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Advancing gender equality in Europe and Central Asia: update on the progress made

Executive Summary

The decision of the Thirty-sixth Session of the ECA (2010) established a permanent standing agenda item to regularly review progress on gender equality, aiming to ensure sustained attention, support and commitment from Members. This background document presents an update on the efforts of the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia to advance gender equality across its core work in the region. The update is structured around the implementation of the Regional Gender Action Plan (2023–2026), which guides activities at the regional, subregional and country levels. While there are encouraging signs of progress stemming from FAO's interventions at both policy and community levels, significant challenges and gaps remain, both in FAO programme countries and in the region as a whole. To accelerate momentum, address persistent barriers and safeguard against setbacks, more systematic and coordinated efforts are required from a broad spectrum of stakeholders with a clear understanding that economic growth and agricultural sustainability are inseparable from the investment in rural women.

Guidance sought

ECA Members are encouraged to review this document, provide feedback on the results achieved, and consider endorsing its conclusions and recommendations. They also are urged to actively promote gender equality and women's empowerment within their countries by engaging key stakeholders – particularly institutions involved in agrifood systems – to integrate gender considerations into policies and programmes. To support implementation, Members should translate recommendations into national action plans, allocate necessary resources, establish monitoring mechanisms, and promote knowledge exchange. These steps are essential to maintaining gender equality as a regional priority and advancing inclusive and sustainable agrifood systems.

I. Introduction

1. At its Thirty-sixth Session in 2010, the European Commission on Agriculture (ECA) decided to have a mandatory agenda item on each session of the ECA dedicated to regularly reviewing progress on gender equality, underscoring the need for sustained attention, political commitment and Member engagement. In line with this mandate, this background document provides an update on FAO's ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of rural women in Europe and Central Asia. These efforts are framed within the broader goals of food security, improved nutrition and the sustainable transformation of agrifood systems.

2. The update is structured around the Regional Gender Action Plan (2023–2026), which guides activities at regional, subregional and country levels. It presents a concise overview of the persistent challenges rural women face across the region – including barriers to resources, services and decision-making – and highlights selected examples of promising practices emerging from FAO's regional initiatives. These initiatives aim to tackle structural gender disparities and support Members in taking transformative action to empower rural women and foster inclusive rural development.

3. FAO, through its research, Country Gender Assessments and targeted policy support, has consistently emphasized that investing in rural women is one of the most effective ways to foster inclusive economic growth, enhance food security and promote sustainable agricultural development.¹

4. While there are encouraging signs of progress at both policy and community levels, significant gaps remain in achieving gender equality and empowering rural women. These gaps are often reinforced by structural barriers, social norms and limited institutional capacity. Importantly, the situation of rural women varies significantly among FAO programme countries and other Members, including the European Union. In programme countries, rural women often face higher poverty rates and more pronounced socioeconomic disadvantages. However, despite these differences, common challenges prevail for rural women across the region, including more limited access to productive resources, underrepresentation in decision-making processes, and a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work.²

5. Addressing these issues requires context-specific yet regionally aligned responses that promote inclusive policy frameworks, equitable service delivery and sustained investment in rural women's empowerment. To sustain momentum, overcome persistent challenges and guard against setbacks, a more coordinated, intersectoral and strategic approach is needed – one that brings together governments, civil society, development partners and the private sector.

6. Achieving lasting change will require a shared understanding that gender equality is a matter of social justice and rights and is fundamental to building resilient communities, driving sustainable agricultural transformation and ensuring equitable progress towards national priorities, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fulfilling the commitments outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action. In this context, the present paper provides an update on FAO's ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of rural women in Europe and Central Asia. These efforts are embedded within the broader objectives of food security, improved nutrition and the sustainable transformation of agrifood systems.

¹ For a full list of the Country Gender Assessments and other resources, please visit the official website of the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia at <https://www.fao.org/europe/resources/country-gender-assessment-series/en>.

² **OECD**. 2022. *Gender and food systems: overcoming evidence gaps*. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/09/gender-and-food-systems_5ff36b6c/355ba4ee-en.pdf

European Parliament. 2019. *The professional status of rural women in the EU*.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608868/IPOL_STU\(2019\)608868_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608868/IPOL_STU(2019)608868_EN.pdf).

