

# SIDE EVENT: Mainstreaming gender in recovery responses of agri-food sectors and rural areas



Moderator: **Yasmine Seghirate El Guerrab**, Communications and Publications Manager, Gender Policy and Women Empowerment focal point, CIHEAM Headquarters

This side event, organised in collaboration with CIHEAM, explored how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted women in the agricultural sector, including in production, processing and distribution. Women are an important part of agri-food chains yet often work in informal or precarious conditions with limited access to social protections, finance, land and natural resources. Discussions focused on how to tackle these challenges and promote women's greater participation in decision and empowerment at all levels. Priorities identified included the need for collaboration and partnerships, bottom-up policies and actions, better data, closing the digital gap and the involvement of grass-roots organisations and civil society to address the gendered impacts of the pandemic.

*"Empowering and strengthening the place of women in sustainable agri-food systems and rural areas is one of the priorities of my mandate. So that they can deploy their full potential, the CIHEAM supports them through training and capacity building." Plácido Plaza*

**H.E. Akissa Bahri, Minister of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries, Republic of Tunisia**, gave statistics revealing Tunisian women's high participation in the workforce versus low rates of ownership, access to resources and revenue compared to men. She outlined Tunisia's economic, social and legislative efforts to empower rural women, promote remuneration for their work and help the vulnerable. She also noted ongoing concerns like female illiteracy, mortality, poverty, wage discrimination and precarious or seasonal employment, particularly among rural women.

## Insights from keynote speakers

The opening session was moderated by **Yasmine Seghirate El Guerrab, Communications and Publications Manager, Gender Policy and Women Empowerment focal point, CIHEAM Headquarters**.

*"In rural and agricultural areas, there is a need to invest heavily in human capital and the socio-economic potential of women and men. Often neglected, they are nevertheless at the heart of the resilience of our societies and the condition for the success of post-Covid sustainable development policies"* Yasmine Seghirate El Guerrab

**Plácido Plaza, Secretary-General, International Center for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM)**. Mr Plaza opened by praising CIHEAM's solid collaboration with UfM and highlighting CIHEAM's commitment to and actions on gender empowerment in line with the SDGs. He noted that women and youth empowerment and social and economic inclusion are major topics for the upcoming CIHEAM ministerial meeting.

She described the difficulties faced by rural women during lockdown in terms of infection risk, increased burden of family care and lost revenue. She stressed the urgent need for their financial autonomy and independence and their crucial role in the agricultural sector, also the positive impact on crop yields and sustainability when they work independently. She also said equal access to technology, removal of barriers and restraints and empowerment in trade and agriculture are vital for women to combat poverty, malnutrition and starvation and contribute to their country's economic growth.

She concluded by describing initiatives such as a state program to guarantee food security in rural areas, training to ensure women's products meet hygiene and quality standards, technological platforms to commercialise their work and make crops ecological and improve access to credit.

*"Only 3% of women working in rural areas have their own resources and revenue, against 90% of men. Now more than ever,*

**Plácido Plaza**, Secretary-General, International Center for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM)

*rural women need their financial autonomy and independence to face their future and their needs”: - H.E. Akissa Bahri*

**Marcela Villarreal, PhD, Director, Partnerships and UN Collaboration**, commented on gender inequalities and the development agenda, including access to resources and food security and nutrition. She stressed that SDG 5 comprises both education and equal access to resources, particularly in rural areas, with huge potential impact in societal gains in food security and nutrition and, consequently, health and other desirable aspects for development.

She drew attention to huge inequalities in the Euro-Mediterranean in land ownership and representation, noting the importance of land as collateral for finance and the need for women's voice and strong organisations in political, policy and legislative forums. She described the gendered effects of mobility and healthcare restrictions in rural areas, including reduced access to markets and economic downturn, saying women already face more precarity, mobility challenges, physical and cultural barriers and are more vulnerable due to structural inequalities in access to resources.

**Ms. Villareal** made recommendations to revise mobility restrictions to ensure access to markets; prioritize support for labourers, informal and seasonal workers; provide social protections that answer women's needs; and invest in women's leadership and organisations. She noted the need for better sex and age disaggregated data to monitor gendered impacts and develop policies and technology accordingly and concluded by reminding the audience that food security in this fast-growing food crisis means not food aid but the ability to actually produce or buy food.

**Dr. Leonard Mizzi, Head of Unit, European Commission, Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development - Rural development, food security and nutrition**, opened with figures from UN Women indicating COVID-19 will result in the loss of 1.7 million jobs in the Arab region, including 700,000 held by women, mostly in rural areas. He stressed the need for women's empowerment in food systems and agricultural value chains to promote recovery, equality, sustainability, productivity, resilience and build back better following the pandemic. He emphasised how COVID-19 has exposed women's additional burden and confirmed the need for women-led, bottom-up solutions; financial and technological inclusion; gender-responsive solutions and institutions; innovative problem

solving; and cross-donor community expertise to put women and girls at the centre of agri-trade approaches and investment strategies. He gave examples of EU responses, including 36 billion Euros mobilised with member states and financial institutions, and stressed the need for partnerships, coordination and actors on the ground.

