



STATUS OF RURAL WOMEN IN MACEDONIAN SOCIETY

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CONTENT

Introduction	7
Rural woman	9
• Sustainable developemnt goals.....	10
• Hunger and poverty	10
• Gender equility	11
• International Legal Standars	12
National Legal Framework.....	17
Status of the rural woman	19
Methodology	24
Research results	25
Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rural woman	35
Conclusions	38
Recomendations.....	43
References	45

„Rural woman: the invisible mainstay of sustainability

Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women.

Introduction

The number of inhabitants in the villages in the Republic of North Macedonia is declining, depopulation and limited possibilities of the rural residents are becoming more evident every day, and the role of the rural woman for survival of villages and rural areas remains invisible and unrecognizable to the general public.

The rural women are powerful, strong and dedicated to the development of their communities. Confronted with numerous challenges, they are the driving force in food production, keeping traditions alive, fight against climate change and for sustainable rural development, reminding us that only through their social and economic reinforcement will we achieve social wellbeing, economic development, better quality of life in the rural areas and sustainable communities.

This analysis is an attempt to identify the key problems and challenges of women in rural areas, in terms of access to rights and services in social protection and health care, as well as from the aspect of opportunities for their professional development and their active inclusion in economic activities.

In defining the term rural woman, the starting point should be the fact that our rural areas or villages go through a strong process of deagrarianisation of the population; therefore many people do not fit the category “farmer”. The term “rural woman” is wider, whereas the term “farmer” or “female farmer rancher” is stricter, because it includes only the active members of this group of holders of agricultural holdings. In this paper, the term rural woman indicates a person living on a farm or in an agricultural holding, involved in agricultural activity. The analysis emphasizes the concern over the lack of policies that stimulate female economic activities, lack of social and health infrastructure in rural areas, as well as a need for change in the legislation in order to achieve gender equality, social justice and protection against discrimination.

The analysis detects the limited access opportunities of women in the rural areas to social, health, educational and economic services vital to creating better living conditions. On the basis of these research results, solution recommendations have been formulated for the identified problems.

Reducing the disparity between urban and rural areas, as well as bridging the gender inequality gap, followed by creation of conditions for equal access to rights, protection against discrimination, career advancement and economic stability of women in rural areas are just a part of the identified priorities that should be met in order to secure a better life for women in the rural areas.

It is necessary for the public institutions to strengthen their efforts to eliminate discrimination and (in) accessibility to women rights in the rural areas, bridge and close the gender gap and facilitate access to women, including women from rural areas and women actively involved in agriculture to formal

employment and entrepreneurship followed by improvement of their possibilities to balance their work life with their family time.

Rural woman

Supporting rural women we give contribution to:

Poverty Eradication

End of Hunger

Stop Gender Inequality, and

Positive achievements in the fight against climate change

Rural women make up a quarter of the world's population.

They are key contributors to agricultural production, food security, a fight against climate change, entrepreneurship, and a civic activism.

Rural women are agents of change in the community by their actions in reducing poverty, generating income and creating employment opportunities, which is an essential contribution to a sustainable community development.

Sustainable development goals

They present a global call to action to end extreme poverty, ensure a sustainable future and the development for our planet, and enable all people to enjoy equal peace, justice, and prosperity.

The Sustainable Development Goals are a continuation of the achievements of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, identifying new priorities and goals (climate change, sustainable consumption, peace, justice) in the fight for eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions.

The United Nations' document SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS contains a total of 17 goals, was adopted at the 70th UN General Assembly jubilee in 2015, by all 193 member states, including the Republic of North Macedonia.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are based on the specific measures in the fight against poverty, inequality, injustice, climate change and pollution that are easily applicable in local community contexts and bring social and economic benefits globally.

In many of the SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS as target groups are rural women and women who are actively involved in agriculture as an important link for achieving socio-economic development and sustainable future.



Hunger and poverty

In fact, poverty remains a predominantly rural problem, with a majority of the world's poor are located in rural areas. Also, in our country the highest percentage of poor people live in rural areas. A number of research studies have been focused on it and make recommendations to ensure sustainable development, but still resources and policies continue to be focused towards and for the benefit of urban development. The urban-rural differences in development and inequality have negative consequences for people in rural areas as well as in the urban areas.

Rural areas face insufficient opportunities for a dignified life, forcing cities take on the responsibility of providing support to the poor and rural residents. Many people from rural areas seek their livelihood in cities, that lead to migration which causes depopulation of rural areas, and burdens infrastructure and economic opportunities in urban areas above their capacity, leading to unfavorable economic situation in both rural and urban areas.

Women and girls constitute three-fifths of the world's poor. The poverty level of rural women is worse compared that of men as clear gender disparities in education, employment opportunities and decisionmaking power exist.

A large number of women are mainly engaged in subsistence agriculture as well as in micro and small-scale enterprises (MSE). In our country women constitute 60-70 per centage of the total agricultural labour force, and despite many of them are engaged in different economic activities, statistical they are invisible. It is not surprising therefore to find many women engaged in food processing, weaving, personal services, beverage preparation, and selling of foods and meals, who are not recorded in the national and local reports.

In addition to their economic and income-generating activities, women assume multi-faceted roles in society, i.e. as breadwinner of a family, unpaid family workers, service providers, etc. but despite their essential role in productive, reproductive and social sphere, they still faced with limited opportunities and risk of poverty.

Gender equality

Equal opportunities for women and men are the promotion of the principle of introducing equal participation of women and men in all areas of the public and business sector, equal status and treatment in the exercise of all rights in the development of their individual potentials, through which they contribute to social development, as well as equal benefits from the results of that development.

Gender equality policy in North Macedonia as a concept in which men and women have equal opportunities to achieve and equal participation in all segments of their lives - personal, professional, private, spiritual, cultural, social, political, economic segment reflects shortcomings that are especially observed in rural women.

Patriarchal matrix, denial of gender rights and the weakness of institutional protection detect the gender inequality and emphasize the necessity of the implementation of the adopted legal standards and national legislation and policies aimed at achieving gender equality.

International Legal Standards

For the purposes of this analysis, we present an overview of the international standards that are relevant to the protection of women in rural areas. They are part of the legal order in accordance with the Constitution, of the state as a contracting party to these international instruments of human rights.

1. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in Article 3 provides that the signatory states undertake to ensure equal rights for men and women in the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights that are listed in the Covenant. Article 7 provides for the principle of fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind. Women in particular must be guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men, and receive equal pay for equal work.

2. UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Optional Protocol

For more than three decades, the international community has been taking serious steps towards affirming the issue of gender equality as well as taking action to eliminate discrimination against women. A key document that regulates women's rights and gender equality in the most comprehensive way is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The Convention was adopted in 1979 and entered into force in 1981. The basic principles of CEDAW are: equality, non-discrimination and the principle of obligation of the state. The convention promotes the concept of essential equality, i.e. equality in opportunities and access to resources, but also equality in the results, i.e. the benefits from the resource use.

The adoption of the Convention with the Succession Act in 1994 created a legal possibility and obligation for the state to transpose of its provisions on women's rights and gender equality in national legislation. Additionally, the ratification of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW allows for the submission of individual applications for human rights violations of the woman to the Committee in charge of monitoring the UN Convention.

The Convention elaborates on the equality, i.e. the existing inequality of women in political and public life, education, employment and employment rights, access to health care, financial and social security, legal and civil rights and obligations, acquisition of citizenship, family relations, and pays special attention to the fight against violence on women, as well as the problems of the rural woman. The issue of the status of women in rural areas is an especially important issue in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in the United Nations on the grounds of particularity

on the status and role of women in villages.

Article 14 of the Convention – A woman from a countryside demands from the countries to take into account the specific problems faced by women in rural areas, as well as the important role that women play in caring for the family, including their unpaid family work. Requested measures that would ensure the application of the provisions of the Convention on Women in the rural areas include providing measures to stop discrimination against women in rural areas to ensure that they, on the basis of equal opportunities for women and men participate in the development of rural areas. This would provide them with the right to: participate in preparation and implementation of development plans at all levels, access to health facilities, including information, advisory and services for family planning; access to program rights and measures for social protection, formal and informal education including training in relation to functional literacy, as well as inter alia benefits from all local community services due to expansion of their technical knowledge; organizing self-help groups and cooperatives in order to achieve equal access through employment or self-employment, participation in all local community activities, access to agricultural loans, modern technology and equal treatment in the agrarian reforms etc.

In order to elaborate in more detail the key principles of the Convention, but also some of its articles, so far this Committee has adopted a total of 34 general recommendations (GR). The general recommendations are aimed at countries members of the Convention and aim to provide comprehensive explanations regarding the application of CEDAW, as well as the views of the Committee regarding specific issues. Some of the more noteworthy general recommendations for the subject of this analysis are:

General Recommendation No. 5 (1988) - Interim Special Measures for achieving equality between men and women.

General Recommendation No. 16 (1991) - Unpaid women workers in rural and urban family enterprises. This recommendation proposes data collection for women working in family enterprises without getting paid for it, and taking the necessary steps to guarantee payment, social security and social benefits for women working without such benefits in enterprises owned by a family member.

General Recommendation No. 17 (1991) - measurement and quantification of the unremunerated domestic activities of women and their recognition in the gross national product. This recommendation gives support to experimental research and analysis to be conducted with the aim to measure the value of unpaid domestic activities as well to report on the progress made in including unpaid domestic activity of women in national systems.

General Recommendation No. 25 (2004) - Interim Special Measures for analysis of the current situation of women and removal of all forms of discrimination and achieving equal treatment in all areas, including the labor market.

General Recommendation No. 27 (2010) - on older women and protection of their human rights. This general recommendation on older women and promotion of their rights points to multiple forms of discrimination faced by women as they get older, and outlines the content of the obligations to be assumed by States parties with regard to the rights of older women. It includes

recommendations for the inclusion of the issue of older women in national strategies and development initiatives so that older women can participate fully in society without discrimination and on an equal basis with men.

General Recommendation No. 34 (2016) – on the rights of rural women in all areas of life, as well as focus in part on their inclusion in the labor market on an equal footing with men.

3. Conventions of the International Labor Organization

The country is a member of the International Labor Organization (ILO) as of 28 May 1993. The ILO is committed to empowering workers rights, to improving the working and living conditions of workers, to creating new jobs and to providing access to information and training. One of the basic functions of the ILO is establishing international standards for the protection of workers' rights. Non-discrimination and the promotion of equality are the fundamental principles that underlay ILO's operation. These principles are also an integral part of the International Labor Organization Decent Work Agenda: Promotion of decent and productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equality, security and human dignity. All workers are entitled to decent work, not just those working in the formal economy, but also the self-employed, the seasonal workers and the workers in the informal economy, as well as those, mostly women, working in the care sector and in private homes. ILO standards are equally applicable to women and men, with certain exceptions, especially those standards that address issues related to motherhood and the reproductive role of women.

However, there is still a gap between the rights set out in the national and international standards and the actual situation of workers (Gender equality and decent work - selected ILO conventions and recommendations for promoting gender equality as of 2012, p. 6). Although much progress has been made in the ratification of the basic standards that promote equality between women and men and in their transposition into national legislation, gender issues should also be considered in the application of the other ILO standards. Gender mainstreaming in the application of international labor standards helps determine equal access to the benefits that arise from these standards for women and men. It recognizes the needs, experiences and interests of both women and men and advocates for equality achieved through the practical implementation of conventions.

4. European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)

Our country has ratified the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the Council of Europe on (ECHR-1950) and Protocol no. 12 to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. This Convention in its basic provisions prescribes that rights and freedoms set out in the Convention shall be exercised without discrimination in relation to sex, race, skin color, national and social origin, political and religious beliefs, property and social position.

5. European Social Charter

The European Social Charter of the Council of Europe represents a substantial amendment to the European Convention on Human Rights in the part of guaranteeing social and economic human rights.

Our country as a full member of the Council of Europe, on 5 May 1998 signed the European Social Charter of 1961, together with the Additional Protocol of 1988 and the Protocol under which the Charter of 1991 is amended. On 27 May 2009, it became a signatory to the Revised European Social Charter, ratified on January 6, 2012, thus committing itself to increase of the economic and the social rights of its citizens.

6. Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council

Adopted on July 5, 2006, it is focused on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in area of employment. The Directive contains provisions of the Directive 2002/73/EC on enhancing the protection of mothers, fathers as well as parents who adopted children on their parental leave.

In addition, it is explained the connection with Directive 92/85 / EEC (on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding). The Directive also emphasizes the need to strengthen the role of the social partners and the civil organizations in the promotion of the equal treatment principle.