Dabkiene, V. 2025. Gender, Women's Barriers and Innovation in Agriculture: A Systemic Literature Review. *European Countryside*, 17(1): 1–26.

7. Section two of this background document offers a concise overview of the persistent challenges rural women face across the region, while section three provides updates on FAO's efforts, highlighting selected examples of promising practices from FAO's regional initiatives. The final section concludes with recommendations to Members and FAO.

II. Rural women in the Europe and Central Asia: key issues³

8. Rural women in Europe and Central Asia play a vital role in agrifood systems – as food producers, natural resource managers, entrepreneurs and caretakers of household well-being. Despite their significant and often underrecognized contributions, women in rural areas remain systematically disadvantaged in accessing productive resources such as land, credit, education, agricultural technologies and leadership or decision-making roles due to deeply rooted structural gender inequalities exacerbated by demographic changes in the region, multiple crises and the growing impacts of climate change.

9. They face persistent barriers across economic, social, environmental and political domains, putting them at heightened risk of poverty and exclusion. These barriers not only limit their opportunities but also undermine the resilience, productivity and inclusiveness of agrifood systems across the region. Young women in particular face compounded disadvantages due to intersecting age and gender-based discrimination, putting them at risk of being marginalized and left behind.

10. As previously reported, supporting region-specific research and analysis on gender inequalities and the status of rural women in agrifood systems has been one of the key priorities for FAO in Europe and Central Asia. Among the most recent contributions in this area is FAO's background paper for the Beijing+30 review, which provides a comprehensive assessment of the structural barriers that continue to impede rural women's empowerment in the region.⁴ This section draws heavily on the findings and conclusions of recent FAO research, including Country Gender Assessments, regional briefs and other key publications produced in recent years.⁵

11. According to these studies, women in rural areas are disproportionately affected by:⁶

³ Based on the thematic paper by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for the Beijing+30 review: **United Nations Economic and Social Council**. 2024. *Status of rural women in the Economic Commission for Europe region: action needed. Note by the Food and Agriculture Organisation*. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE_AC.28_2024_11e.pdf

⁴ **United Nations Economic and Social Council**. 2024. *Status of rural women in the Economic Commission for Europe region: action needed. Note by the Food and Agriculture Organisation*. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE_AC.28_2024_11e.pdf

⁵ These include but are not limited to the following:

- **FAO**. 2022. *Food policy, rural development and gender equality in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. Summary and recommendations of the International forum (10, 12, 17 March 2021)*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb9097en>
- **FAO**. 2022. *Gender, agriculture and rural development in Europe and Central Asia – Brief overview of regional trends and challenges*. Budapest. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc2763en>
- **FAO**. 2024. *Ensuring that rural advisory services are responsive to women: good practices from FAO experiences in Europe and Central Asia*. Budapest. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0448en>

Please also see footnote 1.

⁶ Please see:

- **OECD**. 2022. *Gender and food systems: overcoming evidence gaps*. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/09/gender-and-food-systems_5ff36b6c/355ba4ee-en.pdf
- **European Parliament**. 2019. *The professional status of rural women in the EU*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608868/IPOL_STU\(2019\)608868_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608868/IPOL_STU(2019)608868_EN.pdf)

- **Economic marginalization:** They are underrepresented as landowners and farm managers and in formal employment. Limited access to land, credit, equipment, and training significantly curtails their productivity and economic independence.
- **Unpaid and informal work:** Most rural women, particularly young rural women, work without formal contracts, especially on family farms. Their contributions are labelled as “help” rather than as recognized labour, making them ineligible for social protection benefits such as pensions, maternity leave and health insurance.
- **Lack of services and infrastructure:** Inadequate transport, limited access to health care and education, and the absence of labour-saving technologies significantly increase the time and effort required for rural women to manage daily tasks, including both work and unpaid care responsibilities.
- **Discriminatory practices:** Such practices restrict women’s rights and opportunities to engage in economic activities, impacting them differently across the life course.
- **Food insecurity and malnutrition:** Women in several parts of the Europe and Central Asia region experience higher rates of moderate or severe food insecurity, have lower diet quality, and are more affected by malnutrition than men – with one in four women affected by obesity or anaemia.⁷
- **Exclusion and discrimination:** Young rural women face compounded challenges due to age- and gender-based discrimination, while elderly women are often at risk of social and economic exclusion, especially when lacking access to pensions or health care. In remote areas and regions with weak infrastructure, these barriers are even more severe, limiting mobility, access to services, digital connectivity and participation in economic and public life.

