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**Acting for climate: empowering women  
to build climate resilience****Empowering rural women in the ECE region****Note by the Food and Agriculture Organisation<sup>1</sup>***Summary*

The Economic and Social Council in its Resolution 2018/8 encouraged the United Nations Regional Commissions to undertake a regional review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to assess progress made towards the achievement of gender equality goals and the linkages to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, so that the intergovernmental processes will serve as background for the 2020 global review at the sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). One important focus, especially for the member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), is the empowerment of rural women and girls.

This note provides background information, priority issues, progress, challenges and promising approaches for the empowerment of rural women in the ECE region. The report notes that although the ECE region attains above average achievements across the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Strategic Objectives as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the areas of women's poverty reduction and economic growth, sub-regionally profound disparities persist which disproportionately impact rural women.

<sup>1</sup> This note has been prepared by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) through the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (REU) in cooperation with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and the UN Europe and Central Asia Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality.



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## I. Introduction

1. On 12 June 2018, the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 2018/8, decided that the CSW at its sixty-fourth session in 2020 would undertake a review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 25 years on, and its contribution towards the realisation of the 2030 Agenda. This is the first time that the FAO through its Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (REU), as part of the UN Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality, has taken an active role in the review process by preparing this regional thematic background paper on Empowering Rural Women in the ECE region.
2. This document is based on a desk review and discussions with the FAO REU Gender team and members of the UN Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality in Europe and Central Asia. First, the note describes the main trends in the ECE region with a focus on gender issues facing rural women in ECE member States. Second, the report analyses progress and challenges towards the achievement of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Strategic Objectives and SDGs, with particular focus on SDGs 1, 2 and 5 including examples of best practices. Finally, the report provides a list of key priority actions to accelerate progress towards Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Strategic Objectives and SDGs.
3. The ECE region is diverse, comprising 56 countries<sup>2</sup>. According to the World Bank data, in 2018, 27.8 per cent of Europe and Central Asia population lived in rural areas,<sup>3</sup> with significant variation between countries across the region (see Table 1). Agriculture contributes an average of 4.9 per cent to the Gross Domestic Product, and as much as 28.8 per cent in Uzbekistan and 21.2 per cent in Tajikistan (see Table 2). While agriculture accounts for 16 per cent of all employment in the region, around 40 per cent of rural women work in agriculture.

Table 1

### Rural population as a percentage of total population in selected countries in Europe and Central Asia

	1990	2000	2010	2015	2018
Albania	63.6	58.3	47.8	42.6	39.7
Armenia	32.6	35.3	36.6	36.9	36.9
Georgia	45.0	47.4	44.5	42.6	41.4
Kyrgyzstan	62.2	64.7	64.7	64.2	63.6
Republic of Moldova	53.2	55.4	57.4	57.5	57.4
Republic of North Macedonia	42.2	41.5	42.9	42.6	42.0
Tajikistan	68.3	73.5	73.5	73.3	72.3
Turkey	40.8	35.3	29.2	26.4	24.9

Source: World Bank database accessed 30 July 2019.

4. Within ECE countries, rural women comprise the largest disadvantaged group in terms of achieving equality compared to men and women in urban areas. Rural women in ECE member States are also more likely to be poor and have less access to infrastructure, services and education than urban women.<sup>4</sup> This report adopts a sub-regional perspective, focusing on persistent inequalities that disproportionately impact rural women's opportunities for economic empowerment, and the profound disparities that exist in the ECE region. The document is concentrated on women's economic empowerment as a means to achieving the

<sup>2</sup> This note does not include references to Canada, Israel or the United States, which are ECE member States. Overall focus of this note is primarily on the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and includes references to Kosovo. This and all other references to Kosovo in this document shall be understood to be in full compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank data 2018. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=Z>.

<sup>4</sup> FAO (2016) Gender equality, social protection and rural development in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Insights from the region. Budapest.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in rural areas.

Table 2  
**Selected economic indicators (2018)**

	<i>Agriculture, forestry, and fishing value added (per cent of GDP)</i>	<i>Employment in agriculture (per cent of total employment)</i>
Albania	18.4	38
Armenia	13.7	33
Georgia	6.7	43
Kyrgyzstan	11.6	27
Republic of Moldova	10.2	32
Republic of North Macedonia	7.2	16
Tajikistan	21.2	51
Uzbekistan	28.8	33

*Source:* World Bank database accessed 1 August 2019.

## II. Overview of the situation of rural women in the ECE region

### A. Rural women disproportionately face poverty and disadvantage when compared to rural men and urban women

5. Throughout the ECE region, rural women comprise around 40 per cent of the agricultural labour force, providing crucial contributions to food security in their households, communities and at the national level. In Central Asia 41 per cent of women work in agriculture, while in Eastern Europe this figure drops to 29 per cent and increases to around 45 per cent in Southern Europe (see Table 3.). Although agriculture (including forestry and fishery) remains the main economic activity in rural areas, in many countries productivity is decreasing, due to various reasons, which include rural to urban migration and ageing populations in rural areas, as in Georgia, Serbia or Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

Table 3  
**Women's employment in agriculture as (1) a percentage of total number of men and women employed in agriculture; and (2) a percentage of female employment (2018)**

	<i>(1)</i>	<i>(2)</i>
Albania	48.1	42
Armenia	52.9	37
Austria	44.1	4
Azerbaijan	55.8	42
Georgia	50.8	45
Kazakhstan	43.7	14
Kyrgyzstan	36.9	28
Republic of Moldova	38.1	15
Serbia	38.1	15
Turkey	45.2	28
Ukraine	40.7	13
Uzbekistan	..	37

*Source:* (1) UNECE Gender Statistics database, (2) World Bank database, both accessed 30 July 2019.

