



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
13 August 2024

Original: English

Economic Commission for Europe

Beijing +30 Regional Review Meeting

Geneva, 21 and 22 October 2024

Item 9 of the provisional agenda

Closing the gender gap: effective policies to deliver on Sustainable Development Goals in the Economic Commission for Europe region

Status of rural women in the Economic Commission for Europe region: action needed

Note by the Food and Agriculture Organisation^{*,1,2}

Summary

The changing context and the impact of insecurity and crisis affect progress in the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region towards the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 development agenda. Rural women remain one of the biggest groups at risk of being left behind. The note describes the key challenges that rural women face in the region and suggests priority actions to close the gaps and accelerate progress.

There is a strong need to accelerate efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls in the ECE region by engaging gender-transformative approaches to overcome deeply rooted structural barriers in rural areas that perpetuate inequalities, reinforce the gender dimensions of rural poverty and create barriers to women's empowerment. Efforts to promote gender equality should ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities as men, and urban women, while rural women and girls must be viewed as key agents of change.

* The present report was submitted to the conference services for processing after the deadline for technical reasons beyond the control of the submitting office.

¹ This paper does not cover Canada, Israel or the United States, which are ECE member States. The paper is focused primarily on the countries of Eastern Europe, South 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 the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

² 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.



Contents

	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction	3
A. Resources.....	3
B. Changing context.....	4
C. Insecurity and crisis	5
D. Climate change and environmental instability.....	6
II. Rural women: key issues in the ECE region	6
III. Challenges towards achieving strategic objectives of the Beijing Declaration, and Platform for Action and the SDGs	11
A. Unrealized gender mainstreaming commitments	12
B. Invisibility of rural women in public policy	12
C. Inconsistent political will.....	12
D. Weak evidence base.....	13
IV. Priority actions for governments, civil society organizations and private sector	13

I. Introduction

1. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action flagged 12 key areas where urgent action was needed to ensure greater equality and opportunities for women and men, girls and boys, and also laid out concrete ways for countries to bring the change. Although the Beijing Platform of Action did not specify the needs and priorities of rural women as a separate area of action, the periodic reviews of the progress on implementing the Beijing commitments came to the need to give greater attention and visibility to the status of rural women, protect their rights and support them as a distinct population group.
2. The situation of rural women is the subject of a specific article of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and cuts across much of the 2030 Agenda, as the goals such as ending poverty and achieving food security are bound up with fundamental rights to land and property, decent work, health and education for all. Even those Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that do not refer to gender targets explicitly have the potential to improve the lives of rural women and girls by reducing their vulnerabilities.
3. In the ECE region, the process of the periodic reviews on progress and challenges towards achieving strategic objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the SDGs, led to due recognition of the role and needs of rural women. In 2019, one of the UN background papers that guided the review process, was a note on Empowering Rural Women in ECE region³. It was the first time that the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (REU), as part of the regional UN Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality, contributed to the review process by preparing this thematic paper.

A. Resources

4. This paper is based on FAO continuous research and studies conducted in the region and globally over last five years. This includes FAO's flagship report, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* launched in April 2022⁴. It was produced after more than a decade of the *State of food and agriculture (SOFA) 2010–11: Women in agriculture – Closing the gender gap for development* and provides a comprehensive analysis of the available evidence on gender equality and women's empowerment in agrifood systems that has been produced over the last decade. The report shows how increasing women's empowerment and gender equality in agrifood systems enhances women's well-being and the well-being of their families, creating opportunities for economic growth, greater incomes, productivity and resilience.
5. Key challenges faced by rural women across the region have been reviewed in the recent analysis "*Gender, agriculture and rural development in Europe and Central Asia: Brief overview of regional trends and challenges*"⁵. Up to now, FAO published 13 Country Gender Assessments (CGAs), with at least three reports (in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Montenegro) in progress in 2024. The assessments have generated a body of quantitative and qualitative information about key gaps on the intersections of gender, agriculture and rural livelihoods in these countries that should be used for policymaking for the development of rural areas and improving the status of rural women. The CGAs are based on extensive literature reviews, data analysis and, increasingly, information obtained through focus group discussions that give voice to rural women. The CGA reports contribute to the evidence-base that should inform gender mainstreaming – that is, a process to ensure that the needs and priorities of rural women are embedded in law, strategic planning and public policy related to the development of transformative food systems and rural areas. The CGAs can also serve for improved awareness of the fundamental importance of conducting gender analysis in food security, agriculture, and for improving rural livelihoods.

³ ECE/AC.28/2019/11.

⁴ FAO, Rome, 2023a. *The status of women in agrifood systems – Overview*.

⁵ FAO, Budapest, 2022b. *Gender, agriculture and rural development in Europe and Central Asia: Brief overview of regional trends and challenges*. All quotes in the paper are cited from that report.

