committees. It stipulates that Member States should ensure that the composition of monitoring committees reflects the involvement of partners who contributed to the preparation of the programmes and shall aim to promote equality between men and women and non-discrimination. ▪ The **National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)** represent medium-term strategic frameworks developed by EU Member States under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), a central instrument of the EU's post-COVID-19 recovery strategy. Covering the period from 2021 to 2026, all milestones and targets outlined in the NRRPs must be fully achieved by August 2026. In the year left and given that 50% is unspent, Member States could still channel NRRP funds to strengthen the institutional capacity of local and regional rural governance bodies. ▪ The **European Commission's Technical Support Instrument (TSI),** established in 2021, offers a tool that helps Member States deliver reforms and implement EU policies and laws at large with minimal burden to Member States. This tool can be used to strengthen institutional capacities, helping EU Member States design and implement resilience-enhancing reforms by providing expertise to national authorities. ▪ Under **the European Semester framework, Member States can leverage country-specific recommendations (CSRs)** to integrate gender-conscious governance reforms in rural areas. For instance, the Semester has already promoted gender-balanced decision-making in financial intermediaries via InvestEU and launched initiatives like the *Women InvestEU* network to boost women's leadership. Building on this approach, Member States should

[126] Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_del/2014/240/oj/eng

seek CSRs aimed specifically at improving women's representation in local and regional rural governance bodies, mandating gender targets in rural councils, and embedding gender equality in all stages of planning, budgeting, and monitoring within regional governance structures.

- The **European Commission's 2025 Work Programme** focuses on improving governance through simplification and streamlining of EU policies and regulations. This will continue in the annual work programmes for future years.
- The **new governance linked to the upcoming Multi-annual Financial Framework offers both challenges and opportunities for gender equality**. For **the new National Single Plans and/or regional equivalents** all EU investments in a Member State (not just CAP and Cohesion funding) need to be holistically designed and delivered. It presents a critical policy opportunity for Member States to embed gender equality as a strategic priority within their national plans but also to measure performance and provide accountability of the impact of EU and domestic policies contribution to gender equality in rural areas.
- Under the **Common Agricultural Policy, Member States are required to ensure stakeholder involvement in the preparation and implementation of CAP Strategic Plans**. This is an opportunity to institutionalise inclusive decision-making structures and ensure that rural women, youth, and marginalised groups are adequately represented in CAP governance.
- The **EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas** calls for stronger, more inclusive, and resilient rural communities. This political framework encourages Member States and regions to design rural governance systems that reflect demographic diversity, strengthen citizen engagement, and support bottom-up initiatives like LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). The Vision of Agriculture and Food does not replace it but updates it.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2025)

- **Action G.1** Strengthen **enforcement of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership of the ESIF** by ensuring Monitoring Committees reflect the diversity of the rural population, including women, youth, migrants, and other underrepresented groups, particularly in rural and remote areas. For that, require **all Member States to review and revise the membership rules of Monitoring Committees for ESIF to ensure the meaningful participation of all stakeholders** who contributed to programme preparation, including women's organisations, youth associations, and rural community groups. National managing authorities should publish transparent selection criteria and ensure balanced geographical, gender, and sectoral representation.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2030)

- **Action G.2** Strengthen gender equality through **inclusive and accountable governance of EU Structural and Investment Funds** (ESIF) by fully integrating gender equality into the design, implementation, and monitoring of Operational Programmes under the ESF+, ERDF, CF, and CAP. Leverage the new National Single Plans framework under the Multiannual Financial Framework to embed gender equality as a cross-cutting objective across all EU investments. To operationalise this: (i) **mandate the inclusion of gender equality stakeholders**, particularly rural women's organisations and

equality bodies, in Monitoring Committees, Programme Partnership Agreements, and advisory bodies at all governance levels; (ii) **provide targeted training and technical assistance to Managing Authorities and Monitoring Committee members on gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting, and intersectional policy design**, with attention to rural and agricultural contexts; and (iii) **establish structured mechanisms for ongoing consultation and co-creation with gender-focused stakeholders throughout all phases of the programme cycle, including during ex ante and ex post evaluations, monitoring, and performance reviews.**

- **Action G.3 Establish Mandatory gender quotas** should be introduced in agriculture and rural governance bodies, including LEADER/CLLD groups, advisory boards, monitoring committees, cooperatives, professional agricultural organisations, committees for quality schemes, indigenous breed councils, and designation of origin (PDO/PGI) committees, to ensure gender parity in decision-making bodies. Alongside **co-leadership models** (e.g., co-chaired committees) to ensure equitable representation. In parallel, the **statutes of rural organisations and cooperatives** should be revised to institutionalise gender equality and inclusive governance structures.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2035)

- **Action G.4** Establish a **cross-directorate governance mechanism at the European level** to ensure the co-design and co-implementation of gender-inclusive rural and agricultural policies. This mechanism should rebalance institutional leadership by **formally involving DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), alongside DG Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), and ensure coordinated input from DG Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), DG Justice (DG JUST), and other relevant directorates**. The objective is to broaden the policy scope beyond agriculture, addressing systemic barriers such as unpaid care work, gendered labour segmentation, limited access to public services, and the socio-economic precarity faced by rural women. This governance reform should be mirrored at the national level through inter-ministerial coordination structures, ensuring that rural and agricultural policy is shaped by social, employment, and gender equity objectives, not solely by agricultural imperatives.

- **Action G.5** Develop a **European Rural Democracy Index** to assess and rank Member States based on the inclusiveness, transparency, and gender responsiveness of their rural governance and EU fund monitoring structures.

