



Improving Family and Work Balance in Rural Areas

Policy Brief Italy

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“Implementing policies that balance work and family life may importantly contribute to empower rural women, boosting their self-realization and well-being, as well as promoting gender equality.”

Executive Summary

Women in rural areas play a vital role in driving sustainability and innovation, but their potential is often limited by unequal caregiving responsibilities and patriarchal environments. The Italian case studies from the FLIARA project (Sivini, Roos and Leonardelli, 2024) highlight ongoing shortcomings in family-work balance policies (e.g. in terms of maternity leave, availability of kindergartens and children care facilities, availability of territorial health services) that hinder rural women’s leadership opportunities. Strengthening childcare infrastructure, promoting a relief support system, providing preventive and curative health services in rural areas (taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the use of new technologies in health services), and implementing gender-sensitive funding can help break down these barriers, empowering women as leaders and entrepreneurs.

The Challenge

- 🏠 Many women innovators in rural Italy juggle farm leadership or business management tasks with caregiving responsibilities, often lacking essential support services like childcare or gender-responsive funding and allowances.
- 🏠 A relief system has not been activated.
- 🏠 Women reporting difficulties in being acknowledged as “managers” and in navigating male-dominated and patriarchal farming and rural environments.
- 🏠 Maternity allowances are limited (five months), paternity allowances are most often limited to ten days of leave, and kindergartens are often not available, especially in remote rural areas and in the South of Italy. For these reasons, it is very challenging for women to



continue managing a recently established business or farm if they have babies unless they have their partner or other family members importantly supporting them.

- 🏠 Poor public infrastructures in rural areas such as access to transport, and local health services further constraints women's ability to combine work and family life.

Policy Solutions

We propose to:

- 👤 Open and maintain local childcare facilities. Considering the rural context, flexible services that take into account the working hours of women engaged in agriculture or in rural business should be supported (e.g. agri-nurseries, tagensmutter-type services).
- 👤 Create funding programmes for women with children to complement maternity leave.
- 👤 Establish a relief system that can help women during the periods of time when they have to be absent from work (e.g. for maternity, for taking care of elderlies, etc.).
- 👤 Improve paternity leave.
- 👤 Coordinate agricultural, social and health policies to ensure better services at local level.
- 👤 Support (through funding programmes) women innovators networks to boost collaborations at work and mutual support.

Practical tips

- 👤 Involve local communities in care service design and management to make sure their needs are met.
- 👤 Improve paternity leave to allow men to take up to five months of leave (just like as it is for women) when they become fathers.
- 👤 Promote local campaigns about equal care distribution and gender equality, including in schools and during public fairs, events and festivities – making sure men are also engaged in such discussions.

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Supporting Evidence & Best Practices

Evidence from FLIARA case study in Italy (D3.3) suggests the need to improve work-life balance policies for women living in rural areas. Rural areas are still governed by profoundly patriarchal social norms and women struggle to juggle between care work and business management, as they most often are the main care givers. This is a major challenge, especially felt by women involved in farm innovation, which is a very male-dominated field. Maternity leave for self-employed women covers only 5 months and childcare facilities are not always available in rural areas, especially in remote rural areas. Besides, parental leave for most fathers (excluding those working in the public sector) only entails 10 days of leave. For these reasons, especially for women managing a recently established business, it is challenging to develop it while taking care of young children, unless they receive a lot of support from their partner and from other family members. In addition, in Italy a relief system has never been activated (Pirras, 2021).

Best practice in this regard comes from Northern European countries. For instance, **Finland's farmer relief system**, regulated under statute 20.12.1996/1231, support agricultural entrepreneurs by providing substitute services during vacations, illness, or other periods of incapacity. These include assigning substitute workers or compensating farmers for the cost of self-arranged substitutes. The system is designed to make sure that farmers can carry on with their work without any interruption, which in turn helps to boost their sense of social security and work motivation.






Conclusion & Call to Action

Women in rural areas are already key drivers of innovation, sustainability, and local development. Yet, without systemic support to reconcile work and family responsibilities, their contributions often go unrecognized and insufficiently supported.

Prioritizing work-life balance is an investment in gender equality, rural sustainability and social cohesion.

Call to Action:

-  Policymakers should integrate work-family conciliation as a central component of rural development strategies at EU, Italian, and regional levels.
-  Funding institutions should revise their criteria and processes to better reflect the realities of women innovating while caregiving.
-  Local authorities and service providers should collaborate with rural communities to design flexible and affordable care services. These are citizenship rights and as such should be guaranteed by social and inclusion policies in general, which should pay more attention to territorial gaps

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Further Reading

Finland Relief systems: [Farmers' holiday and stand-in scheme](#), accessed 2 September 2025

Aisling Murtagh, Maura Farrell, & Louise Weir. (2024). *D1.3: Assessment of Rural and Farming Policy and Legal Frameworks in relation to Women-led Innovation*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14045163> accessed 2 September 2025

Silvia Sivini, Annie Roos, & Irene Leonardelli. (2024). *D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14045390> accessed 2 September 2025

Pirras F. (2021), *I servizi di sostituzione come strumento per favorire l'imprenditorialità femminile in agricoltura*, in RRN Magazine, n. 13, pp. 14-15. <https://www.pianetapsr.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/2584>, accessed 2 September 2025

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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