6. In addition to the reports cited above, the paper used other publications produced by FAO over the course of last five years. This includes “*Gendered impact of COVID-19 on food security, agricultural production, income, and family relations have been in focus for the study conducted in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan on 2021-2022*”⁶; “*Gender mainstreaming in climate investments in the agriculture, forestry and other land use in Europe and Central Asia*”⁷; “*How can FAO assist in improving social protection for rural communities in Europe and Central Asia?*”⁸; “*Ensuring that rural advisory services are responsive to women: good practices from FAO experiences in Europe and Central Asia*”⁹, “*Gender-related impacts of the Ukraine Conflict*”¹⁰, and other sources.

B. Changing context

7. The social, economic and political contexts in which rural women and girls live, are deeply affected by urban-rural disparities that have a significant impact on their poverty rates, employment opportunities and engagement in unpaid work.

8. In the ECE region, a considerable proportion of the population lives in rural areas, although the share of rural residents varies by country, from less than a third of the population (in Belarus, Türkiye and Ukraine, for example) up to more than half of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As the demographic profiles of countries are changing, the disparities between resources available to the urban and rural populations are also widening. Addressing gender disparities among the rural population is central to improving rural livelihoods, poverty reduction, increasing agricultural production and transforming food systems.

9. The depopulation of rural areas and subsequent urbanization processes are typical for the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. However, the pattern differs in countries that are experiencing overall rural population growth, such as in Central Asia. Urbanization is primarily driven by migration, both internally from rural areas to more economically developed cities and abroad. After socioeconomic factors, such as the lack of jobs and declining social conditions in rural areas, people are driven to migrate due to armed conflict, natural disaster and environmental degradation. Labour migration predominates in Central Asia and has similar consequences for the demographic situation in rural areas.

10. Migration patterns throughout the region have a gender dimension: historically, labour migration was viewed more favourably as an option for men. In Central Asia, men are still the “typical” labour migrants: for example, men make up 77 per cent of labour migrants (aged 15 years and older) who travel abroad from Kyrgyzstan; and 79 per cent of Kyrgyz labour migrants are former rural residents¹¹. In other subregions, the number of young women migrating from rural areas, both internally and abroad, may be equal to or higher than the rate for male migration. For instance, in the Western Balkans (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) rural to urban migration is more prevalent among women due to factors such as women’s lack of assets, their weaker ties to land and other property, and the lack of employment opportunities. Migration has therefore significant impacts on rural labour markets in the region, with the workforce moving away from jobs in agriculture.

11. The gendered impacts of migration on the population structure of rural communities are twofold. On the one hand, outmigration of the working age population has left rural areas with a higher proportion of older people and the very young. Declining birth rates are a factor in the ageing of the rural population, for instance in Serbia and Ukraine. This trend, however, is not

⁶ FAO, Rome, 2023b. *Gendered impact of COVID-19 on food security, agricultural production, income, and family relations*. Unpublished report.

⁷ FAO, Budapest, 2023c. *Gender mainstreaming in climate investments in the agriculture, forestry and other land use in Europe and Central Asia*.

⁸ FAO, Budapest 2022a. *How can FAO assist in improving social protection for rural communities in Europe and Central Asia?*.

⁹ FAO, Budapest, 2024. *Ensuring that rural advisory services are responsive to women: good practices from FAO experiences in Europe and Central Asia*.

¹⁰ FAO, 2022c. *Gender-related impacts of the Ukraine Conflict*.

¹¹ FAO, Rome, 2023b. *Gendered impact of COVID-19 on food security, agricultural production, income, and family relations*. Unpublished report.

uniform across the region; for example, in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan the birth rate is higher among women in rural areas, particularly evident among adolescents. When women's longevity into old age is also considered, this explains the fact that villages tend to have a higher proportion of older, often single, women than urban areas, and this is especially prevalent in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, where men make up most long-term labour migrants, this has created the phenomenon of women and children in rural areas who are "left behind", as seen in both Central Asia and Armenia. In both cases, the result is an increase in the number of households headed by women. In Armenia, 27 percent of rural households are de facto headed by women.

12. Women, as members of households and those who are "left behind", make up a considerable proportion of rural communities. Although they are often managing family farms and farming small plots of land for their own subsistence, they are not typically recognized as "farmers" in terms of agricultural policies and support programmes.

C. Insecurity and crisis

13. Since the last Beijing+25 regional review, the Europe and Central Asia region have been experiencing instability in its different forms, endangering the hard-won gains towards gender equality. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war waged against Ukraine, rising poverty and violence, climate change and environmental instability, in different ways and to varying degrees are threatening to reverse progress towards gender equality in the Europe and Central Asia region, as is occurring in other parts of the world. There is evidence that gender gaps are widening and progress towards gender equality slipping backwards due to backsliding on gender equality policies in some of the countries of the region or lesser importance of gender equality in public agendas due to ongoing crises in others. Increasing gender inequalities undermine development efforts and exacerbate the vulnerabilities of rural women.