Focus Area 7: Cultural norms and gender stereotypes in rural and agricultural sectors

Focus Area 7: Cultural norms and gender stereotypes in rural and agricultural sectors
POLICY NEED: To transform rural and agricultural sectors in a way that advances gender equality, it is essential to challenge and change persistent cultural norms and gender stereotypes that limit women's roles, visibility, and leadership. Despite formal commitments within EU strategies, rural development and agricultural policies often fall short in addressing the structural disadvantages faced by women, due in large part to entrenched social attitudes and fragmented implementation. Gender disparities in access to land, credit, leadership, and innovation systems reflect not only policy gaps but also deep-rooted patriarchal values and institutional inertia. Rural women, who are diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, socio-economic background, and family roles, often face overlapping barriers that restrict their participation and agency. Even when gender-inclusive measures are adopted, their effectiveness is frequently undermined by societal resistance and stereotypes, particularly within structures such as Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS), where women's expertise is often undervalued and their access to advisory and funding services limited. Addressing these cultural and institutional barriers is critical for ensuring that gender equality commitments are meaningfully implemented and that women can fully contribute to and benefit from rural and agricultural transformation.
POLICY OPPORTUNITIES: ▪ The **EU Gender Equality Strategy post 2025** can provide a guiding framework to ensure that gender norms and stereotypes in rural and agricultural contexts are actively addressed in national policies. Member States can adapt its principles to rural realities, linking gender equality goals with rural development priorities through national CAP Strategic Plans and regional development strategies. ▪ The reform of the **Common Agricultural Policy post 2027 and the integration of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems** (AKIS) provide a unique opportunity to challenge male-dominated norms by embedding gender-sensitive approaches into knowledge transfer, advisory services, and training systems. CAP Strategic Plans should include dedicated measures to promote women's leadership, visibility, and access to innovation networks, particularly for non-farm rural women. ▪ The **LTVRA** and **Vision for Agriculture and Food** offer a forward-looking framework to strengthen gender equality and inclusion in rural transformation. **National and regional Rural Action Plans (or development strategies) aligned with the LTVRA** can be used to invest in care infrastructure, visibility campaigns, and support for diverse forms of rural women's entrepreneurship, creating an enabling environment that challenges traditional gender roles. ▪ **The Social Climate Fund and Just Transition Mechanism** can finance gender-responsive investments in rural green and care economies, sectors where rural women are already active but undervalued. Such investments can shift cultural narratives by making visible the value of women's ecological and social contributions, while offering new pathways into leadership and economic security.
COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2025)

- **Action C.1 The post-2025 EU Gender Equality Strategy should prioritise tailored actions that address the specific and intersecting challenges faced by rural women.** This includes targeted measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in isolated rural areas, support rural women's entrepreneurship, and formally recognise and protect informal and agricultural work by ensuring access to social security, parental leave, and other employment-related benefits. The Strategy must also promote territorial equity by bridging the digital divide through investments in broadband infrastructure and digital literacy in rural communities. It should align with and adapt the European Care Strategy to account for rural-specific barriers, such as limited transport, service availability, and workforce shortages, by supporting the development of affordable, accessible, and community-based care models. Furthermore, the Strategy should promote rural women's meaningful participation in local governance and decision-making bodies. To support evidence-based policymaking, all EU gender-related data collection efforts must include rural–urban disaggregation to capture territorial disparities and inform targeted, context-sensitive interventions.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2030)

- **Action C.2** Tackle symbolic and indirect forms of gender-based exclusion (such as biased language, media representation, and exclusion from leadership spaces) by **developing and implementing gender-sensitive communication guidelines**, media codes of conduct, and institutional accountability frameworks at both EU and Member State levels.
- **Action C.3** Integration of **gender-sensitive education and training modules into agricultural and territorial development curricula,** including vocational training, university programmes, and extension services, to raise awareness of gender equity and promote inclusive practices in rural sectors.
- **Action C.4** Launch EU and Member State **co-funded public awareness campaign**s to challenge gender stereotypes in agriculture and rural communities. Campaigns should highlight the leadership, innovation, and care work contributions of rural women, particularly those from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds.
- **Action C.5 Invest in confidence-building initiatives**, such as leadership coaching, women's innovation labs, and peer-to-peer mentoring schemes.

COURSE OF ACTION (targets 2035)

- **Action C.6 Mandate comprehensive gender equality training and certification for all rural development institutions and service providers**, including CAP Managing Authorities, AKIS actors, extension services, local governments, and financial intermediaries. Certification should be tied to continued access to EU funding, ensuring that gender-responsive service delivery becomes a baseline standard across rural territories.

06 References

6.1. EU Legislation and initiatives

Gender

Council Directive 79/7/EEC of 19 December 1978 on the progressive implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in matters of social security https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/1979/7/oj/eng

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Council Directive 97/81/ EC of 15 December 1997 concerning the Framework Agreement on part-time work concluded by UNICE, CEEP and the ETUC - Annex: Framework agreement on part-time work https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/1997/81/oj/eng

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Directive 2010/41/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2010 on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity and repealing Council Directive 86/613/EEC https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32010L0041

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European Commission (2020) Communication COM(2020) 152 final A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152

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Regulation (EU) 2024/1468 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 amending Regulations (EU) 2021/2115 and (EU) 2021/2116 as regards good agricultural and environmental condition standards, schemes for climate, environment and animal welfare, amendment of the CAP Strategic Plans, review of the CAP Strategic Plans and exemptions from controls and penalties

Rural areas

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