12. Crises – whether geopolitical, environmental or health related – disproportionately affect rural women and multiplies their vulnerabilities:

- **COVID-19 pandemic:** The pandemic exposed existing inequalities. Rural women faced income losses, increased care burdens and reduced access to markets and remittances. Many were pushed into deeper poverty due to their already precarious economic status.
- **War in Ukraine:** The ongoing conflict has heightened food insecurity and civilian displacement. Women-headed households, which are especially common in rural areas, are particularly vulnerable to poverty, hunger and violence.⁸

⁷ For the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity, please see:

- **FAO, IFAD, UNECE, UNICEF, WHO and WMO.** 2025. *Europe and Central Asia Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2024 – Managing water sustainably for improved food security and nutrition*. Budapest. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd4739en>
- **FAO.** 2025. Suite of Food Security Indicators. In: *FAOSTAT*. [Cited 15 July 2025]. <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/FS>

For diet quality based on the indicator “All-5” (defined as “Proportion of the population who consumed all five food groups typically recommended for daily consumption in food-based dietary guidelines around the world: at least one vegetable, at least one fruit, at least one pulse, nut or seed, at least one animal-source food, and at least one starchy staple in the previous day or night”), please see:

- **Global Diet Quality Project.** 2025. All-5. In: *Global Diet Quality Project*. [Cited 15 July 2025]. <https://www.dietquality.org/indicators/all-5/table>

For malnutrition (obesity and anaemia), please see:

- **Global Nutrition Report.** 2025. Central Asia. In: *Country Nutrition Profiles*. [Cited 15 July 2025]. <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/asia/central-asia/>

⁸ **FAO.** 2024. *Ukraine: Food security and agricultural livelihoods assessment (December 2023) – Monitoring report*. Rome. [Cited 8 August 2025]. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cd1128en>

- **Climate change:** Rural women are highly susceptible to environmental shocks due to smaller land holdings, weaker financial buffers and limited access to decision-making bodies related to climate resilience. Although women play key roles in biodiversity protection, their voices remain largely unheard in environmental policy.
13. While legislative frameworks in Europe and Central Asia broadly support gender equality, implementation is inconsistent. The following institutional challenges persist:
- **Insufficient gender mainstreaming:** Agricultural and rural development policies often fail to incorporate gender-specific indicators or actions. References to “farmers” or “rural populations” overlook the distinct needs, priorities and contributions of women.
 - **Limited political will and weak institutional capacity:** Gender focal points in agricultural ministries often lack authority, funding or dedicated time, undermining the effectiveness gender-responsive policymaking and implementation.
 - **Data deficiencies:** The availability of gender-specific sex-disaggregated data is integral to the design of inclusive policies. Key metrics such as land ownership, access to resources and labour contributions by rural women are either missing or poorly documented. This also concerns data on diet quality and nutrition indicators.
14. FAO identifies the following critical areas in the region where progress can drive transformative change:
- 1) **Land rights and ownership:** Women’s land ownership is essential for economic empowerment, access to credit and decision-making in agriculture. Despite progress in statutory protections against gender discrimination, customary practices in many countries still limit the ability of women to access, own or inherit land. Young women are particularly disadvantaged, often facing both age- and gender-related barriers that restrict their ability to claim land rights or participate in decision-making over land use.
 - 2) **Access to resources and technology:** Women face significant barriers in obtaining quality seeds, fertilizers, machinery and irrigation systems. Gender stereotypes often restrict women’s participation in agricultural training or rural advisory/extension services.
 - 3) **Decent work and social protection:** Informal and seasonal work without formal contracts leave women vulnerable to exploitation. Expanding access to formal employment, education training opportunities, child care, safe working conditions and gender-responsive social protection is vital to improving their livelihoods and quality of life.
 - 4) **Leadership and decision-making:** Women remain underrepresented in farm management, producer organizations and local governance. Empowering rural women as leaders in their communities ensures more inclusive and effective development.
15. Rural women remain invisible contributors to agriculture, family well-being and community development. Their “triple role” – unpaid domestic work, farming and community engagement – is critical but undervalued. This invisibility in national statistics and policy frameworks leads to their exclusion from support systems such as agricultural subsidies, land ownership schemes and decision-making processes.
16. Rural women cannot be seen as “helpers” on their family farms, as the “farmer’s wife” or as merely passive recipients of aid. They are key agents of change in food security and better food for all, climate resilience and community development. Yet, unless targeted, inclusive and gender-transformative approaches⁹ are scaled up, they risk being left behind. Ensuring rural women’s meaningful participation in

