

# Breaking the grass ceiling: Gender inequality in agriculture

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## Professor Sally Shortall guides us through GRASS CEILING, which brings together 25 partners from across Europe to research gender inequality in agricultural and rural policies

Agriculture is the occupation with the highest levels of gender inequality. <sup>(1)</sup> This is true globally. Despite considerable advances in gender equality in Europe, patterns of inequality persist. Women rarely inherit land, with the persistence of patrilineal patterns of land transfer. The European Union (EU) sometimes claims that the number of women owning and managing farms in Europe has increased. It is now roughly 30%, but this statistic is very misleading.

Countries such as the Netherlands, Malta, Denmark, and Germany have between 5% and 10% of registered women farmholders, and this figure has remained unchanged for decades. What has changed is that the EU has expanded, and the new Member States, such as Romania, Latvia, and Lithuania, have between 35% and 45% of women farmholders. However, these are more subsistence plots of land and are not commercial enterprises.

However, what a focus on farm ownership misses is that many women work in the farming industry, and the farm owner or holder is not an accurate proxy for who works on the farm. Sometimes farms are worked and managed by women, often with her husband; however, the statistical data on these arrangements are very limited. For example, we know that one-third of Dutch farms are co-managed by women; however, this does not necessarily mean co-ownership. ([OECD Background Note Women Food Systems Netherlands FIN.pdf](#)) Inequality persists at many levels. Farming unions at the national and European levels are almost entirely male. National and European agricultural policies are riddled with unconscious biases.

### The GRASS CEILING project

The GRASS CEILING project <sup>(1)</sup> brings together 25 partners from across Europe to research gender inequality in agricultural and rural policies. The project focuses on socio-ecological transitions, that is, sustainable agricultural practices and rural enterprises. Our partners include researchers, women innovators, stakeholder organisations and high-level European policy experts to maximise impact.

Our approach is varied; we have undertaken quantitative analysis of existing data; undertaken analysis of the differential impact of socio-political contexts; gathered data on gender norms; analysed legal frameworks governing land transfer; and undertaken

European and national policy analysis.

At the heart of our project are our living labs. Nine living labs for rural women innovators were established in Ireland, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. Each living lab trains between six and eight women, establishing a network-learning and innovation system that supports women innovators, strengthens and measures their innovative identity, and transforms gender norms and stereotypes by sharing and capturing insights on rural women-innovator policy and practical experiences.

The labs are co-led with a relevant stakeholder organisation in the country, ranging from women's farming organisations to chambers of commerce. One unexpected outcome is that stakeholder organisations say that collaboration has helped them to be more effective in raising issues for women innovators at the national level.

## **What we found: Gender inequality in agricultural and rural policies**

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The main agricultural and rural policies shaping practices across Europe were benchmarked against the [EU Gender Equality Strategy](#) to assess the extent to which they address equality. We found the persistence of unconscious bias. Some EU documents actually refer to farmers using the male pronoun; his land, his herd. <sup>(1)</sup> [The Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\)](#) has long been recognised as an unequal policy. <sup>(1)</sup>

Research has shown the unequal impact on smaller farms, poorer regions and environmental sustainability. Yet the unequal impact on women has never been considered. On average, women's holdings are 6.4 hectares compared to 14.4 hectares for men. Women's earnings are 12,000 compared to 40,000. CAP payments are not paid to very small holdings, and the usual threshold is 7 hectares, meaning that most of the women's holdings are not eligible for the subsidy.

In the most recent CAP programme, Member States are responsible for the CAP National Plan. Advancing equality for women in agriculture is now to be addressed in national plans. However, the GRASS CEILING analysis found this to be inadequate in practice. It is not compulsory to address gender equality, and there is no sanction if it is not included in the National Plan, as seen in some countries, such as Sweden, which refuse to include it.

In other cases, there are specific targets for women, but the main body of the National Plan ignores equality. In Ireland, for example, women farmers can access the 60% rate of the Targeted Agriculture Modernisation Scheme, while the standard rate is 40%. However, to access this rate, the herd must be registered in the woman's name. This is rarely the case, making women ineligible. In the main body of the Irish National Plan, measures to increase new entrants are discussed, but this is done in a gender-blind way.

## **Women's socio-ecological practices**

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GRASS CEILING has found that women tend to undertake socio-ecological practices. Many of our Living Lab participants have married into farms. They have been instrumental in driving more sustainable and innovative practices on the farm. They advocate reducing the use of fertiliser. One Italian innovator converted her family business to organic farming.

Women also tend to add to farm income by developing enterprises related to the farm, often using produce that would otherwise have been seen as waste. One Scottish innovator uses goat hair from the farm's goats to make products that she sells. An Irish woman has started a dairy using the milk produced on her farm and sells milk and butter in the region. Some of the obstacles women faced included not being taken seriously, a lack of networks, and difficulties accessing finance, particularly microfinance.

We found that women in remote rural areas undertake voluntary social enterprises, providing infrastructure for their local rural communities that would not otherwise exist. In the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, for example, living lab participants provide elder meals, cafes, and childcare that would not otherwise exist. The private sector will never reach these remote regions with small populations, and national governments should recognise and reward these women's work in sustaining rural communities.

## **Women's contribution to remote rural communities in the future**

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The unequal position of women in agriculture must be addressed in the same way as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). This requires a concerted policy commitment at the EU and Member State levels. It is not just a question of equality; it is also about increasing the sustainable practices of the region. Women's contribution to maintaining the fabric of remote rural communities also needs to be recognised and rewarded.

## **Reference**

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1. Shortall, S. and Marangudakis, V., (2022) Is agriculture an occupation or a sector? Gender inequalities in a European context. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 62(4), pp.746-762.  
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