



Strengthening the Voice of Rural and Farm Women in Decision-Making Spaces

Policy Brief

Ireland

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Strengthening the Voice of Rural and Farm Women in Decision-Making Spaces

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There is a need for better representation of women in a range of governance spaces to improve decision-making and ultimately enhance gender equality.

Executive Summary

The voice of women in rural and farming contexts needs to be better represented to improve decision-making and policy formulation for women in rural and farming contexts. Women remain significantly underrepresented in political decision-making arenas across Europe at both local and national levels. This underrepresentation undermines the principles of democracy, equality, and inclusion enshrined in European Union (EU) values. This policy brief outlines the necessity for targeted actions to address this imbalance, aligns the recommendations with existing EU policies, and provides examples of data and relevant sources to substantiate the need for intervention. This situation is mirrored within an Irish context and therefore needs policy consideration.

The Challenge

- 🏠 The underrepresentation of women in politics contradicts the fundamental democratic principle of equal participation. Data from the Women for Election Data Hub shows that 25% of TDs in Dáil Éireann are women. Compare this to other national parliaments such as Sweden where 46% of representatives are women (Women for Election, 2023). Data provided by See Her Elected shows 38% of Senators and 27% of Local Councillors were women in 2025.
- 🏠 Farming organisations also have issues when it comes to women's under-representation. For example, the Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) Diversity Strategy shows that of its total membership, just 15% were women. This imbalance also extends to the organisation's wider operations and governance, with women comprising only 13% of its National Council

and 20% of its Branch Officers, according to data contained in this strategy (IFA, 2019). There are many other governance and decision-making areas where women can be under-represented, such as state boards, policy monitoring committees, Local Action Groups and Public Participation Networks.

- 👤 The value gender balance can bring includes greater capacity to solve complex challenges and make better decisions because of inclusivity, as well as develop more comprehensive policies that better meet all citizen's needs.

Policy Solutions

Women's participation in local and national politics:

- 👤 Quotas are in place for national politics. The Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 requires that for national elections political parties need to select at least 30% of candidates of each gender. If they do not, they lose 50% of their State funding for the parliamentary term (DJE, 2017). Calls have been made for the introduction of quotas at local levels too. For example, See Her Elected (SHE), as part of the Gender Quotas Alliance, called for implementation of statutory gender quotas of 40% for local elections (See Her Elected, 2024). Laws on local governance and balanced participation are found in some countries (see Best Practices).
- 👤 Quotas are also only one part of the solution, as is clear from the report by Women for Election that makes a range of recommendations such as succession planning at constituency level and gender auditing after each general election (McGing, 2024). In the context of local elections, the SHE programme also points to the need for a wide range of actions (Maher, 2024).

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Women's participation in the policy spaces of government:

- 👤 Policy monitoring committees should actively work on and have measures in place to ensure they have gender balance as well as ensure bodies representing women's needs in rural areas and farming are represented.
- 👤 Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 states that its Monitoring Committee will aim to increase women's representation in its membership. The Managing Authority also must ensure relevant women's organisations are represented in the Monitoring Committee. The CAP Strategic Plan also states that Local Action Groups decision making bodies should aim to secure gender balanced representation (DAFM, 2021).
- 👤 This represents progress but only includes aims. A stronger approach would encompass setting of clear, context relevant targets with participation monitored over time.
- 👤 For example, a target of 40% women's participation on state boards exists. According to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) it has 12 state boards and progress is being made, but under-representation remains (DAFM, 2022). The need for greater targeted action is also further underscored by the fact that the 40% target, originally set in 1993, is to increase to 45% (as outlined in 2014) once the initial goal is achieved (DJE, 2017).

Women's representation on boards and in leadership positions in private companies:

- 👤 Promising measures exist in this area, such as the government supported but business-led Balance for Better Business(B4BB) Review Group. It aims to support improvements in women's representation on boards and leadership teams of private companies. Its 7th annual report called for 40%+ women's representation on boards and leadership teams of these organisations. A series of recommendations exist to support this, such as plan/measure, succession planning, and recruitment strategies (B4BB, 2025).

- 👤 The need for progress in corporate boards in a farming context has been highlighted by the Women in Agriculture Stakeholders Group (WASG). It has pointed to the need for a quota system in a number of governance contexts. WASG argues beef and dairy processors and co-ops should set a target and work towards that until at least 30% of elected officials are women (WASG, 2022). Stronger action is found in some countries, such as in the form of broad laws (see Best Practices).