⁹ FAO defines “gender-transformative approach” as: “...one category on the chain (continuum) of gender integration approaches. It seeks to actively examine, challenge and transform the underlying causes of gender inequality rooted

policy, production and decision-making is not just a gender issue – it is central to achieving sustainable development for all.

III. Regional FAO response: implementation of the Regional Gender Equality Action Plan 2023–2026 for Europe and Central Asia

17. FAO gender work over the past two years was focused on the implementation of the FAO Regional Gender Equality Action Plan for Europe and Central Asia for 2023–2026 (ReGAP), with its overarching objectives:

- i. to contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment towards the transformation towards more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems in line with the FAO Policy on Gender Equality 2020–2030, the FAO Strategic Framework and the three Regional Priorities;¹⁰ and
- ii. to minimize gender-related risks, respond to new and emerging challenges and safeguard rural women’s rights in all actions.

18. To reach the objectives, the ReGAP sets the following regional and country-specific outputs:

- 1) Policies for agrifood systems enabling the inclusion of women and men are enabled through knowledge generation, awareness raising and experience sharing.
- 2) Capacities are enhanced to formulate, implement and monitor gender-responsive and transformative agrifood legislation, policies and programmes, and investment plans.
- 3) Agrifood systems are more efficient, resilient and sustainable, and women have access to markets, knowledge and innovation and enjoy improved control over natural and productive resources.

19. The ReGAP contributes to the effectiveness and sustainability of all three Regional Priority Programmes agreed upon by Members for FAO. The below update is structured around these main directions of FAO gender work in the region.

1) Generating region-specific knowledge for evidence-based agrifood policies and action

20. Policies and practices are most effective and sustainable when they address the priorities and needs of all population groups – especially rural women, who often face the greatest disadvantages. A critical first step towards gender-responsive policies and planning is the availability of a robust evidence base and gender-disaggregated statistics relevant to agriculture, rural development, food security and nutrition. During the reporting period, FAO continued its efforts to improve the availability of data that accurately reflect the status of both women and men, supporting Members in collecting, analysing and disseminating data to monitor progress towards the SDGs.

21. Particular emphasis in this work was placed on indicators related to women’s access to productive resources. Ensuring secure and equal rights to land is essential for rural women’s economic empowerment, food security and nutrition, sustainable agriculture and resilience to climate change and shocks. SDG Indicator 5.a.2 measures the legal frameworks that promote, enforce and monitor equal rights to land

in inequitable social structures and institutions”. For more information, please visit <https://www.fao.org/joint-programme-gender-transformative-approaches/overview/gender-transformative-approaches/en>.

¹⁰ The FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031 is available online at <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/29404c26-c71d-4982-a899-77bdb2937eef/content>. For the FAO Regional Priority Programmes for Europe and Central Asia, please visit <https://www.fao.org/europe/work-in-the-region/regional-priority-programmes/en>.

ownership and/or control for women and men.¹¹ It is part of SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), specifically SDG Target 5.a, which focuses on giving women equal rights to economic resources, including access to ownership and control over land. FAO is the custodian agency for SDG Indicator 5.a.2, leading methodological development of the indicator, collection and validation of country data, capacity development, technical assistance to improve reporting and policy implementation, and advocacy for gender-equitable land tenure.