<sup>5</sup> European Parliament (2019), The professional status of rural women in the EU. Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Brussels.

6. While rural women comprise a significant part of the agricultural labour force, they often do not have formal employment status, which results in low recognition of the value of their work, and as a result – low incomes, limited access to social welfare entitlements, and a higher likelihood of poverty. Rural women perform critical roles in family and non-family farms, including in fish farms and forest-dependent communities, but are rarely registered as landowners (including forest owners), farm managers or co-managers. Women own only 5 per cent of agricultural land in the Netherlands, while in Serbia, the figure rises to 16 per cent, and in Georgia and the Republic of Moldova – to 30 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

7. Women in rural areas are less likely to be registered as landowners compared to urban women. For example, the number of women-landowners in some rural areas is as low as 3 per cent in the Western Balkans compared to 48 per cent in some urban areas.<sup>7</sup> In countries where women do own a higher share of land, their plots tend to be smaller. For example, in Ukraine, women comprise around 50 per cent of landowners, however, the average land area belonging to female-headed households is smaller than the average for male-headed households, and female-headed households usually have a slightly smaller proportion of arable land.<sup>8</sup>

8. Across the ECE member States, even where laws guarantee joint ownership of land, registration certificates tend to include only men's names. In Slovenia, women comprise 80 per cent of the labour force who produce the country's food yet only 28.8 per cent of these women identify as managers and only 9 per cent have their agricultural holdings registered in their names.<sup>9</sup>

9. The lack of land registration and the limited awareness of women's rights over land hinder rural women's possibilities to enjoy these rights de facto. This has a wide number of implications, including limited access to social protection, extension services, credit, subsidies, administration and decision-making.

10. Rural women also have limited access to other resources and productive assets including water, pastures, livestock, machinery and subsidies, which are fundamental to their economic empowerment. For example, the number of women who own agricultural machinery is as low as 5 per cent in some countries. In the Republic of Moldova, women own only 7.9 per cent and 8.8 per cent of irrigation machinery and mechanical cultivators.<sup>10</sup>

11. Access to sufficient and safe water for domestic and productive uses is critical to the livelihoods, education, health and economic opportunities of rural women. In Tajikistan, 28 per cent of rural households obtain water from unimproved water sources, up to 8.5 per cent of rural households spend more than 30 minutes collecting water and 65 per cent of households have access to drinking water.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, 95 per cent of crop production takes place on irrigated land, emphasising the urgent need for water in rural areas.

12. A lack of infrastructure in rural areas, such as care centres for children and the elderly, also restricts rural women's time and opportunity for activities that support economic empowerment including paid work, education, professional development and participation in leadership and decision-making. Across Europe, women do 1.9 times the unpaid care and

<sup>6</sup> Beker, K. (2017), Situation of Rural Women in Serbia, Shadow Report to the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women regarding the fourth reporting cycle of Serbia Report submitted by the members of an informal network of women's organizations dealing with the situation of rural women. Belgrade

<sup>7</sup> Llatja, A. Vidar, M. Goelema, M. Kenney, N. Tonchovska, A. (2018), Achieving SDG indicator 5.a.2 in the Western Balkans: Partnerships for gender equality in land ownership and control, Paper prepared for presentation at the "2018 World Bank Conference on Land and Property" The World Bank - Washington DC, March 19-23, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> FAO (forthcoming), Country Gender Assessment: Gender, Agriculture and Rural Development in Ukraine. Budapest.

<sup>9</sup> FAO (2018), What gender mainstreaming in agriculture means in practice: Cases from selected countries of the European Union. Budapest

<sup>10</sup> FAO & MOLDSTAT (2013), Women and men in agriculture in the Republic of Moldova. National Bureau of Statistics Moldova.

<sup>11</sup> Statistical Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Demographic and Health Survey 2017. Dushanbe.

domestic work that men do. However, there is a noticeable amount of variation at the country level. In some European countries, such as Sweden, the corresponding figure is as low as 1.3 times while in Germany, women do 1.6 times the unpaid care and domestic work that men do. In Italy, women fare worse than the global average, with women doing 3 times the unpaid care and domestic work that men do.<sup>12</sup> Women in rural areas spend more time on unpaid care than women in urban areas.

13. While food insecurity in ECE member States now mainly concerns malnutrition and obesity, in rural and remote areas of some countries stunting and wasting remain prevalent. In some areas of the region, adult women tend to face a higher prevalence of severe food insecurity than men do.<sup>13</sup> In some countries in Central Asia, stunting among the poorest groups in rural areas was nearly twice as high as in cities.<sup>14</sup>

14. Rural women who are already facing economic disadvantage are trapped in a cycle where they have limited access to labour markets, finance and productive resources as compared to rural men and to urban women.<sup>15</sup> However, their contribution to rural development is often overlooked and the challenges they face are poorly understood because of their geographic isolation, and the invisibility of their mostly home-based and unpaid work.

