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BRIEF

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# Empowering Women Farmers for Sustainable Agriculture in the EU

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Women farmers play a critical role in driving sustainable agricultural practices across Europe. However, structural barriers and gender disparities hinder their full participation in Agri-Environment-Climate Schemes (AECS), implemented under the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Using Hungary and Slovenia as case studies, this policy brief highlights the challenges and opportunities for empowering women in sustainable agriculture. It provides evidence-based recommendations for enhancing gender equity and sustainability in EU agricultural policy.

Key findings from recent studies show that female farmers demonstrate a strong commitment to environmental stewardship, yet systemic inequities in land ownership, credit access, and resource allocation limit their contributions. Targeted policies can address these disparities, unlocking the potential of women to lead in green entrepreneurship while advancing the EU's sustainability goals.

## INTRODUCTION

As the European Union strives to achieve its Green Deal objectives, agriculture remains a key sector in mitigating climate change and promoting sustainable development. Gender equality is a fundamental principle of the EU, yet women in agriculture continue to face significant structural and cultural barriers. Addressing these challenges is not only a matter of social equity but also essential for maximizing the impact of sustainability initiatives, particularly AECS.

This brief synthesizes findings from two recent studies that analyze the gendered dynamics of AECS adoption in Hungary and Slovenia. By exploring these contrasting cases, we identify actionable strategies for integrating gender considerations into EU agricultural policy.

## BACKGROUND

### The Role of Women in Sustainable Agriculture

Women farmers contribute significantly to environmental conservation and sustainable practices. They are more likely to adopt resource-efficient and community-focused farming techniques, aligning closely with the goals of AECS. However, they face persistent challenges:

- Limited access to land, credit, and technical knowledge.
- Underrepresentation in decision-making and governance structures.
- Structural biases in subsidy allocation and policy design.

### The Agri-Environment-Climate Schemes (AECS)

AECS are voluntary measures under the CAP that incentivize farmers to adopt environmentally sustainable practices. While AECS aim to address environmental challenges, their design and implementation often fail to consider the unique barriers faced by women farmers. Gender-sensitive approaches are critical to ensuring that AECS achieve their full potential.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Hungary: Structural Barriers to Participation

In Hungary, female-headed farms account for a minority of agricultural operations and are disproportionately smaller than male-headed farms. Research by Fertó et al. (2025) reveals key insights:

- 1. Gender Disparities in Resources:** Female farmers have less access to land, credit, and technical inputs, resulting in lower total AECS subsidies compared to male farmers.
- 2. Commitment to Sustainability:** Despite these challenges, women demonstrate equal or higher intensity in AECS adoption when resource disparities are controlled. This highlights their strong commitment to environmental goals.
- 3. Structural Inequities:** Systemic barriers, including economic scale disadvantages and limited access to capital, inhibit women's ability to scale sustainable practices.

## Slovenia: A Model of High Female Engagement

Slovenia provides a contrasting picture, where female farmers are more actively engaged in AECS. Findings from Fertó et al. (2024) show:

- 1. Higher AECS Adoption Rates:** Female-headed farms have a higher adoption rate (67.2%) compared to male-headed farms (63.3%).
- 2. Subsidy Efficiency:** Women receive higher AECS subsidies per hectare of agricultural land, reflecting their strategic use of available resources.
- 3. Entrepreneurial Practices:** Slovenian women integrate green farming with entrepreneurial activities, demonstrating efficiency and innovation despite smaller farm sizes.

## Comparative Insights

The experiences of Hungary and Slovenia highlight the importance of national contexts in shaping gender dynamics in agriculture. While Hungary grapples with entrenched structural barriers, Slovenia illustrates the transformative potential of targeted policies.