22. In this role, FAO has been working closely with national governments and statistical offices to assess legal frameworks related to women's land rights. A key example is FAO's longstanding partnership with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), which supported countries and territories in the Western Balkans in producing sex-disaggregated statistics through national censuses.¹² All participating countries successfully developed and piloted the modules to monitor and report sex-disaggregated data on land ownership, helping to overcome bottlenecks in SDG Target 5.a reporting. This partnership was recognized as a best practice and featured in the 2025 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) report.¹³ FAO also supported SDG Indicator 5.a.2 reporting efforts in Albania, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

23. FAO is committed to building region-specific knowledge at the intersection of gender, agriculture and food security and nutrition. In the past two years, this has led to the production of several key knowledge products, including the first-ever study examining gender-related challenges and opportunities in accessing technical knowledge through rural advisory services in Europe and Central Asia. The study also highlights best practices from across the region to inform more inclusive and effective service delivery.¹⁴ Recognizing that gender roles often shape who applies pesticides, who receives safety training, and who bears the health consequences, FAO has advanced research on gender and pesticide use in the context of the region.¹⁵ Targeted and equitable interventions and inclusive policies in agriculture must ensure equal access to technical knowledge, information and training, as this supports protection from pesticide-related risks.

24. Another major milestone was the translation of FAO's flagship regional report on the status of social protection in Europe and Central Asia into Russian, along with the production and translation of several related thematic and policy papers.¹⁶ This has expanded access to key findings for policymakers and stakeholders across the region.

¹¹ The definition of SDG Indicator 5.a.2 is the "proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control". For more information, please visit <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-05-0a-02.pdf>.

¹² **UNECE.** 2025. Partnership for gender equality in land ownership and control: Towards SDG 5.a.1 reporting in the Western Balkans. In: *UNECE*. <https://w3.unece.org/sdg2025/story-11.html>

¹³ **UNECE.** 2025. *Sustainable Development in the UNECE Region in 2025: More Data, Persistent Challenges*. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/SDG-Report_2025_web.pdf

¹⁴ **FAO.** 2024. *Ensuring that rural advisory services are responsive to women: good practices from FAO experiences in Europe and Central Asia*. Budapest. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0448en>

¹⁵ **FAO.** 2025. *Gender dynamics in pesticide use and management in Central Asia and Türkiye*. Budapest. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cd5800en>

¹⁶ Resources include the following:

- the FAO flagship regional report on the status of social protection in Europe and Central Asia (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cc1925ru>) and its policy brief (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cc2703ru>) in Russian; and
- a series of publications in Albania by FAO and UN Women, such as:
 - 2024: Strengthening the status of the spouse and partner in Albania's agricultural businesses (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cd3392en>);
 - 2024: Towards gender-responsive agricultural extension services in Albania (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7701en>);
 - 2024: Gender-responsive value chain analysis in Albania (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cd1282en>); and

25. At the country level, FAO continued to conduct and support national reviews of agriculture and rural development from a gender perspective.¹⁷ The Country Gender Assessments (CGAs) are grounded in extensive literature reviews and data analysis and increasingly incorporate insights from focus group discussions to reflect the perspectives of rural women. These assessments have generated a rich body of quantitative and qualitative information on key gaps at the intersection of gender, agriculture and rural livelihoods in these countries. This evidence should inform policymaking and contribute to a growing evidence base for gender mainstreaming – a process that ensures that the needs and priorities of rural women are integrated into legislation, strategic planning and public policy for the development of transformative food systems and rural areas. Additionally, the CGAs help raise awareness of the critical importance of gender analysis in achieving food and nutrition security, advancing agriculture, and enhancing rural livelihoods. We request that Members actively use and popularize these assessment reports among relevant stakeholders.

26. In 2025, initiatives supported by FAO have made substantial progress in promoting gender equality in agriculture across various countries in Europe and Central Asia, reflecting a strengthened commitment among governments to foster inclusive rural development.

