



Balancing Women-led Innovation, Rural and Farm Family-life: The Need for Improved Policy Supports

Policy brief Ireland

Grant Agreement n°. 101084234



**Funded by
the European Union**

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Policy Brief IE09, 2025.

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Supporting a balance of work, family and wider life demands to meet the needs of women in rural and farm innovation needs policy action in a range of areas.

Executive Summary

Policy support for women-led innovation can focus directly on innovation and entrepreneurship supports. However, policies impacting the provision of childcare, the design of child-related leave schemes, as well as wider policies and initiatives that impact work-life balance, such as farm relief services, are also critically important policy issues for better supporting rural and farm women's participation and success in innovation.

The Challenge

- 🏠 In general women devote more of their time to family care, such as elderly care and childcare, as well as domestic work. This has an impact on women's capacity to engage in innovation as they balance life's different demands.
- 🏠 Adequate availability of pre-school childcare and after-school services is an issue across Ireland. Indications of the extent of the pre-school care issue are shown for example from Pobal figures from 2025. They showed that up to 40,000 children under age three were on creche waiting lists nationally (Early Childhood Ireland, 2025).
- 🏠 Further to this, women-led innovation in rural areas and farming is not often a nine to five job. More flexible childcare options are also part of the challenge.
- 🏠 The cost of childcare that is available is also an issue. This is currently on the Government agenda. For example, part of the Programme for Government commitments relate to providing affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare. This includes progressively reducing the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child through the National Childcare

Scheme. This would require a significant increase in supports. Pobal figures show that average weekly costs nationally were €197.47 for full day care in 2023/4 (Pobal, no date).

- 🏠 A number of different types of family leave schemes exist in Ireland to support childcare related time off. Data tells us that the design of these schemes and traditional gender norms play a role in who mostly takes these types of leave. Generally, the level of pay received while on leave (and some leave is unpaid) is also behind other OECD countries (see Keane et al. 2025).
- 🏠 There is also a significant gender gap in terms of pensions (Coyle, 2025). More than one in three Irish women have no retirement savings at all, according to a 2025 pensions survey. The figure for men is one in four. The explanation for the gender gap in pensions is long-standing and well-known. On average, women earn less than men, meaning that even where they are a member of a pension scheme, they are saving less into them. Wages in some sectors traditionally dominated by women are also lower and women are more likely than men to be working part-time or to take time out of the workforce to act as family carers.
- 🏠 On family farms, many women contribute heavily to labour, bookkeeping, and animal care, but unless they are formally registered as farm partners or paid employees, they are not insurable for PRSI. This creates a gap in their contributory State pension eligibility.

Policy Solutions

Work towards international benchmarks in childcare and after-school care provision

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- 🏠 Reducing costs is essential. Other countries have significantly lower childcare costs and different models exist to support this. For example, in Slovenia an income assessed subsidy system across 10 income groups exists which can result in childcare payments varying from 0% to 77% of the full price (Murtagh et al. 2024b). In Sweden the cost of childcare is very low, also with caps on fees payable. The highest fee payable is approximately €150 per month per child. Students do not pay for childcare at all (see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).
- 🏠 Children should be guaranteed a place. In the Swedish model, from age one pre-school children are guaranteed a full-time childcare place (see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).

Reduce the complexity of the family leave support system and income link payment for leave

- 🏠 There are a number of different types of schemes that support taking child-related leave in Ireland. Maternity benefit is up to 42 weeks (26 paid, 16 unpaid) for mothers. Paternity benefit provides 2 weeks for partners in the six months following birth of a child. Parent's benefit provides 9 weeks for each parent up to age 2. These schemes provide for leave for employed and self-employed who have the required PRSI contributions (Citizens Information, 2024). A flat rate of €274 is paid per week by the Government and some employers top this up to the salary rate (Keane et al. 2025). Parental leave also exists and both parents can take up to 14 weeks for each child until age of 12 and this is unpaid (Citizens Information, 2024).
- 🏠 In Sweden for example there is one system. Parents have 480 days of paid parental leave. There is no specific maternity leave. This leave can be shared between parents, but 90 days are allocated to each parent. Pay is based on previous earnings (see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Parental Leave, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025).

Design child related leave schemes to support more equal sharing of caring roles

- 🏠 Paternity leave only exists in Ireland since 2016. Maternity leave has been in place since 1981. According to a recent analysis of child-related leave in Ireland this has contributed to



reinforcing the societal expectation on women to focus more on children and care work, which is also a contributor to the gender wage and pension gaps (Keane et al. 2025).

- 💡 A way forward are family leave schemes that enable the sharing of leave entitlements among parents, such as the Swedish model. While change took time, it is widely understood that Sweden's parental leave system has contributed to changed patriarchal norms. The phenomenon of the 'Latte Papa' is observed to describe fathers on parental leave (The New Nordics, 2023).