15. Certain groups of rural women, especially those living in remote areas, including ethnic minority women (including Roma women), young women, refugee or displaced women, disabled women, elderly women, divorced, and women with children, are especially at greater risks of lacking safety nets and accessing development opportunities.<sup>16</sup> Rural women might be also at higher exposure to various forms of violence. For example, young rural women in Central Asia and the Caucasus endure stereotypes and harmful social practices including early and forced marriage, and bride kidnapping which limit their life choices and opportunities.<sup>17</sup>

## **B. Slow changing and rigid social practices impede rural women's economic empowerment**

16. Among rural populations in some ECE member States, gender inequalities are rooted in socially constructed norms and practices that segregate roles and responsibilities by sex. While women are engaged in labour intensive work, men are engaged in capital-intensive work in agriculture. Men are perceived as “authentic” farmers, landowners and heads of households, while rural women usually are perceived as ‘wives of farmers’. Widespread stereotypes consider commercial decision-making, management, machinery maintenance, fieldwork, and agricultural innovation as men’s work, while intensive manual and seasonal labour in harvesting, milking and calf rearing, are typically seen as female activities. Rural women perform a wide range of domestic responsibilities, which include but are not limited to collecting firewood; fetching water, producing food for families’ consumption; as well as caring for children, the elderly and the sick. In addition to this work, rural women are contributing family members or helpers in: seeding and weeding of household plots; tending gardens; feeding and taking care of domestic livestock; processing of dairy; and other responsibilities that contribute to the income of their households but are rarely seen as ‘jobs’ or ‘farm work’ even by rural women themselves. Social norms and practices tend to assign a lower status and little recognition to the contribution of women and girls to the rural economy and livelihoods and in doing so further limit their life opportunities and access to strategic choices.

<sup>12</sup> UN Women (2018) Turning Promises into Action SDG report.

<sup>13</sup> FAO (2018), Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2018. Budapest.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> European Parliament (2019), The professional status of rural women.

<sup>16</sup> FAO (2018), Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2018. Budapest.

<sup>17</sup> UNFPA (2015), Child marriage in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: regional overview, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office. Istanbul.

17. Patrilocal residence after marriage and inheritance practices throughout Western Balkans, South Caucasus and Central Asia impede rural women's economic empowerment for generations.<sup>18</sup> In many parts of Central Asia, South Caucasus and Western Balkans women (and men) acquire property rights only to the assets they gain during the marriage. At the same time there is a social expectation that women will "renounce" their inheritance rights in favour of their male siblings.

18. Patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes of women in some countries in the region perpetuate gender-based violence and in a few countries condone harmful practices and traditions, such as child marriage and polygamy. In Kyrgyzstan, forced and unregistered marriages persist, leaving many young women without economic protection and access to education.<sup>19</sup>

19. Discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes that compartmentalise rural women into domestic and care roles, and ignore their contribution to agriculture and food security, stifle their opportunities and willingness to participate in, and lead on rural development. Rural women are less likely to join leadership roles in decision-making bodies, such as agricultural cooperatives, unions and municipal administrations, than men are. For example, in Georgia, even though women make up 25 per cent of all farmers' cooperative members, only 4.7 per cent of cooperatives are headed by women.<sup>20</sup> Research in Kosovo found that less than 6 per cent of women stated that they would participate in community meetings about forest-related issues.<sup>21</sup> The majority of women surveyed believed that a husband, father-in-law, brother or adult son should participate on behalf of a family.

20. Rural women working in agriculture including women-farmers, women who are unpaid workers in family farms and women who work as paid or unpaid labourers on other farms and agricultural enterprises, usually have limited access to agricultural advisory services. Regionally, due to gender-based barriers, such as time poverty, limited mobility, lack of transport and social infrastructure few women have access to agricultural advisory services.

21. Without a strong voice, rural women have little power and control over a range of decisions and resources at home, in the community and in society as a whole. This is also evident in mainstream agricultural policies and programmes that often do not involve rural women and sufficiently reflect their needs. At the same time, a lack of voice, coupled with economic hardship and poor infrastructure in rural areas makes it difficult for rural women to highlight and respond to different forms of gender discrimination including gender-based violence, women and girls' disproportionate care burden and other rigid social practices.

### **C. Rural women face barriers to economic empowerment**

22. Agriculture remains the largest employer for rural women in a number of ECE member States. However, opportunities for formal employment in rural areas are limited and the strict division of labour disadvantages women more than men. Women's paid and unpaid work in agricultural activities is often informal, labour intensive, seasonal, poorly paid and unstable. Even in EU countries, women in rural areas have less employment opportunities compared both to men in rural areas and women in urban areas.<sup>22</sup>

23. Rural women in the majority of ECE member States are estimated to earn between 60 to 85 per cent of men's salaries.<sup>23</sup> In Ukraine, rural women earn the lowest wages in the country.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> FAO (2016), *Gender and Rural Development in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Key Issues*. Rome.

<sup>19</sup> UNFPA (2015), *Child marriage in Eastern Europe*.

<sup>20</sup> FAO (2018), *Gender, agriculture and rural development in Georgia – Country Gender Assessment Series*. Rome.

<sup>21</sup> FAO (2017), *Gender rural livelihoods and forestry. Assessment of gender issues in Kosovo's forestry*. Pristina.

<sup>22</sup> European Parliament (2019), *The professional status of rural women*.

<sup>23</sup> FAO (2016), *Gender and Rural Development in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Key Issues*. Rome.

<sup>24</sup> FAO (2016), *Gender Equality, Social Protection and Rural Development in Eastern Europe and Central Asia Insights from the Region*. Budapest.