27. In Albania, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development adopted several bylaws aimed at enhancing the gender responsiveness of agricultural extension services. These national efforts were reinforced by local action, with two municipalities updating or adopting gender action plans that include dedicated budgets. In Montenegro, rural women’s perspectives took centre stage during a landmark session of the national parliament. On 8 May 2025, the parliament hosted the eighteenth session of the Women’s Parliament under the theme “Voices of women from rural Montenegro”. The session concluded with the adoption of a declaration calling for stronger representation and targeted support for rural women.

28. In Uzbekistan, a major milestone was achieved with the official launch of the Ministry of Agriculture’s first-ever Gender Strategy 2025–2030.¹⁸ The strategy – developed with FAO’s technical support – focuses on strengthening women’s land rights, enhancing access to finance and technologies, and promoting women’s leadership in agriculture.

29. These achievements underscore FAO’s vital role as a trusted partner in driving the gender-responsive transformation of agrifood systems. Through close collaboration with governments, United Nations Country Teams, the Regional United Nations Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality and interagency platforms – such as the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, the Beijing+30 review process, and United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) reporting – FAO is actively advancing the empowerment of rural women. This work is particularly critical in the face of climate change, food insecurity and the urgent need for sustainable development.

30. FAO’s advocacy work – through the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia’s gender newsletter, podcasts and knowledge-sharing platforms – continues to amplify rural women’s voices and

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- 2025: Monitoring and reporting of gender equality in landownership in Albania (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cd5891en>).

¹⁷ Notably, for the first time, such assessments were completed and published online in Belarus and Kosovo. Please visit <https://www.fao.org/europe/resources/country-gender-assessment-series/en> for a complete list of online resources. Similar analyses are currently being prepared in Kazakhstan and Montenegro, while updated versions are underway in Albania, Tajikistan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan. All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

¹⁸ The high-level national dialogue, held on 27 June 2025 in Tashkent, brought together over 150 participants, including high-ranking government officials, parliamentarians and representatives from the United Nations and civil society. The event concluded with the signing of multiple memoranda of understanding, a commitment to finalize and submit a detailed road map for approval by the Cabinet of Ministers, and the establishment of an interagency coordination mechanism.

good practices across the region, reinforcing that inclusive rural transformation is not just possible but already underway.

2) *Enhanced capacities for gender-responsive agrifood systems*

31. Capacity development and awareness raising for gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches that address the root causes of gender inequalities remain central pillars of FAO's work in Europe and Central Asia. Recognizing that gender equality is not a standalone issue but a cross-cutting priority, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia continues to collaborate closely with stakeholders at the policy level and on the ground to embed gender considerations into all areas of FAO's technical mandate.

32. One of the key objectives of this collaboration is to build a shared understanding that addressing gender concerns is a core responsibility of mainstream stakeholders across all sectors – from agriculture and food security to climate resilience and rural development. At the same time, the system of gender focal points, both in FAO and in national institutions, plays a pivotal role in advocacy, policy support and coordination, ensuring that gender-responsive actions are aligned with national priorities and global commitments.

33. However, the path towards effective gender mainstreaming is not without challenges. A persistent gap in knowledge and capacity often hinders the ability to understand, design and implement gender-responsive programmes and interventions. Without the skills to formulate and monitor such approaches, gender mainstreaming remains an aspirational goal rather than a practical reality.

34. To address these challenges, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia Gender Team has intensified its efforts to provide ongoing, demand-driven capacity development tailored to both country-specific and regional priorities. A diverse range of activities has been implemented in-house to strengthen institutional and technical capacities, including in-person workshops, thematic gender weeks, targeted technical trainings, and knowledge-sharing events. These initiatives serve as platforms to present regional evidence, explore practical challenges and disseminate emerging good practices. Individual consultations on a project-by-project basis are also inseparable parts of the process, ensuring that gender integration is context specific and operationally relevant. All these efforts are grounded in and supported by the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia's expanding portfolio of thematic studies, policy briefs and technical guidance documents, which provide the analytical foundation and tools needed to drive transformative change on the ground.

35. Recent highlights include an in-country training session for FAO staff in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, held on 26 June 2025, that focused on practical tools and strategies for integrating gender into programme design and implementation. Similar events have been delivered regionally and in other countries, reinforcing the importance of applying gender analysis in everyday work and building institutional ownership of gender equality goals.

