

## The minority factor: empowering women in agriculture to boost productivity and social justice



*The role of women and other minorities in agriculture is critical in improving food security and eradicating poverty. However, it is often neither recognised nor properly remunerated. See how GPS-controlled goats, digital platforms, and diverse gender initiatives help make the industry more sustainable, inclusive, and future-oriented.*

**Nata, Maléfica, and Rabiblanca spend their days in the Sierra Norte de Madrid**, enjoying its grass and endless landscape of forest, rockrose, and holm-oaks. Their gaze ranges over unlimited horizons, but **they first receive a sound signal, and then a small electric impulse if they move too far away**. Nata, Maléfica, and Rabiblanca are three out of the 140 goats of what is claimed to be the “world's largest telepastored organic herd”, and like all the others they are **equipped with a GPS collar, restraining their pastures within virtual and invisible fences**. “They are not loose all over our 95 hectares of land, but we can set from a smartphone the areas where they will be grazing, without having to build new fences every day”, explains Clara Benito Pacheco. “This allows not only **proper regeneration of the soil and a more sustainable use of the land, but also better animal and human**

**welfare.** As I keep an eye on my goats remotely, I can spend my time studying or focusing on other tasks."

Thanks to her "Entrelobas project", **Clara was awarded as best female farmer, in September at the 2023 EU organic awards**, organised by the European Commission and other international farming bodies and associations. "I hope this prize will inspire more women to return to traditional livestock farming," she says. **"My goal is to foster these practices, to recover the open ecosystem that once existed in this area.** With mass migration to the cities, all this countryside was abandoned, leading to a huge loss of biodiversity and impoverishment of the land." Co-organiser of the EU organic awards, the European umbrella organisation representing farmers and agri-cooperatives Copa-Cogeca is also behind the Innovation Award for Women Farmers. **"Our objective is to inspire other women, give them more confidence, and show them what they can do in agriculture,"** says Branwen Miles, one of its senior policy advisors, covering the Women's committee.

This goal is also shared by the International Day of Rural Women, which has just been celebrated on October 15. Established by the United Nations in 2007, it recognises **"the critical role and contribution of rural women in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty."** The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) recently reported that **while over one-third of the world's working women are employed in agrifood systems, they represent less than 15% of landholders and are paid 20% to 40% less than men.** According to FAO, **closing the gender and wage gap in agricultural employment would "increase global gross domestic product by nearly \$1 trillion and reduce the number of food-insecure people by 45 million"**. "If we tackle the gender inequalities endemic in agrifood systems and empower women, the world will leap forward in addressing the goals of ending poverty and creating a world free from hunger," said its Director-General Qu Dongyu.

**"Croatia has one of the lowest rates of women entrepreneurs in the EU, and in agriculture, they are much less likely to set up a business than men,"** explains Lara Šiljeg, senior consultant on European funds for the Croatian city of Metkovic, and local coordinator of dRural, **an EU project aimed at tackling the depopulation of rural areas.** "Most of them don't own anything, are fully dependent on men, and rarely have the chance to access higher education." Recent figures confirm that **over 95% of European farms are family-run, but just one out of three is managed by a woman.** Additionally, ILO's report "Bridging the gap" points out that **rural women "shoulder a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work, which is neither recognised nor remunerated."** "As women are underrepresented in agriculture, we definitely need to increase their number, but we also have to recognise those who already work 'in the shadows'," says Miles. **"Many of them contribute to family farms with no official legal status and thus no access to social security, maternity leave or contribution to pensions."**

To help address this, the city of Metkovic has set up **free consultation services for farmers. These services include training in digital tools, guidance for applying to EU rural programmes and support in acquiring skills and knowledge to develop their activities?**

"As part of dRural a call was launched in January, and the first group of applicants received a grant and the opportunity to use a digital platform aimed at accessing new markets," says Šiljeg. "Among other things, thanks to this tool they can also reach schools, hotels, and other customers outside of our Dubrovnik-Neretva County, which would otherwise be out of reach for them." **The success of**



**the initiative attracted the attention of many other players, like healthcare consultants and institutions**, that “insisted on being part of it, thus bringing a whole set of new services to our rural area.” However, Šiljeg acknowledges that **“women's unemployment is a problem that we cannot just solve with a digital platform.” “It’s also a matter of mindset and traditions which should evolve,”** she says.

Pushing for a cultural change within agriculture is among the goals of the **“Women and Diverse Genders in Forestry and Landwork”** group of the **Landworkers Alliance**. Created in 2022 in the United Kingdom, it aims at **bringing voices of women and other minorities into the debate, to make such traditionally male-dominated industries more ‘human-centred’, open to diversity and innovation.** “First of all, as you don't have a male body, you already have to prove that you are capable and strong enough to do the job,” says Sasha Georgiades, one of the group’s co-founders. “And this makes it difficult even to ask questions or for help because people look at you as if you’re not fit for it.” It's way more complicated than this, concedes Georgiades, but **“capitalistic society is organised around productivity units, which have historically been neither women nor other minorities. But listening to these historically marginalised people is crucial, as they can contribute with a different way of working and producing.”**

“For agriculture to become a true opportunity in Croatia, **women should explore new patterns,**” suggests Šiljeg. “They should start seeing beyond the old-fashioned approach and get involved in marketing, digital, and other innovative activities.” Integrating women and other minorities can also prove crucial to **tackling the problem of providing the next generation of farmers.** Current data shows that **only 4.2% of female farmers are under the age of 35**, and given that 42% of them are over 65, the gender gap will further widen in future years. **“Making agriculture and forestry more accommodating to diversity would encourage new people into new sectors.** Gut listening to marginalised perspectives **would also help these individuals to be their ‘most productive selves’** and reach their full potential, which would then benefit the whole industry” concludes Georgiades.

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