14. The COVID-19 health crisis laid bare the pre-existing constraints that rural women faced in accessing productive resources, services, technologies, markets, financial assets and local institutions which, in turn, have left them more vulnerable to the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound economic impacts across the region in terms of lost income and increasing unpaid workloads. New challenges for protecting the most vulnerable segments of the rural population have arisen, especially in light of economic downturns. In 2020, women in seven out of ten countries and territories in the region reported a one-third loss of income from farming, with the most affected living in Albania and Türkiye. A larger proportion of women as compared with men (Albania, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova and also in Kosovo¹²) reported that remittances decreased when borders were closed and family members in labour migration could no longer transfer funds. Because many rural women were already earning and saving less before the pandemic, the impacts of the health crisis, such as restrictions on movement and the closure of local markets, have pushed them closer to or into poverty.

15. The war currently being waged against Ukraine is the most recent example of a humanitarian crisis that puts whole populations in the country, in the region and beyond, at risk. The war is not only affecting women and men differently but also has specific impacts on the rural population¹³.

16. The war, among other things, have caused massive civilian displacement and increased food insecurity. Women-headed households, which previously represented 71 per cent of the total households in the government-controlled areas of Ukraine, are especially vulnerable in terms of poverty, food security and physical safety. In 2023, the prevalence of moderate or

¹² All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

¹³ FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia published its first ever Country Gender Assessment for Ukraine in 2021, identifying many gender issues, including those specific to conflict-affected areas, that have become more acute since the research was conducted. The publication, National gender profile of agriculture and rural livelihood-Ukraine, revised is available in [English](#) and in [Ukrainian](#).

severe food insecurity was considerably higher among women-headed households (20 per cent versus 11 per cent)¹⁴.

17. Political tensions, civil unrest and “frozen” conflicts with periodic escalations have taken place in other countries in Europe and Central Asia. The instability disrupts the lives of rural populations, encourages outmigration and holds back the economic development of rural areas. Violent conflicts have gender-differentiated impacts on mobility, gender-based violence, health and education outcomes, and political and civic engagement, increasing employment in agriculture more for women than for men. However, while it reduces the working hours of both men and women, women’s working hours are reduced less than those of men.

18. During military conflicts and the aftermath of natural disasters, gender equality can be deprioritized, based on the notion that “other pressing issues need to be resolved first”. In fact, gender equality cannot be unlinked from insecurity. Crisis exacerbates existing inequalities, putting women and girls in even more disadvantaged positions. Conversely, full respect for the rights of women and girls and ensuring inclusivity can offer unique solutions to various unfolding crises. Thus, the inclusion of a gender perspective across policymaking, planning and programming – whether related to specific anti-crisis measures or for national development on the whole – is vital. Gender mainstreaming is the tool for ensuring that the specific needs and priorities of rural women in general, as well as the most vulnerable groups of women, are reflected in law, strategic planning and public policy pertaining to agriculture and rural development. This process should not be interrupted by crises but, rather, should be intensified.

D. Climate change and environmental instability

19. Environmental instability, in the form of climate change, extreme weather events and natural disasters, is no less of a threat to the livelihoods of rural populations in the region than humanitarian and health crises. For example, severe droughts in some parts of Europe and flash flooding in others have resulted in the loss of human lives and agricultural crops. Climate change is especially significant for Central Asia because the region is prone to environmental degradation and natural disasters, such as droughts, floods and earthquakes. Past extreme weather events have demonstrated that rural women and men have differing vulnerabilities and levels of resilience, and extreme climate events exacerbate pre-existing gender disparities. Women often have more sensitivity to climate shocks and natural disasters than do men due to their different resilience capacity. For example, women tend to farm smaller plots of land, using fewer agricultural inputs, and have less financial stability, and thus the negative impacts of climate change on their production can be especially difficult to overcome. Women are often excluded from climate change decision-making processes and are underrepresented in agencies that deal with environmental protection or climate change mitigation. Therefore, while women have unique knowledge and perspectives on the protection of biodiversity and disaster risk reduction, for example, their contributions are minimally reflected in national policies critical for their livelihoods.

20. The gendered dimensions of current forms of insecurity and risks should be considered alongside long-standing gender gaps in agriculture and rural livelihoods. During the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit, the UN Secretary-General noted that conflict, climate extremes and economic volatility are drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition, and, moreover, that these forces are “further exacerbated by poverty and high levels of inequality”. In view of the unprecedented challenges, multiple strategies need to be involved to improve the status of rural women, as one of the biggest groups at risk of being left behind.

II. Rural women: key issues in the ECE region

21. Women in rural areas typically play a triple role: in unpaid domestic and care work, work on family farms and also community-oriented work. In Europe and Central Asia, women contribute substantially to the lives of their households and communities, but they also lack time, empowerment and access to entry points that would lead to formal decision-making roles,

¹⁴ FAO.2023. *Ukraine: food security and agricultural livelihoods assessment* (December 2023).

whether in running family farms or in setting priorities for the development of rural areas. Vulnerabilities to poverty are gendered, and some groups of women are at an elevated risk of falling into poverty (for example, older women, single mothers, mothers of many children, women with disabilities, from ethnic minority groups and those with lower levels of education). Women in rural areas may be included in any one or more of these categories. Women's poverty "derives from multiple factors, not only the absence of economic opportunities, but also the lack of access to: economic resources, education, support services and decision-making processes". Women are significantly underrepresented as farm owners and within producers' associations. They own and use fewer land and agri-inputs, including machinery, and have more limited access to the kinds of informational, technological and financial resources that are needed to increase productivity and profitability.

