
The European Parliament's Work on Women in Rural Areas

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The voice of the European Parliament in shaping the rural world

Women living in rural areas within the European Union are not a homogenous group. They play many roles and contribute to society and rural development in many various ways. They also face different challenges depending on their nationality, age, family and other circumstances. They have different needs, interests and expectations. However, discrimination remains a constant feature. On several occasions, the Members of the European Parliament have pointed out the important contribution of women to the farming sector and the numerous challenges that they face in rural areas. Last April 2017, a Report on women and their role in rural areas was approved by a large majority during the plenary meeting.

This resolution is an own-initiative report of the European Parliament and its content has no direct legal power. In own-initiative reports, the European Parliament gives its view on a specific issue, formulates recommendations and calls the European Commission and the Member States to act. The European Commission is the only EU institution with the right to propose new legislation. Own-initiative reports of the European Parliament do feed this process and they can give direction to the European Commission. The European Commission can make proposals, but the European Council (the Member States) and the European Parliament are the legislators. Together, they decide on the final content of EU laws such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The European Parliament has always taken a strong and proactive stance on advancing gender equality. The legal basis of these demands is granted by

the Treaties. The European Union is founded on a set of values, including equality, and is committed to promoting equality between men and women (Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)) and to gender mainstreaming (Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)). These objectives are also enshrined in Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Current policy priorities are set out in the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016 - 2019, which identifies five priority areas for action and funding (including equal pay for equal work, equal economic independence and equality in decision-making).

Whilst some EU funding programmes include a gender aspect agriculture and rural policies do not contemplate specific measures for women in rural areas, with the exception of EU Regulation No. 1305/2013. In Articles 7 and 9, this regulation provides rules to address gender inequality in rural development calling on, among others, Member States to include thematic sub-programmes that address specific needs of women in rural areas (Art. 7). However, these sub-programmes are not mandatory for Member States and they don't benefit from higher support rates while other sub-programmes do.

An overview of the recent initiatives of the European Parliament on rural women

Between 2005 and 2010 around 2.4 million small or family farms disappeared in the EU, having a severe impact on rural regions. The increase in unemployment and poverty contributes to the depopulation of the areas with the desertion of young people, especially women. Since 2008, the European Parliament has been emphasising the important role of women in preserving rural

areas and raising awareness on the existing gender gap and unequal opportunities in the agricultural sector. For instance, women lack equal access to resources and training and tend to manage smaller farms (the average farm size in hectares is 8 ha while for men it is 20 ha).

Only 30% of women are categorised as farm holders. Although they run the farm equally shared with their partners, the majority of women are considered as 'family members' working on farms⁴⁴. Moreover, female participation in decision-making is wider in rural areas while their job remuneration is lower, making their risk of poverty and social exclusion higher.

In March 2008, the European Parliament first issued a Report on 'the situation of women in rural areas of the EU' calling for the recognition of and respect for women and their traditional roles in the rural economy and society. In April 2011, the Report on 'the role of women in agriculture and rural areas' was approved and in May 2016 the Report on 'poverty: a gender perspective' pointed out the specific situation of women in rural areas and called for Member States to improve the living conditions of women.

For years, the Members of the European Parliament have been constantly demanding better statistical data and gender-disaggregated data regarding women in rural areas and in the agricultural sector. However, problems persist in the collection of reliable and comprehensive data on women's work due to the high percentage of invisible work, the seasonal and part-time nature of women's work and the non-remunerated family labour⁴⁵.

The Parliament's last 2017 resolution on women and their role in rural areas

Gender inequality is not only an issue of justice but also of agricultural productivity, food security and rural development. A study issued by the European Parliament in 2015 on the International Day of Rural Women presents the existing inequalities across Europe. One year later, the Committee on Agriculture and the Committee on Women's Rights started working on a joint own-initiative Report on 'women and their role in rural areas'. The text was finally adopted by the European Parliament on 4th April 2017 in Strasbourg, with a large majority (523 in favour, 104 against and 58 abstentions).

The main message of the Parliament's resolution is again to highlight the many and important roles that women play in rural communities and the numerous difficulties that they face regarding, for instance, access to the labour market, participation in decision-making, work-life balance, and access to financing:

1. Ensuring women's work-life balance in rural areas

By 2050, the population of Europe's urban regions is projected to increase by 24.1 million persons whereas the population of rural regions is projected to fall by 7.9 million⁴⁶. Rural areas play a major role in the conservation of the environment, biodiversity and landscape. Therefore, together with its Member States, the European Union must maintain an active and prosperous rural population.