24. In many countries in the region, the level of women's education in rural areas is much lower than that of women in the cities. In the Republic of Moldova, only 46.4 per cent of active rural women have higher education, specialised secondary or vocational secondary education, and this share has shown a tendency to steadily decrease over the past years.<sup>25</sup>

25. In countries where rural women are well represented in post-secondary agricultural education or higher education in agriculture, their qualifications do not always translate into managerial, decision-making positions. Women represent between 51 and 60 per cent of those attending agricultural education programmes in Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, Turkey and Croatia.<sup>26</sup> Numbers of women studying agriculture are also above the global average in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan (around 23.5 per cent).<sup>27</sup> However, in some Central Asian countries structural barriers continue to disadvantage rural women's access to tertiary education.

26. Entrepreneurship allows rural women to get out of poverty, gain economic independence while having flexibility and working close to home. However, barriers such as access to markets and finance, land rights and information and training hinder potential for economic growth and keep enterprises small. In Albania, a gender analysis of the highly profitable medicinal and aromatic plants value chain shows that women are mainly involved in manual and highly intensive labour activities.<sup>28</sup> Rural women's double burden, in productive work and unpaid home and care tasks, becomes particularly high during harvesting peaks. The lack of land ownership titles registered in women's names further prevents them from benefitting from grants or debt financing. Even though their contribution to this value chain is significant, rural women may be omitted from contract negotiations and selling due to entrenched social practices.

27. Migration is a major economic solution for many men and women in rural areas. According to the World Bank data, in 2018, remittance flows were estimated at USD 59 billion in Europe and Central Asia, and comprised 33.6 per cent of the GDP of Kyrgyzstan and, respectively 31 per cent for Tajikistan.<sup>29</sup> Remittances to rural areas contribute to guaranteeing food security and alleviating poverty, particularly in Central Asia. Labour migration in the region has an explicit gender dimension, with men prevailing in outward migration in Armenia, Ukraine and Central Asia; however, the numbers of female migrants are growing.<sup>30</sup>

28. Rural women who migrate for work are more likely to remit money home than men.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, female migrants are particularly vulnerable to gender-based discrimination and violence, in transit and destination countries, where they may struggle to find safe and suitable housing, decent working conditions and access to social services.

29. Large numbers of men and women moving away from rural areas have a profound impact on rural development in terms of lower agriculture productivity, increasing rural women's domestic and on-farm responsibilities, and causing imbalances in the age and sex structure of villages. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, men are estimated to represent around 85 per cent of labour migrants (mostly going to the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan and other countries of the region and beyond).<sup>32</sup> Migration may have a negative impact on the left behind families, leading to increased divorce rates, increased vulnerability of children and adolescents, and many women depending on irregular remittances, if any. These women are vulnerable to

<sup>25</sup> OHCHR (2018), Report on implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in the Republic of Moldova.

<sup>26</sup> FAO (2014), Rural Women.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> FAO (2018), Market and Value Chain Analysis for diversification of the rural economy and women's economic empowerment. Budapest.

<sup>29</sup> The World Bank (2019), Migration and Remittances – Recent Developments and Outlook. Available at <https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/Migrationanddevelopmentbrief31.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> FAO (forthcoming), Country Gender Assessment.

<sup>31</sup> FAO (2018), Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2018. Budapest.

<sup>32</sup> FAO (2019), Gender, agriculture and rural development in Uzbekistan. Country Gender Assessment Series. Budapest.



poverty due to their insecure status as helpers and unpaid workers on family farms and experience social stigma associated with being single women. When women are left behind, they often become the de facto heads of the households or holdings; however, as they are not registered owners or managers of the land, they are not able to engage in profitable economic activities or access credit to develop their own enterprises. In some countries, rural women left behind are also at a higher risk of abuse, discrimination and exploitation, including from human traffickers.<sup>33</sup>

#### **D. Infrastructure, services and social protection measures do not meet rural women's needs**

30. Rural women are severely affected by limited access to everyday necessities such as running water, waste disposal, sewage and access to energy as electricity due to their disproportionate share of household and care work responsibilities. For example, in Kyrgyzstan only 15.1 per cent of rural households have piped water compared with 73.9 per cent of urban households.<sup>34</sup> Underdeveloped communal and social infrastructure contribute to their workload and increase time poverty.

31. Access to knowledge, information and services are uneven throughout the region, for example, rural women in some countries, taking care of livestock, may lack access to veterinary services and information, which are critical to maintaining rural livelihoods.<sup>35</sup> In Tajikistan, only 1.3 per cent of rural households have access to the internet compared to 8.3 per cent of urban households.<sup>36</sup>

32. Women in rural areas also face limited access to healthcare and childcare services. In Ukraine, 48 per cent of rural women have limited access to any health services at all.<sup>37</sup> A lack of services means that high rates of maternal mortality remain a key issue. As illustrated in Table 4 maternal mortality rates vary across the region with ratios as high as 75 in Kyrgyzstan.

Table 4

##### **Maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births**

	<i>2013</i>
Armenia	29.0
Azerbaijan	26.0
Belarus	1.0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8.0
Georgia	41.0
Hungary	14.0
Kazakhstan	26.0
Kyrgyzstan	75.0
North Macedonia	7.0
Republic of Moldova	21.0
Russian Federation	24.0
Serbia	16.0
Slovakia	7.0
Tajikistan	44.0
Turkey	20.0

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> FAO (2016), National gender profile of agricultural and rural livelihoods. Kyrgyzstan republic. Country gender assessment series. Budapest.