36. This work is a key feature of the Regional Office's annual reporting to FAO headquarters, reflecting a sustained commitment to operationalizing gender equality across all areas of FAO's technical mandate.¹⁹ As the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia moves forward, the focus remains on translating knowledge into action – ensuring that gender-transformative approaches that target the root causes of inequalities are fully understood and addressed through solutions that drive inclusive rural development in the region.

37. Institutional support for gender equality in FAO's work across Europe and Central Asia has taken a significant step forward with the appointment of a new gender officer at the P-4 level, who joined the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia in Budapest in April 2024. This marks a major milestone,

¹⁹ As mandated by the FAO Policy on Gender Equality 2020–2030, available at <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1375135/>.

as it is the first time since the establishment of the Regional Office in 2009 that the dedicated, regular staff position has been filled.

38. The arrival of the gender officer brings renewed capacity and strategic direction to the Regional Office's gender work, enabling closer support to Country Offices, more robust engagement with technical units, and deeper integration of gender equality across FAO's regional programming. This enhanced institutional presence also strengthens the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia's role in supporting gender-responsive policy dialogue, programme design and interagency coordination, including contributions to processes such as Beijing+30, CEDAW reporting, and other key multilateral commitments.

39. This investment reflects FAO's commitment and understanding that advancing gender equality requires dedicated expertise, institutional continuity and leadership embedded within its decentralized structures. With stronger in-house capacity, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia is well positioned to scale up its efforts to support transformative change for rural women and men across the region.

3) *Improving women's access to markets, knowledge and innovation for more efficient, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems*

40. Direct support to rural women remains a key priority for FAO in Europe and Central Asia. Across the region, thousands of rural women have benefited from enhanced knowledge, technical skills and access to productive assets.

- **Albania:** Under the GREAT project, funded by the Government of Italy, two agro-incubators were established in Leskovik and Elbasan to support the economic empowerment of rural women's groups and improve their market access.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Through the Women Driving Resilience to Climate Change project, women-led Farmer Field Schools (FFS) were established to promote climate-resilient and economically viable value chains. Six FFS are currently active, engaging over 120 women.
- **Georgia:** With support from the Government of Switzerland, the project Fostering Economic Empowerment of Women Farmers by Supporting Homemade Dairy Production through the Farmer Field Schools (FFS) Approach has reached over 1 200 women dairy farmers in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti and Abkhazia. Through 60 FFS, participants received hands-on training focused on improving food safety, hygiene practices and business skills. Delivered jointly by FAO and UN Women, the initiative also promoted women's leadership and economic empowerment, helping rural women strengthen their roles in local agrifood systems.
- **Montenegro:** In partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, the EmpowerHER initiative delivered a series of demand-driven training sessions in agriculture, business development and digital literacy, reaching over 50 women from remote and underserved communities. For each thematic area, more than five in-person training sessions were conducted, with an average of 15 women successfully completing the full set of sessions. These trainings equipped women with practical skills and knowledge to enhance their livelihoods, increase economic opportunities and strengthen their resilience.
- **Kosovo:**²⁰ Funded by the Austrian Development Agency and implemented in collaboration with UN Women, the Promoting Rural Women's Empowerment project trained over 200 women from flood-affected municipalities in sustainable, climate-resilient agricultural practices before offering in-kind support for business development. In close cooperation with local authorities, the project pilots a model for rural advisory services.
- **Tajikistan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan:** Under the Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) project – implemented with support from the FAO–Türkiye Partnership Programme (FTPP) – a comprehensive dual-track strategy was adopted, combining policy engagement with community-