ASPECT	HUNGARY	SLOVENIA
AECS ADOPTION RATE	Comparable between male- and female-headed farms when structural disadvantages are controlled	Higher for female-headed farms (67.2% vs. 63.3% for males)
SUBSIDY INTENSITY	Lower overall subsidies for women but high intensity relative to resources	Higher subsidies per hectare for women
FARM SIZE	Smaller for women; reliance on family labor	Smaller for women but high efficiency in AECS participation
POLICY CHALLENGES	Structural inequities in resource access	Underrepresentation of women in leadership roles
POLICY SUCCESSES	Emerging recognition of women's role in AECS	Effective integration of women in AECS with targeted policies

## POLICY CHALLENGES

- 1. Resource Inequities:** Women farmers across the EU face systemic disadvantages in land ownership, credit access, and technical support, limiting their ability to participate fully in AECS.
- 2. Gender-Blind Policy Design:** Existing AECS measures often fail to account for the unique challenges and contributions of female farmers, leading to unequal outcomes.
- 3. Underrepresentation in Decision-Making:** Women are underrepresented in agricultural governance and policy formulation, limiting their influence on sustainability initiatives.
- 4. Data Gaps:** A lack of gender-disaggregated data hinders the ability to assess the impact of AECS on women and to design effective interventions.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these challenges, the European Commission should adopt a multifaceted approach that integrates gender considerations into CAP and AECS policies. The following recommendations are informed by the findings from Hungary and Slovenia:

### 1. Improve Resource Access

Policymakers should prioritize equitable access to land, credit, and technical resources for female farmers. Measures could include:

- Expanding financial support for women in rural areas through gender-targeted grant programs.
- Facilitating access to low-interest loans and microfinance tailored to the needs of small and medium-sized farms, which are often led by women.
- Establishing land redistribution programs that prioritize female farmers.

### 2. Invest in Education and Training

Tailored education and training programs can equip women with the skills needed to adopt sustainable practices and entrepreneurial strategies. Initiatives should:

- Focus on technical knowledge in green farming, such as organic practices and agroforestry.

- Include leadership development to increase women's representation in agricultural governance.
- Provide digital literacy training to enable women to leverage technology for farm management.

### 3. Design Gender-Sensitive AECS

AECS measures should be restructured to recognize the unique contributions of female farmers. Possible reforms include:

- Introducing additional financial incentives for practices commonly adopted by women, such as crop diversification and agroecology.
- Simplifying application processes to make AECS more accessible to women, particularly those managing smaller farms.
- Incorporating flexibility in subsidy allocation to account for the different scales of women-led farms.

### 4. Strengthen Community Networks

Community-based networks can empower women by fostering collaboration and knowledge-sharing. The European Commission should:

- Support the creation of women-led farmer cooperatives focused on sustainable practices.
- Fund initiatives that connect female farmers with mentors, experts, and policymakers.
- Develop platforms for women to share success stories and best practices in green entrepreneurship.

### 5. Monitor and Evaluate Gender Impacts

The European Commission must prioritize the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data to track the effectiveness of AECS measures. This should involve:

- Regular assessments of AECS participation rates and outcomes by gender.
- Publishing gender-specific impact reports to inform policy adjustments.
- Collaborating with national governments and academic institutions to conduct longitudinal studies on gender and sustainability in agriculture.

## BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU

The lessons from Hungary and Slovenia offer valuable insights for shaping EU agricultural policy. Empowering women in agriculture is essential for achieving the Green Deal's climate and sustainability objectives. By addressing gender disparities, the EU can enhance the effectiveness of AECS and build more resilient rural economies.

Slovenia's experience demonstrates the potential of targeted interventions, such as education and subsidy reforms, to elevate the role of women in sustainable farming. Hungary's challenges highlight the need for systemic changes to address structural inequities. Together, these cases underscore the importance of integrating gender considerations into CAP reforms.

## CONCLUSION



Empowering women farmers is both a moral imperative and a practical solution for addressing climate change and rural inequality. The European Union has a unique opportunity to lead in this area by adopting gender-sensitive policies that promote sustainability and equity.

By enhancing resource access, investing in capacity-building, and designing inclusive AECS measures, the EU can unlock the potential of women to drive sustainable agriculture. The contrasting experiences of Hungary and Slovenia provide a roadmap for action, offering lessons that can inspire broader efforts across the Union.

Achieving gender equality in agriculture is not only about fairness; it is a strategic necessity for building a greener, more resilient Europe.

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