<sup>35</sup> UN Women, Swiss Cooperation Office and Austria Development Cooperation (2016), Gender Assessment of Agriculture and Local Development systems. Georgia.

<sup>36</sup> FAO (2016), National Gender Profile of Agricultural and Rural Livelihoods – Tajikistan, Ankara.

<sup>37</sup> FAO (2016), Gender equality, social protection.

	2013
Ukraine	23.0
Uzbekistan	36.0

*Source:* UNECE Statistical database accessed 23 July 2019.

33. In Hungary, in 2018 only 48 000 childcare places were available for 280 000 children.<sup>38</sup> The geographical distribution of day care services is extremely unbalanced, with 83 per cent of day care centres located in cities and towns with a population larger than 10 000 people. By comparison, only 6 institutions with day care services are located in villages with a population below 1000 inhabitants.<sup>39</sup>

34. Rural women's geographical isolation and the fact that they do not enjoy their own means of transport means that they are dependent on others to take them to health, social and administrative services. In this situation, women's access to information and services first passes through men's consent making it impossible for women to make independent and informed decisions about a range of issues, such as sexual relations, contraceptive use, healthcare and psycho-social issues such as domestic violence, which can improve their situation. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, only 76.6 and 40.9 per cent of rural women feel empowered to make their own sexual and reproductive health choices.<sup>40</sup>

35. From 60 to 87 per cent of rural women's work is unpaid or informal.<sup>41</sup> Operating outside of the formal labour market excludes them from benefits and entitlements such as maternity leave, sick pay and carers' leave. In Albania, only 19 per cent of women from rural areas who gave birth in 2014 received maternity allowance, compared with 59 per cent of pregnant women from urban areas.<sup>42</sup>

36. A lack of access to social benefits continues to impact rural women as they age. Older women who remain in rural areas are more likely to experience poverty than men due to their status as unpaid or informal workers with limited access to pension schemes. For rural women who are poor, lack access to health services and decent pensions living longer does not translate into living better.<sup>43</sup>

37. The concentration of rural women working informally also excludes them from accessing financial services, training, agricultural extension programmes and agricultural subsidies, which have the potential to improve their economic situation.

### III. Progress and challenges in the ECE region

#### A. Progress in line with Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action strategic objectives and the SDGs

38. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Strategic Objective A. on women and poverty touches on all of the development needs of rural women, such as access to decent jobs, agriculture, access and control over resources, food security and decision making and leadership opportunities at home and in society. Strategic actions proposed in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action focus on revising macroeconomic policies and strategies, improving women's access to credit, revising and developing new laws to promote equal rights

<sup>38</sup> Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2018.

[www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/stattukor/kisgyermnapkozbeni/kisgyermnapkozbeni18.pdf](http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/stattukor/kisgyermnapkozbeni/kisgyermnapkozbeni18.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> UN Women ECE web content. <http://ECE.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality> accessed 11 July 2019.

<sup>41</sup> FAO (2016), Gender and Rural Development in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Key Issues. Rome.

<sup>42</sup> FAO (2016), Gender, agriculture and rural development in Albania. Country gender assessment series, Budapest.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

and increase access to economic resources and improving data and understanding on women. All of these issues remain relevant to rural women in the ECE member States.

39. The majority of countries in the region have advanced policies and legislation that institutionalise gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting and the collection of sex-disaggregated statistics.<sup>44</sup> While EU countries lead on strong gender budgeting measures, initiatives exist also in other countries. For example, the Republic of Moldova, has a law on temporary special measures, which introduced a 40 per cent quota for women in cabinets and electoral lists, and provisions for paternity leave.<sup>45</sup> However, implementation of policies and special measures to improve the lives of rural women has not been even across the region.

40. Poverty rates remain higher in rural areas compared to urban, in all countries of the region where data is available. In the Republic of Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the gap between the share of rural and urban populations living in poverty is 15 per cent, 5 per cent and 7 per cent respectively.<sup>46</sup>

41. The situation of rural women is explicitly reflected in at least 14 of the 17 SDGs. In particular, rural women's development is integral to SDG 1, ending poverty, SDG 2, to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture and SDG 5, to achieve gender equality and empowering women. Even those SDGs that do not explicitly include gender related indicators (SDG 13 related to climate change, SDG 14 related to life below water and SDG 15 related to life on land) have the potential to influence the lives of rural women by reducing their vulnerability.<sup>47</sup> Issues such as food security, land rights and gender equality are also fundamental to achieving the other SDGs. For example, health, education and economic development goals will not be met unless the status of women is improved by way of ensuring their property rights, food security and nutrition.<sup>48</sup>

42. In ECE member States, the prevalence rate of food insecurity is higher among women than men, and has shown no improvement since 2016.<sup>49</sup> The prevalence of undernourishment is around 5 per cent in the region and the prevalence of severe food insecurity is 2.1 per cent, however, obesity rates are very high (23 per cent), with higher obesity rates for women than for men (4-5 percentage points) for the past decade.<sup>50</sup> These trends, coupled with the expansion of the definition of food security, makes it unlikely that SDG food security targets will be achieved in the next 10 years.<sup>51</sup>

43. Achieving targets for gender parity in land ownership under law may be possible in the next 10 years; however, ensuring de facto rights is less likely. Implementing property laws will require considerable budgetary support and a stronger evidence base for monitoring progress.<sup>52</sup> Creating an enabling environment in all ECE countries where rural women know and are able to claim their property rights is also unlikely to be fully achieved.