7. Resolution of the European Parliament on the position of rural women

Recognizing the specific features of life, status and meaning of the role of women in rural areas, the European Parliament in 2008 passed a Resolution on the position of rural women. It sets forth initiatives for sustainable and comprehensive development of rural areas, with special emphasis on employment opportunities, especially for women and youth. Many rural women are not registered on the labor market, listed as employees nor involved in Unemployment statistics. Many women in rural areas are employed in positions that are not recognized, protected and paid although they are measurable. Few women in rural areas own property. Therefore, the significant contribution of women in local development and development of the community is scarcely reflected in their participation in the decision making processes. The Resolution specifically calls for states, in cooperation with regional and local governments, to open opportunities for education and empowerment of women in rural areas communities and to direct their policies towards improving the general living conditions (health care, legal protection, the right to work, cultural and social activities, decision making). In addition, they should direct policies at encouraging women entrepreneurship, supporting association of women, mentoring, encouraging assistance and advisory projects when establishing innovative enterprises for primary agricultural production, development of legal form for joint ownership which will fully respect the rights of women, securing social protection and value for their work, enabling ideolog-

ical and financial support for unpaid or voluntary work, promoting the importance of social activities of women's associations. They should also work to improve the rural road infrastructure because transportation significantly affects social exclusion and inequality in society that mainly affects women, etc.

8. Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)

The Istanbul Convention is generally accepted as the most far-reaching legal instrument in preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence as one of the forms of violation of human rights. Our country has signed the Istanbul Convention on July 8, 2011, but ratified it by depositing the ratification instrument only on March 23, 2018. It came into force on 1 July 2018. The Istanbul Convention obliges the States Parties that have ratified it to adopt a comprehensive set of measures to address all forms of violence against women and domestic violence. Each provision of the Convention aims to prevent violence, help victims and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

The Convention calls for various forms of violence against women, such as domestic violence, persecution, sexual harassment and psychological violence, to be classified as crimes and to secure for them sanctions by law.

There are numerous international documents, plans and programs focused on improving gender equality for women, not just the overall population of women, but also certain target groups, such as women living in rural areas, so as to achieve gender equality and social justice

National legal framework

The gender equality and women empowerment policy, as one of the fundamental principles of democracy and social order, is part of the legal framework of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The gender equality is one of the core values of the Constitutional order of the Republic of North Macedonia which is based on full recognition and promotion of equal opportunities for women and men, as an indispensable precondition for sustainable development, enjoyment of human rights and the practice of democratic values.

Equal opportunities of women and men in the Republic of North Macedonia are regulated by the Constitution as the highest legal act, but also, in a number of laws, there are provisions added that forbid sex discrimination and provisions that incorporate the concept of gender in the domestic legislation.

The first act that targets gender equality in a more specific and fundamental way is the Action plan on gender equality, adopted in 1998, whereas the gender concept is incorporated most thoroughly in the Law on Equal Opportunities of Men and Women, a primary and leading act in establishment of gender equality in political, economic, social, educational, cultural, health, civil and any other area of social life. It regulates the issues of interest to the equal opportunities of men and women in the area of healthcare and health insurance, social protection, access to goods and services, economy, work relations and employment, education and professional development, economic and proprietary relations, use of public goods and services (consumer rights), culture and sport, information and communication technologies, defense and safety, judiciary and management, housing, public information and the media, state and public administration and other areas of social life.

Other legal acts of significance that encompass elements of gender equality are the Law on Labor Relations with provisions on men and women equality at employment, equal pay for the same work positions, mobbing provisions as well as separate provisions on pregnancy and maternity.

The gender concept is incorporated in the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence on Women and Domestic Violence, whose aim is to prevent gender-based violence against women as well as domestic violence, effective protection of victims from any type of gender-based violence on women as well as victims of domestic violence by respecting basic human liberties and rights guaranteed with the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia and the international agreements ratified in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia.

Key steps have been taken for the adoption of the national documents on gender equality and protection of women, some of the more important ones being Strategy for introduction of gender-responsible budgeting in the Republic of North Macedonia 2012-2017, National strategy for equality and non-discrimination 2016-2020, and the National plan for action for gender equality 2018 – 2020.

The Strategy for demographic development of the Republic of North Macedonia 2015-2024 is among the adopted national documents that need to be applied and implemented. It covers the priority areas for promotion of gender equality in the family, harmonizing parenthood and professional employment, and improvement of conditions for care, growth and development of children especially in the rural areas.

In the area of gender equality and non discrimination, the Strategy for gender equality 2013-2020 is of great significance, seeing that it has achieved positive results. A new strategy for the gender equality for the upcoming period is under way.

A document focused on the improvement of the economic status and protection of women workers in the informal economy and unpaid family workers is the Strategy for formalization of the informal economy in the Republic of North Macedonia 2018 -2022 that identifies women as one of the most vulnerable actors in the informal economy and proposes measures to stimulate and support the formalization of the informal economic activities.

The New National Strategy on agriculture and rural development 2021-2027 aims to secure sustainability of rural areas by improving the living and work conditions and supporting economic activities in the agricultural sector, identifying the women farmers as a priority and introducing measures geared towards elimination of the gender inequality, women empowerment and support for their increased agricultural productivity.

Among the more important international documents that have elements of gender equality, our country has ratified the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Convention, and it is a signatory to the Convention for preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CAHVIO) and the Istanbul Convention.

On June 13, 2019 a Memorandum of understanding was signed between the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of the Republic of North Macedonia. By signing this Memorandum, the two institutions agreed to collaborate so as to reach the common goal – Advancement of gender equality in the Republic of North Macedonia through institutionalization of gender-responsible budgeting in the strategic planning of agricultural and rural development, creation of policies and budget processes in accordance with international and national obligations, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other UN agreements on human rights, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA).

Status of the rural women

According to the data from the last Census of the population, households and dwellings in 2002, the Republic of North Macedonia has 2 022 547 inhabitants, 3.9% more than the Census of 1994, and 43% more than the Census from 1948. In the Republic of North Macedonia, the State Statistical Office assesses the population at 2 055 004, according to the latest statistical data (2019), with approximately equal number of men and women, at 1 029 848 and 1 025 156, respectively, which allows us to conclude that there is a balance in the population structure by sex. According to the data, there is a small difference in the percentage of women living in the urban compared to rural areas.

When it comes to the rural areas in our country, there is very little data on the life, status and role of women. The fast and multiple changes reflect in all aspects of life for the women in rural areas – education, employment, entrepreneurship, access to programs for support of agriculture, political participation, right to health care, right to social security and right to legal protection of women in rural areas, yet there are no analysis and reports that offer insight data on the status and role of the rural woman in the Macedonian society.