Women need greater incentives to stay in the countryside, including the facilitation of a good work-life balance through the provision of a

⁴⁴ Rossi, R., 'Women and their roles in rural areas', European Parliament Think Tank, 2017

⁴⁵ European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 'Gender in Agriculture and Rural Development', 2016

⁴⁶ Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Urban_Europe_%E2%80%94_statistics_on_cities,_towns_and_suburbs_%E2%80%94_patterns_of_urban_and_city_developments, visited at 31st August 2018.

number of services: rural childcare arrangements, healthcare, educational facilities, care services for the elderly and dependent people, sickness and maternity replacement, access to transport and communication and cultural services. The paragraphs of the resolution dedicated to the request for specific measures to combat violence against women need a special mention. These paragraphs state that Member States and regional and local governments must offer services to prevent gender-based violence and ensure victim support in rural areas. The resolution also reiterates the importance that all Member States ratify the Istanbul Convention and the need for an EU directive on violence against women. All in all, as it says in the resolution, 'improving general conditions in rural areas will result in achieving an improved status for women in those areas'.

2. Legal recognition of women's rural work

According to the European Commission, in 2009, only 61% of women aged 20 to 64 were employed in rural areas⁴⁷. In 2014, women were responsible for about 35% of total working time in agriculture (53.8% of part-time work and 30.8% of full-time work). Only 30% of farm holdings in the EU are managed by women. The work of spouses and other female family members of the owners constitute indispensable 'invisible work' which has the effect of depriving women of social and economic rights. Therefore, the Members of the European Parliament call for the promotion of women's ownership, facilitation of their equitable access to land and guarantees to ensure inheritance rights and access to credits.

Women also suffer from gender pay and pension gaps in the farming sector. Thus, the Parliament urges the elimination of any form of discrimination as well as the provision of social security registration for all workers to guarantee them entitlements such as access to sick leave and maternity leave, as well as greater financial independence.

3. Multifunctionality of roles: women as agents of change

The Members of the European Parliament recognise the different economic, social, environmental and cultural roles that women play in rural areas. Besides their agricultural activities, women are often promoters of tourism or artisan production. Alternative business models, cooperatives and social enterprises also have great potential to stimulate growth and empower women in the agricultural sector. However, women and girls' access to education and lifelong learning, particularly in the areas of technology and science, needs to be facilitated. The improvement of infrastructure such as transport and access to high-speed broadband Internet is a requirement to guarantee a complete education and allow for full career development, as well the good functioning of new business models, including rural tourism or online sales.

Family farming is the most common operational farming model in the EU28 with 76.5 % of the work being carried out by the holder or members of his or her family. The Parliament highlights the significant role women play in ensuring the continued existence of smallholdings and family farms with prospects for the future. Furthermore, support and assistance have to be tailor-made according to the different situations, occupations and roles of women in countryside.

4. Women as agents of change for sustainable rural development

The resolution includes a specific call to the Commission and the Member States to include the promotion of access to the labour market for women as a priority in future rural development policies. Women are often creative promoters of activities that go beyond conventional agriculture and, as noted in the text, 'women in rural areas can be agents of change in moving towards sustainable and ecologically sound agriculture and can play an important role in the creation of green jobs'.

⁴⁷ European Commission (2011), 'Agriculture and Rural Development. EU Agricultural Economic Briefs. Rural Areas and the Europe 2020 Strategy – Employment', Brief No 5 – November 2011.

If the European Union wants to preserve its rural population, it will need to empower women living in the countryside by also supporting their participation in decision-making and enabling them to carry out farming activities and other innovative functions. Thus, European institutions should facilitate provisions for a balanced distribution of aid and support small farms under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

What next? Gender mainstreaming the Common Agricultural Policy

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is still the most expensive of the EU policies, responsible for shaping the agricultural sector across Europe. Gender mainstreaming is an obligation of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 on Rural Development Regulation (which sets the rules for support of rural development under the CAP). The Commission and Member States committed to promote gender equality at the different stages of design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, but according to many studies the problem is the lack of concrete targets identified and defined processes on how to achieve it⁴⁸.

On 1st June 2018, the European Commission presented a legislative proposal on the CAP beyond 2020. Now both the European Parliament

and the European Council will start working on their respective positions on the proposal. Within the Parliament, the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development will have the lead, while other committees, including the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality will have the opportunity to provide input through opinions. This is a long process that can take between one and two years.

Since one of the demands of the Parliament in their last own-initiative report on women in rural areas was to improve the Common and Agricultural Policy, this whole negotiation process is the right moment to get better policies for rural women. The above-mentioned ideas expressed by the resolution, could now be transformed into concrete amendments to legislative proposals. In conclusion, CAP reform is a current window of opportunity to improve the lives of girls and women in rural areas and to 'promote rural development, mitigate the effects of climate change and protect and enhance the natural environment', as expressed in the last resolution.



⁴⁸ See for instance: Taylor & Francis in Shortall S. Gender mainstreaming and the Common Agricultural Policy. *Gender Place and Culture* 2015, 22(5), 717-730.