22. Employment opportunities for women in rural areas are much more limited compared to men and the urban population, due to a combination of factors including gender norms and discrimination. Women living in rural areas are especially prone to vulnerable employment – that is, work associated with "small-scale activities, low earnings, weak market orientation, informal work arrangements, difficult or dangerous working conditions, and inadequate access to social protection and social dialogue mechanisms".

23. It is not only the scarcity of off-farm work opportunities that contributes to rural women's economic dependency, but also their triple role, which includes unpaid domestic and care work, such as housework, caring for children and other family members, work on family farms and also community-oriented work. Underdeveloped social and physical infrastructure in rural areas, limited public transport to reach schools, health facilities and local markets and a lack of labour saving technologies, contribute to women's daily workloads and further restrict their opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, education or involvement in local decision-making.

24. Women's unpaid workload is generally not valued as "work" that would be accompanied by social protections, such as unemployment, pregnancy or maternity benefits. Moreover, it is not factored into national gross domestic product (GDP). Nevertheless, the unpaid work undertaken by rural women contributes significantly to the well-being of rural households, especially in terms of food security and nutrition

25. While extreme poverty has been largely eradicated in the region, inequality and social exclusion have increased, with rising pockets of poverty and inequalities- both within and between individual countries and territories. National poverty data in many countries of the region remain incomplete, and data disaggregated by location, sex, age and social group are lacking. Thus, many forms of poverty remain hidden, especially among disadvantaged populations. Still, available national data demonstrate that risks for poverty and social exclusion remain higher in rural areas than elsewhere, including the rates of gender-based violence. Rural population, as a whole, experiences a number of deprivations, including income poverty, lack of decent work, lack of access to basic infrastructure, services and social protections and the risks of environmental hazards. Rural women are the most disadvantaged in this regard.

26. In addition to their roles in the care economy (which includes childcare and care for family members who are ill, of old age or have disabilities), women in rural areas also contribute substantially to community life. Although women's representation in public office remains low across Europe and Central Asia, it should be noted that special measures (such as gender quotas) have had a positive impact. As a rule, women find more entry points into representative government at the local (village) council level. Women in rural areas undertake community-oriented civic projects as volunteers and informally, but also as part of civil society organizations. Rural women, therefore, represent important drivers of change in community life and, as such, they are vital stakeholders in sustainable development initiatives

27. Agriculture (referring to the combined sector of agriculture, forestry and fisheries) occupies an important place in the economies of the countries and territories of this review. While agriculture supplies 2 percent of the GDP for the larger Europe and Central Asia region, it makes a more significant contribution to many national economies, ranging from under 10 per cent (in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, for example) to around 25 per cent (for instance, in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Women, despite their key role in agriculture, face discrimination in access to productive resources such as land, agricultural extension and rural advisory

services, and inputs such as irrigation, fertilizer and credit. The compounded impact of these inequalities is poor livelihood outcomes and limitations on what women can contribute to agricultural production and food security.

28. Access to land: Land is a crucial resource for poverty reduction, food security and rural development, and thus women's secure land rights are also a pre-condition for their economic empowerment. As the "custodian" UN agency for two indicators under SDG 5, FAO has addressed women's ownership and secure rights over agricultural land (SDG 5.a.1) and guarantees of women's equal rights to landownership and/or control (5.a.2) in Country Gender Assessments.

29. Across the region, there are no legal barriers to the full respect for women's rights to own, use and control land and other forms of property. Women can inherit, buy, sell, rent or lease land on an equal basis with men. In practice, however, women represent a far smaller share of landowners and co-owners than would be expected given their engagement in agricultural labour. Data on the number of women and men registered landowners are incomplete in much of the region. Available data indicate that despite an increase in women as registered landowners, their representation as owners and co-owners remains disproportionately low. For instance, in the Western Balkans, women represent around one third of registered owners or co-owners of land, but in some cases, they are less than one fifth of registered landowners or co-owners¹⁵.

30. In the Caucasus – Azerbaijan and Georgia – women represent around 40 percent of landowners. Positive trends include the incremental increase in the proportion of women as registered landowners (seen in the Western Balkans) as well as the practice of co registration of land in the names of both spouses (in Georgia).