**Dr. Mizzi** advocated for a safety net and framework for communities to bounce back and held out hopes for the Italian G20 presidency, the UN Food Summit, Gender Action Plan 3 and multi-institution collaborations to scale gender transformative approaches, promote sustainable agriculture, end hunger and address root causes of inequality. He concluded saying the SDGs cannot be met without improving women's status, and Build Back Better is only a reality if the framework conditions for good policy-making are embedded in the system. He also noted digital transformation is vital but must be applied in a structured, rights-based way to avoid deepening existing inequalities.

## Key issues discussed

### Panel 1: Gender impacts and responses to protect and promote the role of rural women during the COVID-19 pandemic

Moderator **Gaëlle Ferrant, Economist and Gender Programme Coordinator, OECD Development Centre**, asked panellists to comment on how COVID-19 has impacted women in agriculture, processing and distribution, and its impact on inter- and extra-familial gender relations in rural areas. Also, what national, international and local measures can address the gendered impacts in rural areas on agriculture, food security and nutrition, and what alliances and networks can serve a gender-responsive recovery agenda.

**Silvia Barbatello, Project Coordinator, Cooperation Office, CIHEAM Bari, Italy**, presented the **GEMAISA project** on enhancing gender mainstreaming for sustainable rural development and food security. She insisted on the need to consider as-yet unmeasured social and economic impacts of COVID-19—particularly in rural contexts where women's pre-existing vulnerability and fragility have been exacerbated and which may be complicated by complex political contexts. The consequences, she said, cannot be understood in isolation.

She pointed to obstacles—social norms, traditions, access to resources, information, training,



**H.E. Akissa Bahri**, Minister of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries, Republic of Tunisia



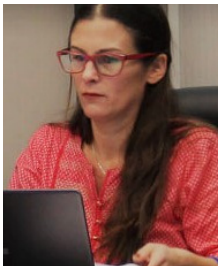
**Marcela Villarreal, PhD**, Director, Partnerships and UN Collaboration



**Dr. Leonard Mizzi**, Head of Unit, European Commission, Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development - Rural development, food security and nutrition



Moderator **Gaëlle Ferrant**, Economist and Gender Programme Coordinator, OECD Development Centre



**Silvia Barbatello**, Project Coordinator, Cooperation Office, CIHEAM Bari, Italy



**Ghizlaine Maghnoij Elmanjra**, social entrepreneur, activist for regenerative economy and Founder of Human for Human



**Meher Al-Khelifi**, Founder of the Ahmini start-up



**Esmahane Etri**, a DEVLOK beneficiary working with CIHEAM Montpellier

credit, basic services and social security—that limit rural women's ability to actively participate in development. Also, potentially increased competition for access to markets, land and resources if men now reverse migrate from urban to rural areas looking for work. She was, however, positive about the potential of technology solutions but, like Dr. Mizzi, stressed the need for judicious application to ensure women's participation.

She also highlighted the need for sound, abundant, locally gathered data on rural women to inform effective initiatives, identify the vulnerable and the factors that contribute to or alleviate their vulnerability. She closed by warning we must not assume women will continue to bear the burden of the socio-economic crisis and increased family duties and called for dialogue between donors, agencies, civil society, local and institutional partners and final beneficiaries.

*"A sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery process should be based on a thorough understanding of how the pandemic has impacted on gender roles and engaging rural women in the response design."*  
**Silvia Barbatello**

**Ghizlaine Maghnoij Elmanjra, social entrepreneur, activist for regenerative economy and Founder of Human for Human**, reminded participants that the crisis in rural women's vulnerability pre-dates COVID-19. She detailed pandemic impacts on Morocco's large population of rural women, already at a disadvantage, who now face deepening poverty and unequal fallout from lockdown, industrial slowdown, facilities closures, loss of exports and access to healthcare, as well as increased domestic burden and violence. She noted that most businesses in the rural sector are small and micro-enterprises.

On a positive, COVID-19 has shaken up high-level decision-making and shown us what we can achieve under pressure with limited time and resources. She also welcomed the opportunity for activists and civil society to gain in voice and visibility at a time when we need exceptional, multidimensional, bottom-up solutions, societal transformation and the implementation of a social economy. This, she stressed, can only be achieved by thinking and acting locally, with the involvement of agile new stakeholders and actors on the ground, and by refreshing the "ego-system" and silos in which many currently work.