Design policies that respond to farm specific demands

- 💡 More innovative childcare provision can meet the needs and opportunities of the farming profession. More flexible childcare with extended hours would better support the work demands of farming.
- 💡 Farms can also potentially themselves become part of the solution where new innovations such as farm-based kindergartens are developed. For example, FLIARA has identified a number of examples, such as the organic farm and kindergarten [Maso Canova in Italy](#).
- 💡 In Finland holiday leave for farmers is supported under a publicly funded farm relief scheme and this covers the cost of temporary workers. A similar scheme in Ireland could both make farming more attractive to women and increase existing farmers well-being (see Best Practices for more).

Policy responses to pension gap

- 💡 Automatic PRSI Coverage for Farm Partners - Require joint farm registration for spouses/civil partners to ensure both accumulate PRSI credits. Provide retrospective options for women previously excluded.
- 💡 Strengthened Caring Credits - Simplify access and raise awareness of the caring credit scheme. Extend eligibility to cover informal care common in rural areas.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Achieving work-life balance, reconciling family and business commitments, childcare cost and availability were all challenges identified in the FLIARA case studies from Ireland (see Farrell et al. 2024a; 2024b). For example, the rural case study showed how innovators experienced issues around time management, achieving work life balance and meeting the demands of domestic, caring and business tasks. There was a general tendency to put family first. Women leading innovations in rural contexts who had caring commitments described how their time and energy are stretched daily as they work to combine many demands and tasks.

Motivations for innovation in farming case studies highlighted how a farm-based livelihood could combine well with family commitments by working close to home. However, this also came with challenges. Similarly, in the farm case studies, the challenges of combining motherhood and entrepreneurship were also evident. Some women also commented that family caring responsibilities did disproportionately fall to them. Emotional challenges were also highlighted such as 'mammy guilt' as well as working long hours around caring commitments.

The case study evidence highlights how women-led rural and farm innovation presents an important opportunity, but also without the right supports there are significant challenges. The consequences relate to well-being and the potential for burn-out, as well as potentially limiting women's ability to advance and continue to succeed in innovation.

Farm relief in Finland: This publicly funded system is provided for in regulations under the statute 20.12.1996/1231. The [Farm Relief system](#) supports farmers by providing substitute workers or self-arranged substitutes, as well as covering their costs, such as for holidays and illness. The scheme allows for parental leave and pregnancy leave. For more information see FLIARA Policy Brief: Implementing a Farmer Relief Service, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025.





The Swedish parental leave system: Paid parental leave of 480 days is available to parents in Sweden. This is a universal, state administered scheme. Days can be transferred to people other than parents if one parent is absent, such as a grandparent. The scheme is also flexible, and days can be taken in blocks or over longer periods of time. There is also an additional allowance of 60 days paid leave per child to care for a sick child. For more information see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Parental Leave, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025.

Pre-school and after-school childcare system in Sweden: Municipalities must offer full-time pre-school care to all children over aged 1 as well as after school activities. The system does not just provide day care but also most municipalities provide services for night or shift workers. Privately owned or cooperative pre-schools also exist but follow the same regulations. For more information see FLIARA Policy Brief: Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities, found in Kang et al. eds. 2025.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Women-led innovation in rural and farming contexts can be supported by developing policy measures, for example, to facilitate networking or provide access to finance and training. However wider policies must be considered as part of this, such as family policies. This is also a point argued in wider research. For example, Ahl et al. (2024) argue: “Entrepreneurship and rural development policy cannot be separated from family policy and welfare state policy. These policy areas intersect in important ways, and policy makers must recognise that they need to work horizontally across policy areas”. To have a comprehensive support system for women-led innovation in rural and farming contexts family and work-life policies must be considered as part of this.




Call to action

-  Review child related leave schemes in Ireland and implement changes to support more equal sharing of how caring roles are combined with career and employment.
-  Support greater availability and affordability of pre-school and afterschool childcare.
-  Conduct a feasibility study to assess the potential for farm-based childcare provision in Ireland.
-  Conduct a feasibility study into the cost and benefits of introducing a similar Farm Relief System that is found in Finland.

Further Reading

FLIARA Sweden Policy Briefs

Find the following Policy Briefs published in D5.1 Policy Booklet and Policy Briefs (Kang et al. eds., 2025):

-  Providing Adequate Childcare and After School Activities
-  Providing Adequate Parental Leave
-  Implementing a Farmer Relief Service

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The New Nordics, 2023. Latte Pappas | Is Paternity Leave in Sweden the best in the world? .
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCC-4smezts>

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.

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2025.



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