31. Women's limited land and property ownership stems from inadequate knowledge of women's equal rights among the rural population, as well as professionals working in land registration (notaries or staff of cadastral offices, for example) and long-held traditions that landownership is passed to male family members. Men customarily inherit land, and other property, and the bias in favour of male family members is linked to patrilocal marriage practices, common in rural areas. Daughters are expected to join their husband's family when they marry and sons to remain and run the family farm and support older parents economically. In the process of marrying, women either lose or give up their rights to the portion of land from their parents' household and do not gain any rights over land that their spouses owned before the marriage. In Albania and Kyrgyzstan, women are often unaware of their rights to land when marrying, or it is not acceptable culturally for them to protect their right to sell their land share to their families and receive compensation. By default, a woman's share of land goes to her parents and then becomes part of the inheritance of their sons or grandsons. Land is usually registered only in the name of the husband who is considered the head of the household/holding (for example, in Armenia and Georgia) and women tend not to assert their rights to land when a marriage ends (in Uzbekistan, for example). Even if women are willing to claim a portion of land as part of a divorce, if they are unable to cultivate it, they pass ownership and control to male relatives (as seen in Kyrgyzstan).

32. Women's lack of authority to manage family farms is especially relevant in countries in which a large share of men migrates from rural areas to work. Even though men are not present for the day-to-day decision-making, gender norms still favour them as the landowner and recognized head of the holding. While women form most land users, and de facto farm managers, they are rarely recognized as landowners or farmers.

33. Women's limited landownership is not only an issue of discrimination, but it also prevents rural women from utilizing a key economic resource to its full potential. The implications are land insecurity and dependency on male family members to use and access land, as well as reducing access to a form of collateral for credit that can be used to finance other productive resources, such as equipment or fertilizer. Women's reduced power and decision-making over land and family farms ultimately leads to less-than-optimal productivity.

¹⁵ Ibid.

34. Farm ownership and management: Throughout the region of Europe and Central Asia, the prevalent image of the “typical” farmer is a man who is considered the holder and manager of a small family farm. Consequently, when women are not classified as farmers, even if they regularly undertake agricultural activities, they are overlooked in agricultural and related policy development and in the implementation of capacity building projects.

35. Understanding how women are represented as “farmers”, using the word in its broadest sense, is complicated because indicators that purport to measure women’s agricultural roles are imperfect and definitions are not consistent. Statistical collections usually refer to heads of formally registered farming enterprises, owners or managers of family farms (whether legal entities or not). A second statistical category is the head of a rural household that undertakes farming activities (whether for self-consumption or for market, or a combination of the two).

36. The concept of a “head of household” reinforces the norm of a single decision maker, presumed to be male, and does not capture the gender division of labour. Rather, indicators that measure the intra household distribution of managerial decisions and ownership on a holding need to be considered. In rare instances, national statistics cover rural residents who use garden plots primarily for subsistence agriculture, but in fact this is a type of farming in which many women are engaged.

37. Reviews of national data indicate that women represent no more than around one third of the heads of agricultural holdings (referring for the most part to smallholder farms). Although the data between countries cannot be directly compared, women’s engagement ranges from 6.5 per cent (women farm managers in Albania) up to 36.6 per cent (female headed holdings in the Republic of Moldova).

38. For most of the subregions, women consistently represent only around 20 to 25 per cent of farmers, again with variations based on how this term is defined. A noteworthy trend is the apparent gain in the number of women registered as farmers (farm owners or managers), observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina (the proportion of women registered as the heads of family farms has increased by eight percentage points since 2016), in Kazakhstan (the proportion of women heading peasant farms or farming households increased by almost ten percentage points in the last decade) and in Tajikistan (the share of women managers of dekhkan [private smallholder] farms doubled between 2009 and 2019). However, it is not clear what is driving this trend – for example, whether it relates to an increasing recognition of women’s ownership rights or reflects the fact that a larger share of men is leaving farming for other occupations..

39. Additionally, the overall low representation of women among agricultural holders is concerning as it distorts their role in the sector. Women represent a large proportion of the total agricultural workforce on smallholdings (including as informal workers), but their contributions are largely considered to be that of “wives of farmers” or “helpers”, and thus secondary to contributions of the “head of the holding”.

40. This lack of recognition not only diminishes rural women’s important contributions but also denies them access to resources, decision-making power, and policy support that are crucial for their empowerment and the sustainable development of the agricultural sector.

41. Access to decent employment and social protection: Agriculture is a key employer of the rural population and is crucial to the livelihoods of many families. In several countries, more than one fifth of the working population is employed in agriculture. The proportion of women working in agriculture, as compared with all working women, is even greater. In countries in which the proportion of women working in agriculture is larger than the proportion of men, it speaks to the fact that the sector is one of the few that employs rural women. In contrast, men have more diverse employment opportunities and thus move away from agricultural labour, or they migrate for work.

42. Data from labour force surveys often fail to capture all facets of employment in agriculture, including not only formal sector wage employment, but also self-employment, less than full-time employment, informal work and unpaid work as a contributing member of a family farm. A significant number of women who are classified in national labour statistics as economically inactive (meaning they are neither working nor looking for work), in fact work as farmers on their own land (they are own account workers or a type of self-employee) or as

unpaid workers on family farms or in kitchen gardens. Women's contribution to agricultural production also includes seasonal and part time work, on family farms and as hired labourers.

