

**Initial Contribution of the Women’s Committee of Copa to the
Annual Session of the
United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 2018**

**“Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality
and the empowerment of rural women and girls”**

The Women’s Committee of Copa, representing European women farmers, farmers' wives, family member assistants and farmers' daughters, fights for better living and working conditions for women in rural areas worldwide, promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment as well as ensuring jobs, growth and the sustainable development of rural areas.

Rural women across the world face numerous challenges on a daily basis. Only together can we find solutions, in particular to tackle climate change, desertification and the ageing population in the countryside. The lack of quality and accessible infrastructure, transport, facilities and services for everyday life in rural areas also impacts the choices families and women make.

The agricultural sector is key to the vitality of rural areas, enhancing generational renewal, social cohesion and economic growth. Agriculture also contributes to providing safe, nutritious and healthy food, to the diversification of the landscape, to mitigating climate change and to preserving biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Although women farmers and women working in rural areas face similar constraints to women in urban areas, they are also confronted with other difficulties due to the specificities of rural areas.

In 2015, the rural population represented 19.13% of the total EU population, and rural areas generated 17% of total employment in the EU. European agriculture provided 3.3% of all jobs held by women, making agriculture the seventh largest employer of EU women. Yet although women in rural areas make up just below 50% of the total rural population, they represent 45% of the economically active population (39.47% of rural women work on their family farms). Moreover, this data may be misleading as it does not take into account the informal rural economy, in which many women are still involved.

Female entrepreneurs represent only one third of self-employed people in the EU and women farmers represent 30% of the total EU farm managers. They tend to have smaller farms: on average 5.84 ha compared with the 12.88 ha owned by male farm holders. Women take more calculated risks than men, yet it is still difficult for them to access credit. Women’s ideas for innovation are as marketable as men’s, but they are not recognised by predominantly male stakeholders.

In rural areas, women are more frequently employed in part-time and temporary jobs than in urban areas. Women are also generally concentrated in lower paid roles, which in turn has consequences on the social structure of rural communities. 25.5% of those living in rural areas in the EU are likely to live in poverty or social exclusion. Women are 1.4 percentage points more likely to live in such conditions than men.

In addition, the 15% European gender pay gap is transferred to women's pensions. Thus, the gender gap in pensions stood at 37.6% in the 65 and over age group in 2015. In rural areas, the figures are 10% higher. Some European women face an even more difficult challenge: they do not have access to legal recognition of their part-time or full-time work on a farm. In fact, apart from farm managers, in many countries, most family members working on farms do not have social protection or legal recognition, and are therefore not covered for maternity leave or against accidents in the workplace, for example.

The Women's Committee of Copa urges UN members and all stakeholders to embrace the opportunities that the rural world can provide

Demographic change is creating a pressing need for policies that integrate women into the labour force. In particular, if rural women are **equally integrated into the labour market and enjoy equal pay**, they can help to increase household income, improve living conditions, reduce poverty, and enhance economic, social and territorial cohesion in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals.

Worldwide, agriculture is managed by family farms which are veritable success stories. Indeed, they bring the principle of the eco-social circular economy to life. This is why the Women's Committee of Copa calls for **strong social protection of all family** members involved in agriculture. Shared-ownership of farms and agricultural enterprises must be promoted and the economic and social role of assisting spouses recognised. Assisting spouses need personal protection, including guaranteed support for medical expenses and for cases of illness or work accidents, decent allowances in the event of maternity leave, temporary help in the household, and fair old-age pensions.

In order to help them reconcile a seven-day working week on the farm with "invisible" family responsibilities, women living in rural areas require **better health care, childcare and elderly care**, which would thereby boost living conditions.

Advisory services, education, lifelong learning, validation of skills acquired and acquisition of new skills and training for women but also for their families is essential for viable rural areas.

The future of rural areas and agriculture also very much depends on a **high-speed broadband internet** connection and the use of new technologies. Internet access will help to overcome isolation, to enhance contact and to encourage the use of e-commerce and platforms facilitated by quality ICT. Entrepreneurial networks must be supported in order to increase women's empowerment and gender equality and to guarantee living standards equivalent to those living in urban areas.

Women need **financial advice and the same access to credit** as men. The Women's Committee of Copa also calls for the support of **entrepreneurial initiatives** that will provide extra family income, namely, multifunctional farms (combining agri- and rural tourism, direct marketing, paid social services like care for children and for the elderly, or educational school programmes).

Women farmers need support to strengthen their **participation in networking activities and in the bodies making decisions on rural policies**.

These opportunities will provide women with the inspiration needed. Women farmers can be at the forefront of innovation and diversification. Women possess special interpersonal and communication skills as well as awareness and knowledge of local needs, contributing to local and community development and strengthening identity.

In conclusion, the Women's Committee of Copa calls on UN Members and stakeholders to promote **gender equality policies and to ensure the empowerment of rural women**.

The participation of women in the social and economic sphere will create jobs, reduce inequalities, promote gender equality, reduce the risk of poverty, prevent the depopulation of rural areas, and ensure that rural and agricultural activities contribute to biodiversity and sustainable food production.

The UN's support will make the rural world richer and help implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.