The rural areas that take up around 87% of the total surface of the country have around 45% of the total population. Agriculture is the most important economic activity in rural areas that leads to the alleviation of poverty and unemployment. The comparison among solely agricultural households, mixed households with at least one family member employed aside from agriculture and households with non-farm livelihood shows that mixed households have the highest income, followed by agricultural-only households with the poorest ones being the households reliant only on the non-farm sector.

In the period 2017-2019, an average of 45% of the total number of employees in the country (342.474) is employed in the rural areas. From them, 19% are self-employed and 12% is unpaid family labor. With a share of mere 35%, the disparity of female employment in proportion to men's in the rural areas remains significant and much higher than in urban areas, where the participation is more balanced and amounts to 43%.

Following the data of the State Statistical Office, on employed workforce according to the status in urban and rural areas, the unfavorable position of the women in rural areas is evident, especially due to the high percentage of women that are unpaid family workers.

The high percentage of rural women who are not active on the labor market arises from their engagement in the home, such as child rearing, care for their elderly family members and other domestic obligations which represent unpaid labor.

Employed persons by status of employment and gender, urban and rural in 2019 year				
	Number		Sex distribution	
	Women	Man	Women	Man
Urban				
Employee	178 247	211 237	39,6	46,9
Employer	6 749	15 099	1,5	3,4
Self-employed	8 816	25 214	2,0	5,6
Unpaid family worker	22 578	2 500	0,6	0,6
Total	196 390	254 050	43,6	56,4
Rural				
Employee	86 647	153 352	25,0	44,2
Employer	1 567	7 718	0,5	2,2
Self-employed	12 065	48 655	3,5	14,0
Unpaid Family worker	23 544	13 662	6,8	3,9
Total	123 823	223 387	35,7	64,3

*Source: Labor Force Survey, State Statistical Office

Even when the female work labor is paid, they make only **33%** of the income men have in the same sector. Access to resources and opportunities for economic and social empowerment between men and women in rural areas is limited, so **the share of women – holders of agricultural holdings within the total number of farmers is only 10.4%, whereas only 12.01% of women are landowners**, with a low level of participation in the decision making process relevant to production activities. Due to the unfavorable position of women as a share of the workforce and as income to the family, young women in the rural areas generally do not see their future in agriculture and are willing to stay in rural areas only if they are able to obtain another type of employment.

The rural population is deprived in relation to the urban population in many respects. Thus, 36% of those living in rural areas experience difficulties with access to bank services, 24% have limited access to postal services and 20% have no access to cultural facilities. Basic transport services are either not available or difficult to come by for 22% of the population in the rural areas. Public transport is more available in the lowland rural areas and in use by women. However, due to the limits of passenger transport they find themselves in unfavorable position with limited mobility (they cannot go to see a doctor by themselves, take children to the closest kindergarten, visit social service centers to realize

their social rights, or the Employment Service Agency to seek work or get regular information etc). The need for improvement of the road network in the rural areas is emphasized as high priority, both in lowland villages (51%), as well as in the mountain villages (54%).

Access to education for the children of rural areas is somewhat satisfactory as far as elementary schools are concerned, whereas traveling distance to high schools has a negative impact on it. The phone network (landlines and GSM) covers the entire territory of the country, and a major growth in internet availability from 1.5% household reach in 2000; it rose from 58.3% in 2012 to 82% in 2019. National and local televisions including cable and satellite TV and radio stations are readily available all over the country.

The quality of the physical and social infrastructure in the rural areas has deteriorated over the past few decades as a result of insufficient investment in development and maintenance of the infrastructure. The small and financially weak municipalities face considerable problems to maintain the quality and access to basic services in the small settlements, resulting in smaller satisfaction in quality of life in rural population compared to those living in urban areas.

In 2020 in the National Register of Agricultural Holdings noted 175 088 registered agricultural holdings. Of these, **38 328 have registered women as holders of agricultural households**, according to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy.

According to the economic size, half of the total number of holdings are classified in the smallest, first economic class that makes up to 2.000 euro value from sale of agricultural products per year and contributes the least in the total market value of the realized agricultural output (only 10%). In the second class, ranging from 2.000 to 4.000 euro, there are about 20% of the holdings, in the third from 4.000 to 8.000 euro – 16.3% and lastly, 8.4% have an economic size of 8.000 to 15.000 euro. The holdings from the third class take up the largest share in the total market value of production with 20%. According to the type of agricultural holdings, mixed holdings take up 30% of the total number of 178 125 holdings included in the latest research in 2016, the largest part being mixed crops/livestock holdings (31 409). The remaining 70% specialized holdings generate 60% of the total value of the agricultural output.

The characteristics of agriculture workforce show the share of the total active population employed in agriculture amounted to 13.9% in 2019. Out of 111 033 persons that work in agriculture in total, **35% (38 478) are unpaid family workers**, mostly women, 49% are self-employed and around 15% have regulated employment status. Around 17% (18 379) of the total hired labor in the agriculture have been hired at fixed-term contract or as seasonal workers. More than half of the total workers in the agriculture are hired in horticulture, and the rest work in mixed production and livestock breeding.

Hired labor in the agricultural holdings in the country, calculated in terms of equivalent annual work units, is estimated at 151.5 thousand in 2018. From these, 60% are paid equivalents, and the remaining 40% is labor of hired members of family agricultural holdings, pointing again to the already documented large number of unpaid workers in the family agricultural holdings.

Income of agricultural holdings and impact of state support The net-added

value (NAV), which represents total value generated by the agricultural holdings from their production activity, according to the economic calculations for agriculture has a mild trend of increase in the previous strategic period. The average amount of NAV created by one annual work unit for the period 2014-2018 amounted to around 5.000 euro, which is three times less than the European average, additionally confirming the bad economic state of farmers and the higher rate of poverty in rural areas.

The data of many analysis show that still only a small fraction of women participate in the processes of creating politics and plans for development in their community, and in turn they are excluded from the decision making processes that could impact positively the improvement of their status.

The participation of women and men in the decision making organs is regulated with the legislation in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The Equal Opportunities Act for men and women has provisions on participation of both sexes in commissions and boards, i.e. in the decision-making institutions and bodies, on national and local level, as established to be no smaller than 40%. However, the factual state shows that women do not participate sufficiently in the work of management boards and the legislation on the matter is ignored.

The conducted analysis on the participation of women in the management boards shows that women participation is very small, and in part of the rural areas, women do not participate in the work of management boards at all.

The analyses show that there are almost no women in the role of presidents of local community, although in order to improve the status of women in the community, it is essential that women participate in the decision making processes on the local community level. The community priorities are selected and discussed at this level of citizen organization, and if women are excluded, then their needs and priorities will not be heard, or taken into consideration as priority of their community.