43. Informality in working arrangements is common in rural areas, where jobs in agriculture and construction dominate. For rural women, agriculture is their primary source of income generation, although a small number find informal jobs in domestic services. Due to its unregulated nature, informal labour leaves employees ineligible for social guarantees such as pension payments, health insurance, annual leave, sick leave or pregnancy and maternity/paternity leave. Both men and women are at risk of job insecurity, but because rural women have more limited access to formal employment, they are in an especially precarious position that keeps them in a cycle of economic dependency and poverty.

44. Women are more likely than men to be in part time, seasonal and low paying agricultural jobs. Much of this type of work is low skilled manual labour undertaken by rural women who are classified as non working "housekeepers" or pensioners (they are economically inactive). In Uzbekistan, for example, women may represent up to three quarters of cotton harvesters; they primarily work for cash as individuals or in organized brigades but typically do not have employment contracts. The Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan has taken steps to incentivize farmers to conclude contracts for such work. A high number of women in the Republic of Moldova are involved in informal seasonal work, estimated to be as many as 80 to 90 per cent of this workforce.

45. Women often work on family farms with no contract, social benefits or remuneration. In a few instances, the farm owner can claim family workers as employees, granting them access to health insurance (for example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina) or if the farm is registered, women are entitled to health care insurance, pensions and disability insurance (as in Serbia). However, such arrangements still place women in a dependent position, on their spouse or another male family member, to formalize their working status.

46. This lack of access to decent employment and social protection leaves women vulnerable to exploitation, perpetuates gender inequality, and hinders their economic empowerment and overall well-being.

47. Access to agricultural inputs: Agricultural census data and household surveys paint a picture of the serious constraints that women face in accessing agricultural inputs. For example, in Georgia, many smallholders have difficulty obtaining blended fertilizers and high-quality seeds because they cannot afford to purchase them or lack information about their appropriate uses. While specific gender analysis is limited, the fact that women farmers have fewer resources – not only financial but also personal networks – suggests that they are even less likely to use these kinds of inputs.

48. Gender gaps in access to agricultural equipment are consistent. In Georgia, machinery, pesticide/fertilizer use, and water management are stereotypically linked with masculine gender roles. Likewise, in Armenia, even in female-headed households, women seldom use farm machinery personally but instead hire assistants or ask male relatives for help. Small scale research in Uzbekistan suggests that female farmers are more likely to rent equipment from machine tractor fleets than to own it, but due to frequent breakdowns and because they cannot obtain spare parts, they also experience lower crop yields. According to the agricultural census for the Republic of Moldova, among holders with agricultural equipment, such as tractors, combines and harvesters, mechanical cultivators and ploughs, around 90 per cent of the machinery was located on holdings headed by men.

49. Women traditionally do not exercise control over irrigation. In Central Asia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye, where water for irrigation is a scarce resource, women's engagement in water users' associations (WUAs) varies but is generally quite low. For the most part, irrigation is considered men's responsibility because the process of opening canals requires physical strength or is carried out at night. Thus, men undertake most decision-making concerning irrigation, on WUAs and informally. Moreover, in regions with high levels of male labour outmigration, women who are managing households alone can struggle to contribute financially to canal maintenance and repair, and often have insufficient access to irrigation for their farms, land plots or kitchen gardens. The lack of access to agricultural inputs and irrigation among women hinders agricultural productivity and undermines efforts to achieve sustainable agrifood systems and food security.

50. Access to agricultural resources: extension services, information and communication technologies and finance: Farmers depend on a range of other resources, informational, technological and financial, to increase productivity and profitability. As is the case with access to agri inputs, gender norms and discrimination often determine how resources are allocated.

51. Gender stereotypes impede women from attending training events; often their domestic workload simply does not allow them time to be away from home. It is widely expected that men, as recognized farmers, will attend and convey the knowledge they gain to other family members, an approach that reinforces stereotypes and ignores women's role in farming. In Azerbaijan, joining agricultural training activities, especially those that require travel, may be considered unacceptable and "inappropriate" for a woman. Women tend to receive information from male farmers and mass media, while men are targeted by public service providers of extension services. On a positive note, rural women in Azerbaijan are well connected digitally and so online training sessions are more accessible to them. In Albania, most often, the mobilization of farmers for extension services is "carried out via male-dominated channels of communication", through the heads of farmers' associations (the majority of whom are men) who then contact the male membership. In only a few cases are men explicitly asked to bring their wives and/or female relatives. This reliance on established networks and associations that are male dominated not only isolates women farmers from extension and advisory services but also discourages young women from participating in activities such as farmer field schools or demonstration plots.