Gender equality plans as a tool

- 👤 Gender equality plans, as well as diversity and wider equality plans, are an important part of the tools and strategies organisations can implement to improve gender equality. We see examples in rural and farm related public sectors (e.g. Teagasc) and stakeholder organisations (e.g. Farm Europe, IFA).
- 👤 Tools such as targets or quotas for the percentage of women in elected positions in farming organisations could, for example, be part of the aspects detailed in gender equality plans. For example, the Women in Agriculture Stakeholders Group (WASG) has advocated that farm organisations adopt a quota system to have women make up at least 30% of elected officials (WASG, 2022).
- 👤 External policy frameworks and criteria can also be a push factor driving action more broadly. For example, part of the eligibility criteria for certain organisations to apply for Horizon Europe funding is to have a gender equality plan. There is also potential room for a wider framework to ensure plans work to address key issues and reach important targets (see Best Practices).

Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Ireland's women-led farm innovation case study research highlights the need for a greater involvement of women farmers and improved connection to issues on the ground in policy making process. Both Ireland's women-led farm and rural innovation case study research also found that women involved in innovation can possess a lack of confidence and be impacted by the phenomenon of 'imposter syndrome'. This can decrease with the length of time involved in innovation. The case studies highlight how once women gained experience and success their comfort and confidence grew. Pair with this the fact that the motivation for women-led farm and rural innovation was often driven by social, environmental and cultural concerns and issues. This suggests an untapped capacity for rural and farm women innovators to become more active in decision-making, but also the need to increase women's capacities by addressing the imposter syndrome issue and building confidence (Farrell et. al. 2024a; 2024b).

The [SHE programme](#) supports women in rural constituencies engaging in local democracy by providing training, mentoring and networking programmes. The programme is delivered by Longford Women's Link and supported by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. SHE's work also includes engaging with local agencies and governance structures including Longford Public Participation Network and Longford County Council, such as by producing the booklet [Connecting Women to Local Government](#).

FLIARA's policy assessment (see Murtagh et al. 2024b) identified laws and wider initiatives in other European contexts that could provide lessons for future action in Ireland:


-  A law exists in Italy in relation to women's representation on the board of directors and auditors of listed companies, as well as non-listed companies controlled by public companies. A quota is in place. In 2011, this was 20% but has since increased to 40%. The assessment also identified that in Slovenia legislation is in progress to introduce gender quotas in private enterprises.
-  In the local governance context, in relation to the councils and boards of local authorities and in regional councils, Italian law provides for the rebalancing of gender representation. More broadly, the Italian constitution also provides for the removal of any obstacle that prevents full equality of men and women in social, cultural and economic life and promotes equal access between women and men to elected positions.
-  In Germany, women are supported in local politics and outstanding achievements recognised through the [Helene Weber College](#) and its [Helene Weber](#) award. The winners are said to provide role models to other women. They also have formed a self-organised network of award winners.








Lessons can also potentially be drawn from other sectors that also have faced issues related to women's participation. For example, one area is higher education and research. In this context the [Athena SWAN Charter](#) provides a globally utilised framework to support and transform gender equality in higher education and research. The charter was launched in Ireland in 2015 and includes Gold, Silver and Bronze awards for successes (HEA, no date). Potentially there are lessons to learn here to build a more comprehensive framework to support women's improved representation in the range of governance spaces that impact women in rural and farming contexts.

Conclusion & Call to Action

The under-representation of women in decision-making positions and value of achieving gender balance in this area, from government bodies to stakeholder organisations and politics more broadly, are raised in the European Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 as well as the 2025 Roadmap for Women's Rights. To address the underrepresentation of women in rural and agricultural decision-making spaces, it is critical that policymakers, institutions, and rural communities adopt decisive and effective actions to achieve gender-inclusive leadership. This policy brief discusses a range of potential actions to increase women's participation in decision making and provide greater opportunities for rural and farm women to take part in influencing the decisions that impact them.

Call to action

-  Greater affirmative action is needed such as the setting of quotas and targets for women's representation in a variety of decision-making processes and spaces.

-  Increase efforts to foster inclusive policy design by ensuring women's representation at every decision-making level.
-  Expand leadership and decision-making opportunities and support for women in rural settings, such as participation in the SHE programme's Introduction to Politics module, which provides information and training in relation to understanding decision-making structures and how best to become involved.
-  Increase capacity for local and national advocacy to support greater representation of women in decision-making, learning from structures such as the Longford Public Participation Network in Ireland on participation of women in local democracy.
-  Increase recognition of women's achievements in decision-making spaces to make role models more visible for emerging generations, such as through awards and campaigns recognising national, regional and local activities.
-  Establish mentorship programmes connecting experienced women leaders with emerging women decision-makers.
-  Facilitate access to networking and digital spaces where women in rural innovation can connect, share experiences, and learn from best practices and from those already engaged in decision-making fora.
-  Form a multi-stakeholder working group to assess and push for policy changes at national and EU levels.

Further Reading

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About FLIARA

The project is on a mission to create a more sustainable future by highlighting the role of women in agriculture and rural areas. FLIARA will boost understanding of the needs and challenges facing women leading innovative environmental and rural development practices in EU farming and rural areas.

Contact

Email: info@fliara.eu

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Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas

www.fliara.eu



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