The representation of women in the municipal Councils is one important indicator for the participation of women in the public and political life, especially if you take into account the importance of municipal councils as places where local policies are created and all issues of importance to the municipality are decided on. The participation of women in the municipal Councils is regulated by law. The Electoral code foresees an affirmative measure that enables the participation of both sexes in the Council's work (the same provision applies to the election of MPs), i.e. the provision guarantees that both sexes will be represented by at least 30% in the Municipal Councils. The analyses of the Councils in the rural municipalities show low representation of women as representatives of the Councils, and in some rural municipalities they are even below the level of the provision of the Electoral Code, indicating very little involvement of women in decision-making processes, but also inconsistent compliance with the legislation, i.e. exclusion of women from the decision-making processes in these local self-government units.

The analyses of representation of women as leaders of the local self-government units, show that out of **81 municipalities on the territory of our country, only 6 (six) are led by women**, and only 3 (three) of them have women in position of mayor in a rural municipality.

The life of women in rural areas of our country has changed today, compared to the past, but albeit the positive breakthrough, women in rural area are still a marginalized population in the Macedonian society.

There is not much research on the status role of women in rural areas, especially women farmers in the Republic of North Macedonia and there are not enough tangible data that would illustrate the social and economic position of women as well as their role for the rural communities, although there are many important subject topics that need to be looked into.

The numerous economic and social changes that came about as a result of democracy and the aspirations of our country towards EU membership and towards the positive global trends do not carry the same intensity in every sphere of our life. Hence, in addition to the positive benefits, they brought with them challenges from aspect of equality, i.e. widening the gender gap between women and men, while emphasizing the unequal status and the unequal access to rights and opportunities for women in rural areas versus women in urban areas, as well as the unequal status of women workers in other sectors compared to women farmers, thus emphasizing further their disadvantage in society as a whole.

In order for society to achieve equality of rural women and grant them the status they deserve, it is necessary to secure bigger economic autonomy and independence for them, as well as adequate representation in the political life.

The patriarchal system in the family in terms of decision making and traditional division of male-female jobs and roles are largely still barriers for women in rural areas.

The role of women in the rural areas of our country is still unrecognized and "invisible" to the institutions, although they are the backbone of the rural communities and sustainable rural development.

Understanding, appreciation and affirmation of rural women is needed, as well as support for their economic empowerment and encouragement for a more active involvement in social and cultural life, by enabling them access to rights and institutional support, as well as creation of conditions for their active participation in local planning processes for development.

Methodology

The analysis is conducted on the base of two dimensions, primary and secondary. The collection and analysis of primary data from the field is based on field research and surveyed focus groups, in keeping with a previously prepared questionnaire. The secondary data are obtained on the basis of analysis of the legal framework, programs, strategies and previous research on women in rural areas and women engaged in agriculture on local, national, European and global level.

For the needs of the analysis, a quantitative research was conducted with a semi-structured questionnaire and a qualitative one with the method of focus groups in the rural areas of the municipalities Dolneni, Krivogastani, Krusevo and Prilep. The target group of the quantitative and qualitative research consists of women living in the rural area engaged in agricultural activities, and above 18 years of age.

The main goal of the field research and the focus groups is to get insight into the needs of women in the rural areas for social services and their quality, access to rights from agricultural activity, familiarity with the measures of the relevant programs for support of the agriculture and rural development, as well as the impact of the COVID 19 pandemics on their life.

The completion of the survey questionnaire is anonymous because in that way it may involve more women in the survey and we could obtain more genuine answers. Most of the questions offer a multiple choice of answers with the option to add answers not originally given in the offered choice.

The first part of the research was conducted during the months of September and October 2020 on the territory of four municipalities (Dolneni, Krivogastani, Krusevo and Prilep – rural part), encompassing 400 women with address on the target territory and the second part of the research was carried out in March 2021, and it included 100 women living on the territory of the aforementioned municipalities.

The analysis of the answers to the survey questionnaire and the surveyed focus groups yielded the results, presented in the form of a diagram and/or info graphic.

The analysis is based on quantitative indicators, and for their breakdown and supplementation we use qualitative data from the research and the focus group discussions carried out for the needs of this study.

The results of the research are complemented with comparative analysis from other countries, so as to consider the broader context of possibilities for economic and social promotion of the life of women in the rural areas.

Research results

The total number of participants in the field research was 400, spanning in age from 18 to 74 years. Most of the respondents (29%) are aged 40-49 years, and the smallest share (3.75%) is the group over the age of 70. The participation of the respondents according to age is given in the following table

Age	Number of respondents	%
18 – 29	87	21.75
30 – 39	98	24.5
40 – 49	116	29
50 – 59	47	11.75
60 - 69	37	9.25
Over the age of 70	15	3.75
Total	400	100.00

Level of education and vocational training has a considerable influence on the empowerment of women in the rural areas in terms of professional development and economic independence. The largest share of participants (53.25%) has completed high school; the number of higher education graduates (bachelor diploma, master, and doctorate) is 91 (22.75%), versus 96 (24%) respondents with primary education and incomplete secondary education.

Level of education	Number of respondents	%
Only primary education	96	24
Secondary education	213	53.25
Higher education (bachelor)	11	2.75
Higher education (master)	75	18.75
Magister	5	1.25
Doctorat	0	0
Total	400	100

The income in the family plays an important role in the quality of life of all members of the family. The analysis has shown that most female respondents, who are actively engaged in the agricultural production where they generate their living income from, live on the poverty line as a result of the COVID 19

pandemics and the belated financial support from the national programs.

Average monthly income in your family (during COVID 19):	Number of repondents	%
up to 10.000 MKD	58	14.5
10.000 - 20.000 MKD	85	21.25
20.000 - 30.000 MKD	88	22
30.000 - 40.000 MKD	17	4.25
40.000 - 50.000 MKD	10	2.5
over 50.000 MKD	12	3
I do not now	66	16.5
Prefer not to answer	64	16

Most respondents (**57.75%**) have insufficient income for dignified life and their needs, according to the market basket of consumer goods, versus 9.75% respondents that can meet their basic needs for living. Part of the respondents (16.5%) does not know their family income, and 16% refused to answer the question.

The standard of living is closely connected with the possibilities for social activities. A low rate of social inclusion is noted in women from the elderly group with a low level of education. 84% of respondents own a cell phone, and 74% of households own computers. 78% of the respondents have Internet access.