**Meher Al-Khelifi, Founder of the Ahmini** startup which helps rural women access social coverage and affiliation, shared experience of direct actions to protect rural Tunisian women working in agriculture, artisanal and handicraft trades, as well as owners of land or small business. He emphasized the challenges faced by women who must care for families and are, therefore, the cornerstone of food security, stressing that, for them, ceasing work during lockdown was not an option. He also drew attention to the tremendous losses resulting from the lack of marketing and distribution of commodities and everyday products. He went on to mention the issues of poor communication, transportation and long urban-rural commutes, as well as disruption to food supplies during lockdown. However, he noted positive interventions like Ahmini's rapid development of applications to provide food and financial assistance to women, and efforts to address the barriers that limit women's empowerment and that are the focus of Ahmini's mission.

The session also featured a **video** of **Esmahane Etri, a DEVLOK beneficiary working with CIHEAM Montpellier**. As Founder and Manager of Chez Halima, Tunisia, she spoke about the challenges of securing supplies and continuing production and distribution of milk products during lockdown, as well as the solutions she found and her need for government assistance.

## **Panel 2: Strengthening resilience of rural women through education, training and research**

This panel, moderated by **Tomas Garcia Azcarate, Deputy Director, Institute of Economics, Geography and Demography, Spanish Research Council, Associate Researcher, CEIGRAM**, discussed how education, training and research in agri-foods can help limit the negative impacts of crises like COVID-19 on women, and the instruments, innovations and technologies that can be mobilised in response.

**Dr. Maroun El Moujabber, Projects Coordinator and CIHEAM Bari representative in the "Gender smart" project**, presented this inter-community project to strengthen gender equality in agriculture, life sciences research and innovation in institutions, management, research and teaching. He stressed how equality in research and innovation fosters creativity, excellence, fairness and business opportunities, warning that bias blinds us to people's merits and ignoring inequality sends a message to women that it is normal and



they are less valuable. He explained that gender equality plans are the main policy instruments to advance equality in the European research area and that the European Commission has established these as mandatory for research organisations and higher education to access funding from the next Horizon Europe.

During lockdown, to understand the gendered effects of the pandemic and how a gendered lens can help develop or strengthen measures to reduce gender inequality at work, CIHEAM Bari surveyed the human resources impact and measures taken by Gender Smart partner countries and organisations. They found COVID-19 has not been the same for everyone: men suffered more stress from lack of physical activity while women had more anxiety; men highlighted more time with the family as a possible life improvement, while women wanted more professional development. Dr. El Moujabber concluded by saying we cannot afford to revert to business as usual after COVID-19 and recommended strengthening support for tele- and home-working and incorporating the long-term presence of the virus into gender equality plans.

*"COVID-19 has not been the same for everybody. Building back better means a*

*person-centred and gendered approach."*  
**Dr. Maroun El Moujabber**

**Carmen Urbano, Director-General of Agri-food Innovation & Promotion, Government of Aragon, Spain**, shared experiences from a region that has experienced massive rural depopulation and has very few women in the agri-food sector. To mitigate this, the government applies positive discrimination to support women-led projects and has developed a legislative framework to promote direct marketing and a publicly funded e-commerce platform, open to all producers. Through case studies of women-led farming and production, she illustrated how Aragón has played to its strengths as a major exporter of black truffle. It has also taken advantage of the UNESCO World Heritage status of the Mediterranean Diet, as well as the trends towards more rural living, producer-to-consumer direct marketing, organic and healthy produce, and good internet coverage to enable e-commerce and networking.

*"I am convinced that Digital Transformation can contribute to a better future in rural areas, especially for women"*  
**Carmen Urbano**



**Tomas Garcia Azcarate**, Deputy Director, Institute of Economics, Geography and Demography, Spanish Research Council, Associate Researcher, CEIGRAM



**Dr. Maroun El Moujabber**, Projects Coordinator and CIHEAM Bari representative in the "Gender smart" project

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**Mainstreaming gender in Covid-19 recovery responses of agri-food sectors and rural areas**  
SIDE EVENT / 19 NOVEMBER 2020 (14.00-17.00)

**Strengthening Gender Equality in Agriculture and Life Sciences Research and Innovation Institutions: Challenging the COVID-19 Pandemic**  
**Maroun El Moujabber, CIHEAM Bari**

Logos: ANR, CIRAD, Wageningen, Yellow Window, etc.

**ARAGON, REGION ESPAGNOLE TRÈS "MED"...**

Map showing the Mediterranean region with labels for countries like France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, etc.

Logos: ANR, CIRAD, Wageningen, Yellow Window, etc.



**Carmen Urbano**, Director-General of Agri-food Innovation & Promotion, Government of Aragon, Spain