## B. Best practices for empowering rural women

44. Examples of progress towards the achievement of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action strategic objectives and the SDGs are included in this section. These examples have

<sup>44</sup> FAO (2016), Gender and Rural Development in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Key Issues. Rome.

<sup>45</sup> UN Women Moldova website content. <http://moldova.unwomen.org/en/munca-noastra/gender-equality-in-moldova> accessed 11 July 2019.

<sup>46</sup> ILOSTAT Database: Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line by rural/urban areas (%) cited in FAO (2016), Gender and Rural Development in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Key Issues. Rome.

<sup>47</sup> Agarwal B. (2018), "Gender equality, food security and the SDGs", Science Direct available at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> FAO (forthcoming). State of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia Region.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> FAO website content [www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1199760/icode/](http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1199760/icode/) accessed 22 July 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Llatja, A. Vidar, M. Goelema, M. Kenney, N. Tonchovska, A. (2018), Achieving SDG indicator 5.a.2 in the Western Balkans: Partnerships for gender equality in land ownership and control, Paper prepared for presentation at the "2018 World Bank Conference on Land and Property" The World Bank - Washington DC, March 19-23, 2018.

been taken from countries in the region, implemented by national governments and civil society, often with the support of the UN and other bilateral and multilateral development agencies. Overall, these practices demonstrate the need for holistic approaches when working towards the economic empowerment of rural women.

45. The Armenian National Emergency Commission has established selection criteria to target female-headed households. The Commission provides compensation and employment opportunities as a rural development strategy and as a deterrent to labour migration.<sup>53</sup>

46. In Austria, a network of women experts on gender in disaster risk reduction (WE4DRR) has been established. This opportunity recognises the knowledge and experience of rural women. From the government side, the Gender Focal Point and Gender mainstreaming group within the Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism, the agency, leading the implementation of agricultural policy, forestry and fishing, works actively to enable women to participate in rural development and have a stronger voice in decisions that impact their lives.<sup>54</sup> Women farmers and municipal decision makers are also participating in training and management programmes with ongoing coaching and mentoring to increase and improve the representation of rural women in decision-making.

47. Uzbekistan is encouraging women's entrepreneurship through home-based income-generating activities, designed to ensure food self-sufficiency. Rural women, especially widows, divorced women and women from the poorest areas, are the target groups for the programme and are provided micro-credits to establish home-based enterprises.<sup>55</sup>

48. Azerbaijan and Turkey are working to ensure that rural advisory services are gender-sensitive and better meet the needs of rural women, by providing training and on-the-job coaching to extension workers and the ministries of agriculture. Targeted training programmes on new opportunities are also provided to female farmers.<sup>56</sup> Female farmers are becoming more organised, through regional women's centres and cooperatives, which are opening up access to new markets, and strengthen their voice in rural development.

49. In Kyrgyzstan, women are breaking into non-traditional areas such as conservation agriculture, integrated pest management and drip irrigation, to ensure greater productivity of family farms and small holders, and higher incomes and food security for rural households. Programmes that combine cash benefits with technical support to diversify their incomes through off-farm activities, are piloted and replicated. Women's self-help groups have strengthened collaboration among women, and provide peer learning and sharing.<sup>57</sup>

50. The Union of Hungarian Women plays a critical role in advocacy to increase the visibility of rural women and in providing targeted initiatives for young women, and women with children. Each year, national and international decision makers meet with rural women and women's groups' advocates to share good practices on gender equality and rural development and visit local, women-led farms.<sup>58</sup> Female farmers are also provided information and training on organic farming, English language and computer literacy.<sup>59</sup> These new skills have the potential to expand rural women's economic opportunities.

51. In Tajikistan and the Republic of Moldova, migrant workers are investing remittances in the development of family farming, targeting female heads of households and returning

<sup>53</sup> FAO (2018), Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2018. Budapest.

<sup>54</sup> FAO (2018), What gender mainstreaming in agriculture means.

<sup>55</sup> FAO (2018), Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2018. Budapest.

<sup>56</sup> FAO (forthcoming), FAO in action Mainstreaming gender in FAO work in Europe and Central Asia Experiences from the field. Budapest.

<sup>57</sup> UN Women website content [www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/3/feature-story-women-in-rural-kyrgyzstan-bring-change-through-water-and-infrastructure](http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/3/feature-story-women-in-rural-kyrgyzstan-bring-change-through-water-and-infrastructure) accessed 30 July 2019.

<sup>58</sup> FAO (2018), What gender mainstreaming in agriculture means.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

labour migrants.<sup>60</sup> Participants in the project invest remittances (up to 50 per cent of the funds) in a small-scale agricultural project and obtain the remaining 50 per cent from project funds. Promising initiatives support migrants and their families and communities in formulating small- and medium-scale projects in agribusiness and the production of fruits, vegetables and livestock.

52. In Spain, rural women and women in fisheries are part of networks that meet regularly with government representatives so that their voice and needs can influence policy-making. Rural women are recognised as entrepreneurs who generate employment, and as decision makers themselves.<sup>61</sup> In 2011, Spain passed a law on the joint ownership of agricultural holdings and recognition of co-working status. Similar laws have been passed in Belgium and France. In France, the law also covers small scale fishers. Joint ownership enables women to access EU subsidies, other social protection schemes and pensions.