The social infrastructure is a challenge for the inhabitants of rural areas, especially the women. In part of the target municipalities where the research was conducted, respondents face limited access to information from social institutions and the municipalities lack social workers (Municipality of Krivogastani, Municipality of Dolneni). In this way, residents are forced to travel over 30km to visit the regional centre, in order to receive information and use their rights to social security. **Complete lack of kindergartens, centers for care for people with disabilities, care for the elderly etc leads to women taking over the entire care for the family members.** This increases additionally the burden on women in the rural areas for family care, while having the economic activities in the agriculture.

A large share of the respondents (38%) are not satisfied at all from the social infrastructure, because they are denied access to the social welfare programs, 45% are partially satisfied, and 17% of women have received the social protection rights and are satisfied from the access to social services and rights.

8% of the surveyed respondents do not have any health coverage, while 60% are not part of the retirement insurance system. **Because of lack of money, women who are unpaid workers on family farms are unable to pay their own pension insurance (84%).**

With the demographic change, many rural areas lack access to public and medical infrastructure. The economic state of the country, the rural depopulation, youth migration, and drain of highly qualified professionals to other countries, all of this has a negative impact on the provision of health services and health care. The elderly people are in a particularly difficult situation in the rural areas with neglected access to health care.

On the question how satisfied they are from the health care access, data shows that 20% are forced to seek health care over 20 km away from their residence. Given the state of the health care system locally, regionally and nationally, 60% of the respondents are partially satisfied with the health care access, 20% of the respondents are not satisfied from the health infrastructure. Especially, there is a focus on the need to access primary health care, i.e. a rural doctor, access to a gynecologist, dentist, and the existence of an emergency ward with ambulance as an absolute necessity.

A major challenge for rural women actively engaged in agriculture is maternity and the right to paid pregnancy and maternity leave.

Maternity care is vital to the promotion of health, nutrition and wellbeing of mothers and their children, and it represents the first key step from the comprehensive set of care policies that promote economic empowerment of women, prevent informalization of workforce and allow individual and societies to advance, especially in light of demographic transitions. The social benefits during pregnancy, childbirth and maternity that ensure security of income are the basic component for protection of motherhood. Still, they cover a minority of women in North Macedonia, i.e. a small percentage of the workforce -workers in the formal economy are effectively protected with paid compensation in the event of maternity.

Out of all surveyed respondents, **21% used the right to paid maternity leave**, 19% of them are women who have been employed in the public or private sector, and have agriculture as their secondary activity. The remaining **2% are women employed in the family agricultural holdings, registered as business entities with a status of a legal subject, whose primary activity is agriculture. From the remaining 79% of women who have not been granted the right to paid maternity leave, 31% had the status of unemployed workers, and the other 48% are registered as individual farmers and have the status of employed workers.**

Due to economic pressures and lack of income security, most women engaged in the agriculture are not able to afford cutting the amount of their work considerably before and after giving birth, so as a consequence they continue their work activities in late pregnancy too, or begin work too early after giving birth, thus exposing themselves and their children to considerable health risks, such as early labor, miscarriage etc.

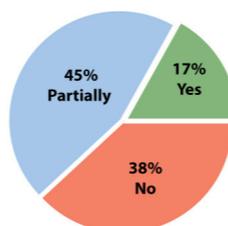
The survey carried out on 100 women actively involved in agriculture, aged 20-45 years yielded the following data:

36 of them had pathological pregnancy diagnosed as early as the first trimester, but 22 of them went on with lighter agricultural activities to the very date of giving birth, so as to secure their income.

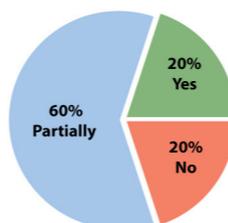
ACCESS TO RIGHTS AND SERVICES FOR RURAL WOMEN



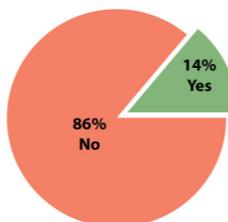
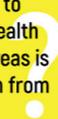
Are you satisfied with the access to social protection in your area?



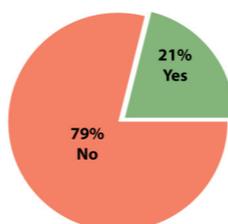
Are you satisfied with the access to health protection in your area?



Do you consider that the access to rights of economic, social and health protection for women in rural areas is equal to the access for women from urban areas?



Have you ever used (paid) maternal leave?



From the respondents, fourteen admitted that, as a consequence of physical activity (agricultural activities), they suffered a miscarriage, and twelve had early labor.

The increased workload on the agricultural holding was the reason for fifty four respondents to start agricultural activities just two months after childbirth.

Due to their inability to provide simultaneous care for the child while earning an income, a large number of them stopped breastfeeding and for reasons of material insecurity began bottle-feeding the baby with cow's milk from the

third month from birth, and some of them due to lack of breast milk started supplementing baby's nutrition with toasted flour and semolina from the 40th day of the birth.

Most of the babies born had health issues: decreased immunity, obstructions, bronchitis, decreased visual acuity, etc.

The research detected the problem of **(lacking) right to use paid sick leave, or paid leave of absence for care for oneself, a child or a family member.** This makes the rural woman workload even heavier, reducing the care for her health, due to existential pressure.

A high percentage of the respondents, i.e. **86% of women in rural areas believe they are facing limited opportunities in every sphere of living**, and that they lack equal access to rights and opportunities that women in urban areas have. A low percentage (14%) of respondents (women living in the rural areas bordering the urban part of Prilep) have expressed the sentiment that they have access to the same rights and opportunities as women of urban areas.

The research results detect patriarchal family unit as dominant in a large portion of the respondents' families, reflecting in ownership structure of the property or economy.

Only 28% of the participants in the survey responded that they have property and/or land on their own name, or 8% are real estate proprietors, whereas 16% own land, 2% own a family farm and 2% own both property and land.

An interesting data in part of the answers denotes ownership of land or property on the name of the son, and zero answers state a daughter owning estate or land.