²⁰ All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

level support. At the institutional level, the project focused on strengthening the enabling environment for gender equality, with particular emphasis on enhancing the capacity of gender equality units within the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Türkiye. This included capacity development, technical guidance and tools to better integrate gender perspectives into agricultural policies and programmes. On the ground, the project delivered technical training and equipment to women engaged in key agrifood value chains across Tajikistan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan. Areas of focus included beekeeping, dried fruit and vegetable processing, mushroom cultivation and dairy production. These interventions not only helped improve the productivity and quality of women-led enterprises but also supported their economic empowerment by increasing income-generating opportunities and promoting greater inclusion in rural economies. The project facilitated peer learning through intergovernmental exchange on gender-responsive agriculture and best practices and benefited hundreds of women through technical knowledge, skills and other inputs. Eventually, the project led to the development of a replicable training module for rural women's empowerment, taken up by other FAO ongoing initiatives in the beneficiary countries. These interventions contributed to regional knowledge exchange, strengthened national capacities and promoted inclusive policy development aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While tangible progress was achieved, continued support is vital to sustain capacity development and institutional ownership. Ministries of agriculture and forestry must remain engaged to scale gender-responsive and socially inclusive policies, ensuring long-term impact for rural women across the region. These initiatives seek to address structural gender disparities and to support Members in implementing transformative actions that empower rural women and foster inclusive rural development.

IV. Recommendations and conclusions

41. Closing the gender gap in rural development not only is a matter of women's rights and quality of life but also critical to enhancing the productivity, efficiency and sustainability of agrifood systems. FAO advocates for a multipronged strategy involving governments, civil society and the private sector.
42. Members are strongly encouraged to reaffirm and strengthen their commitment to gender equality by taking concrete, targeted actions that address the specific needs and priorities of rural women – the largest group at risk of being left behind. These efforts must be inclusive and intersectional, recognizing the compounded marginalization experienced by young and elderly rural women.
 - Governments must adopt and systemically integrate gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches in national agricultural, rural development and social protection policies, community engagement, public campaigns and large-scale programmes to improve rural women's equitable access to resources and influence societal attitudes. Structural barriers – such as discriminatory norms and the burden of unpaid care work – must be dismantled by involving women of all ages directly in the design and implementation of programmes.
 - To support this, governments must invest in disaggregated data collection and analysis (by sex, age, ethnicity, disability and location) to better understand and address disparities.
 - Rural women should be empowered as leaders in their households, agriculture and governance at all levels. Strategic planning and decision-making must actively include rural women from diverse backgrounds.
 - Targeted economic policies and inclusive value chains are key to providing rural women with diverse and viable income-generating opportunities. These efforts should focus on decent work, entrepreneurship, closing gender gaps in pay, unpaid workloads, and access to assets and resources.

- Investment in rural infrastructure should reflect the intragenerational needs of rural women. Improved transport, child care, education and health care services can alleviate the care burden, enhance mobility and improve access to markets.
- Social protection measures must address the needs of rural women, especially those in informal, seasonal and part-time jobs. Recognizing and reducing unpaid domestic and care work is critical for equitable participation in economic and public life.
- All interventions must include explicit actions to close gender gaps and empower women and girls. Transformative approaches at both community and national levels are key to challenging discriminatory gender norms and driving lasting change.
- Civil society organizations play a vital role in bridging the gap between rural communities and decision-makers. Greater synergy is needed between organizations focused on women's rights and gender equality and those working in agriculture, small business development, environmental protection and climate change mitigation.

43. The private sector can further contribute by expanding rural women's access to knowledge, extension services, technologies and finance by actively promoting women's empowerment through inclusive business practices.²¹

44. **For FAO:**

- More persistently and vigorously implement the FAO Policy on Gender Equality 2020–2030²² by adopting and applying gender-transformative approaches that challenge discriminatory practices and structural inequalities. To this end, continue promoting and strengthening gender mainstreaming across FAO, including at Regional Office and Country Office levels, to enhance capacities and knowledge for implementing gender-transformative approaches.
- Promote decent work, inclusive value chains and entrepreneurship for rural women to support their economic empowerment as leaders in agrifood system transformation and as key agents of household food security.
- Invest in gender-sensitive social protection and job creation in agrifood systems.
- Integrate gender in disaster preparedness, conflict recovery and climate resilience programmes.

²¹ **United Nations Economic and Social Council.** 2024. *Status of rural women in the Economic Commission for Europe region: action needed. Note by the Food and Agriculture Organisation.*
https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/ECE_AC.28_2024_11e.pdf

²² The FAO Policy on Gender Equality 2020–2030 is available online at <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1375135/>.