52. Digitalization is increasingly becoming inseparable from both agriculture and rural development. Even though rural areas in the region are generally well covered by mobile and internet services, the "triple divide" – a digital, rural and gender divide – places rural women in "the most marginalized position when it comes to access to, and use of ICTs". Incentives, subsidies and loans, offered through ministries for agriculture, are an important means by which farmers can invest in their own enterprises. In several of the focus countries, such support schemes have recognized the gender gaps in access to resources and give special priority to or have dedicated incentives for women farmers (for example, in Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova and Serbia). Women's uptake of these incentives remains low, however. For instance, in the Republic of Moldova, women represented only 19 per cent of unique applicants for post investment subsidies in 2020. Women constituted a much larger group of recipients (almost half) of a one-time only incentive dedicated to start-ups (specifically for women farmers, young farmers, green agriculture and domestic production). Still, when the share of women who benefited from the special incentive is compared with all applicants for subsidies, women's representation is only 2.7 percent.

53. The gender gaps in access to agricultural resources as well as inputs, whether machinery, water for irrigation, skills, knowledge, innovations or networks, contribute to the lower productivity of women's farms in general. If access to key resources was equalized, women's potential would be increased, leading to enhanced agricultural production, and as a result - greater economic independence.

III. Challenges towards achieving strategic objectives of the Beijing Declaration, and Platform for Action and the SDGs

54. The extent to which national policy frameworks address gender issues has improved over the past decade, but it is evident that while some advances have been made in closing gender gaps, progress has not always been consistent. The need to accelerate efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls is acute on the agenda for the ECE region. There is a need for gender-transformative approaches to overcome deeply rooted structural barriers in agriculture and rural areas that perpetuate inequalities, reinforce the gender dimensions of rural poverty and create barriers to women's economic independence.

A. Unrealized gender mainstreaming commitments

55. In practice, gender equality commitments are poorly reflected in national agriculture, forestry and fishery policies that usually refer to “farmers” or “the rural population,” rendering women’s contributions invisible. Broad national development strategies may refer to gender equality as a high-level goal, but rural development plans generally lack gender-sensitive targets and indicators, seldom specify concrete actions and allocate budgets for gender-responsive measures, and do not specify responsible institutions.

56. In general, a gender perspective is often absent in mainstream policies. While there are a few positive examples in the region, where several key policy documents for the next five years have carefully integrated a gender equality perspective, the misconception persists that agriculture is a gender-neutral topic. This failure to recognize gender as crosscutting is resulting in women’s further isolation from key resources, and increased risks that women and girls, as well as those in minority groups, will not fully benefit from the development of agrifood systems and will be left behind. On the whole, the Europe and Central Asia region has a strong legislative and policy base for the promotion of gender equality, through dedicated national laws, gender sensitive legislation and national strategies and action plans. A key feature of many of the laws on gender equality is the institutionalization of gender mainstreaming, a process in which gender issues are considered throughout policymaking. However, significant challenges remain for the full realization of gender mainstreaming commitments in terms of implementing concrete actions that support the empowerment of rural women and girls.

B. Invisibility of rural women in public policy

57. Despite high level commitments, considerable and persistent work is required to systematize gender mainstreaming across public policy, at the development stage and, critically, also when policies are realized through national activities and in budgeting.

58. Agriculture and rural development policies often fail to adequately incorporate gender equality commitments, frequently using generic terms like “farmers” or “the rural population,” which obscures the specific contributions of women. At the same time, standalone national strategies on the promotion of gender equality rarely include topics related to rural women and their roles in agricultural production and food security. In general, a gender perspective is included in policies for issues that are traditionally associated with women, such as health care, education, and increasingly also micro or small business, yet is virtually absent from agricultural policy. National action plans to implement strategies follow a similar pattern: with the exception of national action plans on gender equality, they tend to lack gender-sensitive targets and indicators, do not specify a responsible institution and have no budgets for the implementation of concrete activities.

59. While there are a few positive examples in the region of strategies and public programmes dedicated to improving the lives of rural women, the misconception persists that agriculture is a gender-neutral topic. This failure to recognize gender as cross-cutting means that issues such as women’s unpaid work on family farms are frequently overlooked, resulting in women’s further isolation from key resources. Policies that aim to be inclusive must not ignore the inputs of rural women. When they do, there is an increased risk that women and girls, as well as those in minority groups, will not fully benefit from the development of rural areas and will be left behind.

C. Inconsistent political will

60. A positive trend is the increased capacity of public institutions to implement gender equality law and policy and to reflect gender considerations in their work. Initiatives in the region include the creation of gender units or networks of gender focal points in line ministries or in inter-ministerial bodies. However, the practice of appointing gender focal points within ministries of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, or ministries concerned with rural development or the environment, is not consistent. The ministries of agriculture in Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine have directives referring to gender advisors, but the gender mainstreaming practices of these

institutions have not been widely disseminated. Furthermore, the responsibilities and the levels of authority of gender focal points vary considerably. In many cases, this role is an additional responsibility to other work, without terms of reference, funding or time allocated for this function. Thus, while a promising practice, gender focal points tend to play an informational and advisory role, and their ability to influence policymaking in the agriculture sector remains very limited.