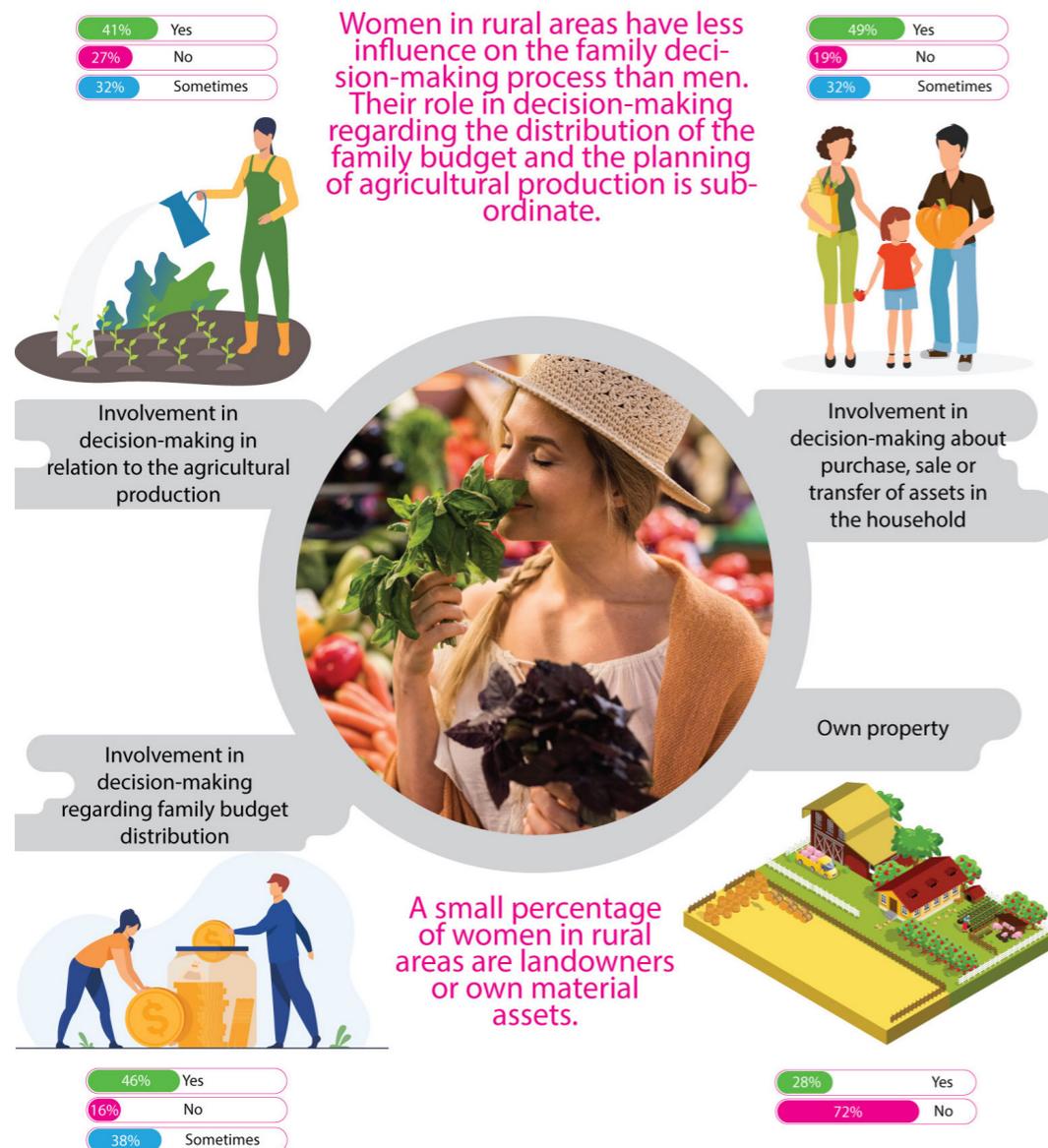
Active employment in agricultural activities is from 8 to 10 hours a day in 38% of the respondents and more than 10 hours in a large portion of respondents (31%); in addition to the time for care for their home and family, it emphasizes the long-term and physically exhausting activity of rural women.

Despite their involvement in agricultural work and activities, 27% of respondents answered that they do not participate in decisions related to agricultural production. On investment issues, buying or selling property and / or equipment, 32% of respondents are sometimes consulted, whereas only 46% of respondents make decisions on the family allocation budget. This limits their capacity to contribute to a better life, and to use the new opportunities for individual and family progress, and sustainable development of the community.

Empowering women to participate fully in the household and community decision-making leads to improved wellbeing and it opens opportunities for the next generations to decrease poverty of the future generations and to contribute to long term socio-economic development.

Analyses at national level indicate that women from urban areas participate in a larger percentage in raising local initiatives and their execution; also, their representation in the institutions and decision-making bodies is much higher compared to the women in rural areas.

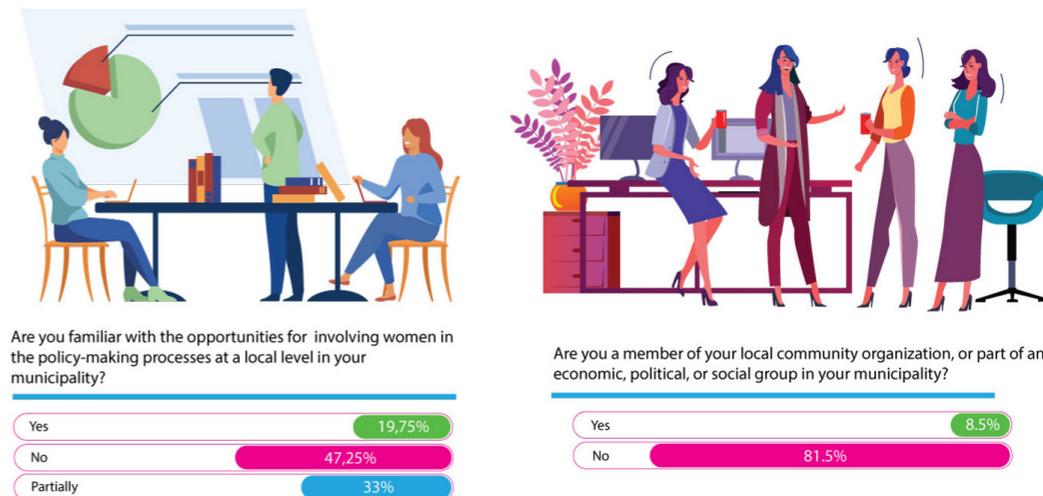
Involvement of rural women in the household decision-making process



Only 19.75% of respondent are familiar with the opportunities for active participation in the processes of creation of politics at local level, 33% of them are partially familiar, and a large portion of 47.25% are not familiar at all and they have a stereotypical view on the role of the woman as agent of change in society.

Most common ways to participate in the community decision making processes are the activities in a political party and the municipal meetings/debates/ public discussions.

Not one of the 400 female respondents is part of the Municipal Council or a board member of a public institution. There is a lack of interest and a low level of women awareness for participation in the creation of public policies on a local level, as well as inexistence of the organized female action for improvement of the position of the rural woman in society, contributing to the creation of conditions for disregard of the legislation for women representation in the decision making processes on local level.