53. In Kazakhstan, support under the forthcoming project of the Ministry of Labour and Social Development offers rural women in a pilot region entrepreneurial skills and access to a range of information and financial services on available economic opportunities. Increasing women's access to financial resources is an opportunity for economic growth in the formal sector.<sup>62</sup>

54. The Association of Rural Women in Slovenia recognises that rural women have less access to healthcare services than urban women and men.<sup>63</sup> Each year the association holds a national workshop addressing topics such as the prevention of diseases, the health insurance system and insurance for women farmers. The association also collaborates with the National Programme for Breast Screening and the National Programme for Prevention and Early Detection of Colorectal Cancer and organises educational programmes about health and social and recreational activities.

## C. Challenges

55. Regional success measured by a low Gender Inequality Index (GII) (0.270 in the UNDP Human Development Report 2017), masks the situation facing the most disadvantaged groups, particularly rural women. Even in the wealthiest countries in the ECE region, rural women continue to face poverty and discrimination when compared to rural men and urban women. Ensuring the visibility of rural women at the national level is an ongoing challenge.

56. Although a gender perspective is present throughout the region in areas of policymaking, planning and programming, the specific needs of rural women are not always considered. In particular, EU institutions have established stable goals and objectives regarding gender equality and adopted extensive legislation to ensure a framework for equal opportunities and treatment of men and women, including rural women.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, there are still many countries in the region without strong legislation and social protection programmes that are not adapted to rural women's realities (land ownership, unpaid work by farm women, strong gender division of labour and rural women numerous responsibilities, early marriage, domestic violence).<sup>65</sup> Implementation of existing laws and policies in many countries in the region is also weak, particularly in rural and remote areas where complex barriers to development exist.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>60</sup> FAO (2018), Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2018. Budapest.

<sup>61</sup> European Commission website content <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/cms/farnet/files/documents/Women-in-fisheries-EN.pdf> accessed 30 July 2019.

<sup>62</sup> UN Women website content <http://ECE.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/03/kazakhstan-economic-empowerment> accessed 22 July 2019.

<sup>63</sup> FAO (2018), What gender mainstreaming in agriculture means.

<sup>64</sup> European Parliament (2019), The professional status of rural women in the EU.

<sup>65</sup> FAO (2016), National Gender Profile of Agricultural and Rural Livelihoods – Tajikistan, Ankara.

<sup>66</sup> FAO (2018), Conference Report: Promoting Socially Inclusive Rural Development in Europe and Central Asia. Budapest.

57. The visibility and inclusion of rural women in policies and programmes can be improved by a stronger evidence base. While the use of sex-disaggregated data has been institutionalised throughout the region, this data does not consistently reflect the situation of rural women. There is a lack of up-to-date, reliable statistics and information on gender disparities and their implications in agriculture, livestock, fisheries and forestry. At country and regional levels there is also a lack of disaggregation of existing data by age, location, ethnicity and other variables, to provide a better understanding of sub-groups of rural women most at risk of being left behind.<sup>67</sup>

58. There is also inconsistent political will in some countries in the region in support of women's rights, which has the potential to further impede sustainable progress towards the economic empowerment of rural women. While many ECE member States have established gender focal points or advisory services within rural development or agriculture ministries and at the municipal level, most of these roles are added responsibilities that have been included in terms of references for existing jobs without additional funding or time allocations.<sup>68</sup> Unless institutions establish sustainable gender equality mechanisms, which are accountable for women's empowerment and gender equality, progress will be slow at best.

59. In recent years, women's groups throughout the region have become more organised and vocal. At the same time, some civil society organisations report that there has also been a growing backlash, which seeks to undermine the sustainability of movements for gender equality and human rights. For women in rural areas participation in women's associations and groups can be instrumental in advocating for improvements in social infrastructure and services that are fundamental to their development by helping to raise awareness of their challenges and to improve access to resources.

60. Climate change, natural disasters and the depletion of natural resources challenge food security and investment into rural areas and drive migration and urbanisation, which disproportionately affect rural women's economic empowerment. Land degradation and desertification caused by unpredictable weather patterns and drought are affecting agricultural productivity and food prices, further compromising household food provision, and increasing rural women's agricultural work and burden as caregivers. Countries such as Albania, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.<sup>69</sup>

61. Rural women also face challenges related to food security and nutrition. At least 48 ECE member States struggle with malnutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies and emerging issues such as overweight and obesity.<sup>70</sup> Between 1990 and 2010, risk factors for premature death and disability due to alcohol use rose by 38 per cent and dietary risks by 14 per cent.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, refugees in rural areas and women affected by conflict are increasingly reliant on food and livelihood assistance and support programs. Social practices in rural areas see women taking on primary responsibilities for feeding their families, however, these same social practices limit their access to and control over resources and information to meet nutrition and food security needs.

62. Migration processes are also changing. Labour migrants from rural areas continue to move to cities in search of jobs, however, as urban spaces become more populated there is a flow of people into rural areas which remain under developed. In addition, civil unrest and conflict around the world has led to an increase in the movement of refugees and displaced people into the ECE member States. The ECE region ranks second in the world for receiving migrants: 78 million international migrants of the total 258 million worldwide in 2017.

<sup>67</sup> FAO (2016), *Gender and Rural Development in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Key Issues*. Rome.

<sup>68</sup> FAO (2018), *What gender mainstreaming in agriculture means*.

<sup>69</sup> FAO (2018), *Conference Report: Promoting Socially Inclusive Rural Development in Europe and Central Asia*. Budapest..