D. Weak evidence base

61. Concerns over the lack of sex-disaggregated data and statistics relevant to agriculture and rural development have been raised since many years. Insufficient data obscures the picture of where gender gaps are most pronounced and this, in turn, leads to policies and programmes that are not inclusive or evidence-based and thus neither targeted nor effective. While the collection of sex-disaggregated data has become a standard practice across the region, the statistics that are produced are insufficient to inform policies that would take into account priorities and needs of rural women. Data are missing for fundamental indicators such as access to and control over a range of productive resources (including agricultural extension services, machinery and equipment, and irrigation) as well as benefits (agricultural credit and membership in farmers' organizations, for instance). These kinds of data are needed to clarify the picture concerning the constraints women working in farms face in order to devise responsive strategies.

62. All countries in Europe and Central Asia collect data and produce statistics on agriculture, fisheries and forestry. These are compiled and published regularly, but their primary purpose is for monitoring agricultural markets. For this reason, data collections are oriented towards indicators on crop production, harvests and yields, and land use, but do not include individual-level indicators that would allow for data to be disaggregated by sex.

63. Most countries have conducted an agricultural census in the last two decades, but gender has been integrated only minimally. Very few censuses have generated sex-disaggregated data about the size of farmland, farming purposes, the educational background of farm holders and the contributions of unpaid family members to household or smallholder farms.

64. The selection of gender sensitive national targets and indicators for the SDGs also has the potential to increase the availability of relevant data. Particularly notable efforts are underway in the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and the Western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, as well as in Kosovo) to enhance reporting under SDG 5.a.1 and SDG 5.a.2 on women's ownership of agricultural land and women's equal rights to landownership.

65. National data collections are generally disaggregated by settlement type (rural or urban) or by sex, but not both variables at once. Limited data concerning rural areas mean that information about the sectors in which disparities are the most pronounced or where there may be opportunities for improving rural livelihoods is obscured. Furthermore, there is a lack of complex disaggregation by location and sex, age, ethnicity, disability status, and refugee or internally displaced status, among other variables. Such data, as well as analysis, are needed to provide a better understanding of sub-groups of rural women most at risk of being left behind. Specialized data collection is also necessary to identify particular constraints, risks and opportunities for rural women – for instance surveys on time use, patterns of household decision making and the prevalence of gender-based violence.

IV. Priority actions for governments, civil society organizations and private sector

66. Efforts to promote gender equality should aim at unleashing potential of rural women and girls, ensuring that they have the same access to a full range of resources and opportunities as men, and urban women. Rural women and girls must be viewed as key agents of change, and as neither inherently vulnerable nor passive observers. There is a need to go beyond merely improving rural women's access to sustainable livelihoods, and the very norms that perpetuate inequalities must be challenged.

67. Governments are called on to reinforce commitment and take concrete actions to address the needs and priorities of rural women as the biggest group at risk of being left behind.

68. The evidence base and gender statistics relevant to agriculture and rural development must be strengthened so that policymaking and planning are gender-responsive, effective and sustainable. The collection and use of accurate data, disaggregated by sex, age and other forms of social and economic differentiation, and the implementation of rigorous qualitative and quantitative gender research are paramount for monitoring, evaluating and accelerating progress in improving the status of rural women.

69. Further support is required to empower rural women as leaders in their households, as farmers, as stakeholders in rural development to enter governance at all levels. Strategic planning and decision-making should be inclusive of rural women from diverse backgrounds.

70. Targeted economic policies and programmes are vital to provide rural women with diverse and viable opportunities for income generation, through decent work, entrepreneurship and inclusive value chains, by reducing the gender pay gap and women's unpaid workload. It is also critical to close gaps related to women's access to assets and resources.

71. In addition to investments in physical and social infrastructure, there is a need to both recognize women's role in unpaid domestic and care work and reduce this burden. Social protection policies and practices need to address rural women's vulnerabilities in access to decent jobs and prevalence in informal, seasonal and part-time jobs.

72. Gender-transformative approaches show promise in changing discriminatory norms across a broad array of areas. While engaging with communities and households through gender-transformative approaches remains critical, governments, international organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector must influence positive changes in gender norms and improve women's access to resources through national policies, campaigns and large-scale integrated programmes.

73. Finally, interventions must integrate explicit actions to close gender inequalities and empower women. Whenever possible, they should use transformative approaches at community and national levels to address discriminatory gender norms and attitudes. Doing so can drive major improvements in the status of women.

74. Civil society organizations have an important role to play in bridging gaps between rural stakeholders, women and men, and decision-makers at the local, regional and national levels in order to improve the gender sensitivity of relevant policy and national programmes. There is a need to increase the synergies between civil society organizations with mandates to promote women's rights and gender equality and those that work with rural populations on projects to improve agricultural production, small business development, and environmental protection and climate change mitigation.

75. The private sector can do more to empower rural women by taking actions that improve their access to knowledge (extension and rural advisory services), technologies and financing, and by advocating for women's empowerment.