<sup>70</sup> UNICEF (2018), *Working to close nutrition gaps in the Europe and Central Asia Region*. UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, Geneva.

<sup>71</sup> World Bank (2013), *Rising Chronic Disease and a Gender Gap in Health Take a Growing Toll in Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. Press Release 2014/057/ HDN, 4 September 2013.

## IV. Priority Actions

63. Despite strong progress towards empowering rural women in ECE member States, there is a need for more transformative and holistic actions to tackle the deep-rooted, structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequalities especially in rural settings. To achieve the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda, areas for action to empower rural women should focus on redressing gender inequalities, which hinder economic growth, food security and nutrition, and improving access to quality infrastructure and social protection services and measures.

64. The following priority actions are derived from the challenges facing rural women across the region in seven key areas: a) the invisibility of rural women as productive members of households and farms; b) the dearth of women in decision-making and governance; c) insufficient data on rural women's experiences as compared to rural men and urban women; d) rural women's lack of access to productive resources; e) limited opportunities for economic growth; f) limited social protection measures adapted to meet rural women's realities; and g) a lack of legislation and policies reflecting rural women's needs.

65. The priority actions were identified at the 2017 conference on promoting socially inclusive rural development held in Vilnius<sup>72</sup> and agreed conclusions of the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) on "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls", 2018.<sup>73</sup>

- a. Increase the visibility and recognise the contribution of rural women as both productive members of households and farmers.
  - i. Support the participation and inclusion of rural women in policies and programmes related to all SDGs in all ECE member States, including the wealthiest countries in the region;
  - ii. Support the coordination of efforts to promote rural women's empowerment in national and regional institutions;
  - iii. Support the collection and dissemination of information on successful good practices that challenge gender norms and stereotypes and advance the empowerment of rural women nationally and regionally.
- b. Strengthen rural women's voice in leadership and decision making at home and in governance and administrative structures.
  - i. Increase rural women's representation in women's organisations, networks and movements;
  - ii. Raise rural women's capacity in development-related policies and programs;
  - iii. Review and strengthen accountability measures for gender focal points in all governments.
- c. Update and strengthen the evidence-base on rural women in the ECE to guide policies, programmes and strategies.
  - i. Improve the capacity of national statistical committees to develop, analyse and use sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data;
  - ii. Provide technical assistance to support in-country data collection and gender analysis;
  - iii. Ensure the disaggregation of data sets by sex, age, geography, education and ethnicity to better identify rural women and vulnerable groups;
  - iv. Support the systematic measurement of gender programmes and policies.

<sup>72</sup> FAO (2018), Conference Report: Promoting Socially Inclusive Rural Development in Europe and Central Asia. Budapest.

<sup>73</sup> UN Women web content [www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/62/csw-conclusions-62-en.pdf?la=en&vs=4713](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/62/csw-conclusions-62-en.pdf?la=en&vs=4713) accessed 26 July 2019.

- d. Increase rural women's access to resources, which addresses their strategic needs, thus enabling them to remain on the land, or by opening up opportunities in urban areas.
  - i. Review the legal framework related to property rights in line with the voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure, CEDAW and SDG 5.a.2. In particular, review the legislative, administrative and procedural options to remove any barriers to women's equal enjoyment of property rights and accelerate the achievement of *de facto* equality in land ownership;
  - ii. Improve rural women's access to other resources such as, water, finance, equipment and seeds;
  - iii. Improve rural women's access to advisory services, education, ICT, knowledge and skills.
- e. Support rural women to diversify incomes and promote economic growth.
  - i. Support the development of inclusive and gender-sensitive value chains, including processing and marketing;
  - ii. Increase opportunities for rural women to develop entrepreneurship skills and access to markets;
  - iii. Design policies and programmes which seek to create decent jobs;
  - iv. Close the existing pay gap between women and men in rural areas;
  - v. Work with men to overcome gender stereotypes and balance the gender division of labour, particularly related to care work.
- f. Design and implement transformative social protection policies, infrastructure and targeted social safeguards for rural women.
  - i. Support policies and programmes to ensure that informal labour and unpaid care work is recognised;
  - ii. Support revisions of pension policies to recognise the contribution of rural women;
  - iii. Support investments in rural physical and social infrastructure which seek to support rural women's health and wellbeing;
  - iv. Support measures to promote responsible fatherhood and fight against gender stereotypes;
  - v. Reduce the risks of irregular labour migration by signing intergovernmental agreements to regulate the issue of migration and social protection systems of sending and receiving countries;
  - vi. Place the empowerment of vulnerable rural women at the centre of strategies and reforms in the area of social protection, situating them as equal players and actors. It is important to apply social allowances as a temporary measure and focus on the delivery of a comprehensive package of pro-active and professional social services to support vulnerable groups;
  - vii. Introduce pro-active and empowering measures such as education, sexual and reproductive health services, decent and formal employment, supporting business skills and small and medium enterprises, investment to care infrastructure, redistribution of unpaid domestic work in households and rural women and girls' empowerment and participation;
  - viii. Ensure appropriate budget financing to support social protection measures;
  - ix. Strengthen national data to demonstrate the situation/progress on rural women and girls' participation in the labour market and social protection, decision making and access to resources.
- g. Address the underlying structural causes of gender inequality in legal and institutional frameworks and ensure that national budgets are gender-responsive.
  - i. Revise land laws to ensure that women are registered as land owners;
  - ii. Support the development, implementation and review of gender-responsive budgets, ensuring accountability mechanisms are in place.