The insufficient flow of information has a negative impact on the socio-economic status of women in the rural areas.

The work obligations, low level of digital literacy in the older population, followed by the low rate of information flow for development of profitable agriculture and available opportunities in the rural areas via the media, disable timely activities and intervention for improvement of the quality of life in rural areas.

A considerable amount of women in rural areas (49.12%) are not informed on the possibilities to receive advisory and financial support through the National Program for agriculture and rural development.

The majority (51.13%) of the respondents is not familiar with the possibilities for project finances with the support of the European Union funds. A large proportion of respondents were not informed on the possibilities of the IPARD program, through the measures created for support of economic activities in agriculture with a special focus on support of women. At the same time, they also stated that they need informative and advisory support for their applying to use existing measures.

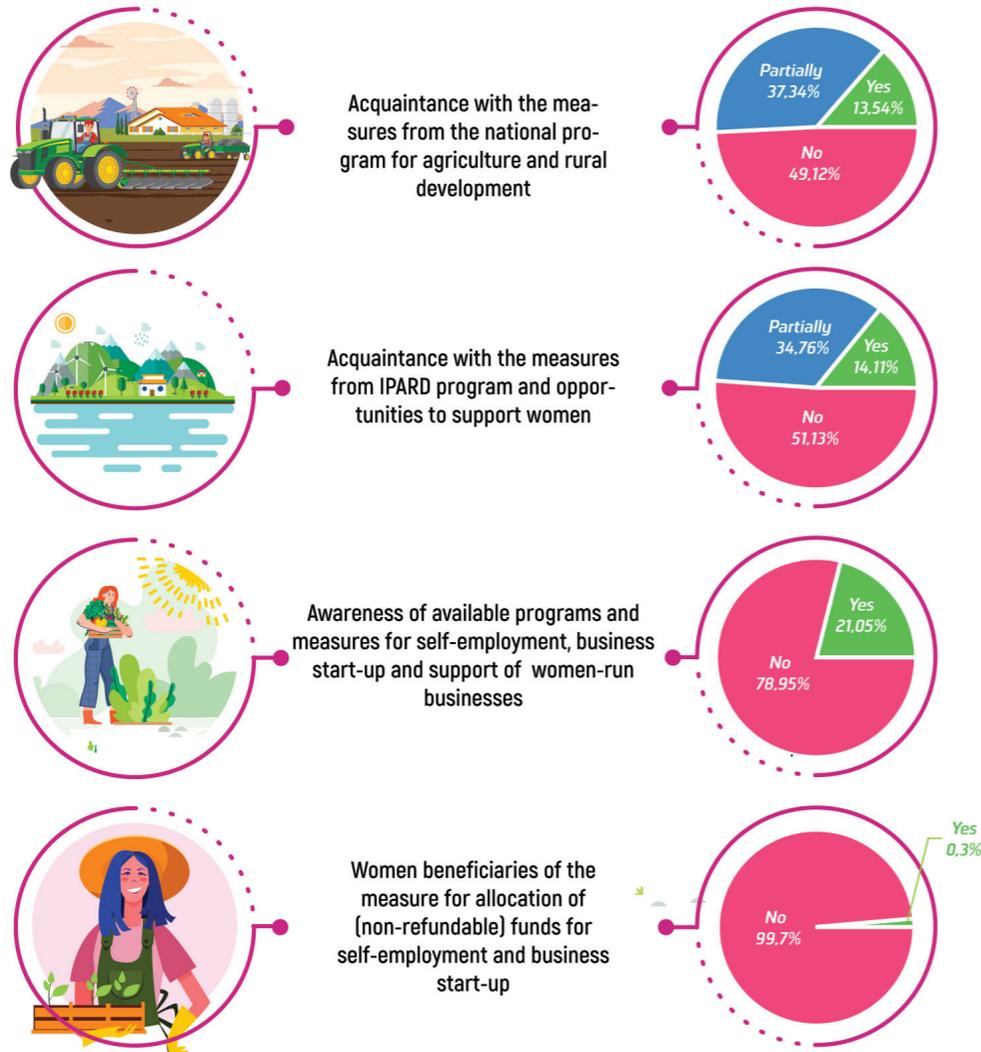
Only 21.05% of the respondents had information on the available programs and measures for self-employment, starting a business and support of women-led businesses.

Of 400 women included in the survey, just one had started her own business through the self-employment program. It is important to note that 72% of the respondents are not informed about the Measure 115- Support for an active female member of the agricultural household created with the aim to

eliminate gender inequality and empower women through the support for increasing agricultural productivity, which contributes to the development of the entire community.

AWARENESS OF WOMEN FROM RURAL AREAS ABOUT SUPPORT MEASURES AND ACTIVITIES

Women in rural areas are confronted with lack of availability of information on measures and activities that are fully or partially intended for them, whose use would make a significant contribution to improving their socio-economic status and development of rural women into successful entrepreneurs.

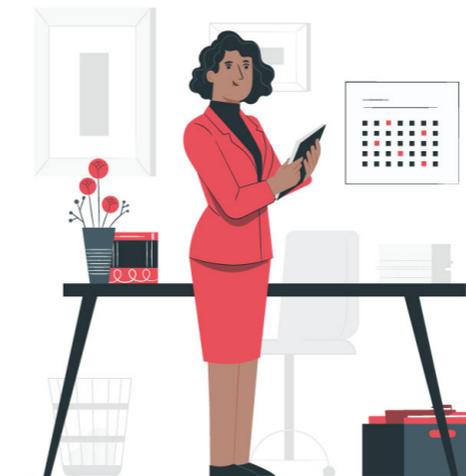


The women in the rural area fall in marginalized groups, and some of the reasons for this are the traditional norms that hinder their development.

Although a significant progress has been noted in the economic empowerment of women in the rural areas and their greater involvement and decision-making power, still there are a number of challenges that restrain their aspirations for professional development as a main route towards social and

economic empowerment, and active participation in all segments of life.

The participants in the research for the most part (98%) identified women stereotypes (16%), domestic and family obligations (32%) lack of financial and institutional support for women entrepreneurs (15%), lack of institutional support for women employees (13%) lack of job positions in the rural areas women qualify for (11%), as well as lack of qualified women (6%), and adequate mentors for job positions (5%), as key obstacles for professional advancement of women in the rural areas. Only 2% of respondents have stated that there are no obstacles for career advancement for women in the rural areas.



Which are the obstacles to the professional advancement of women and girls in your community?

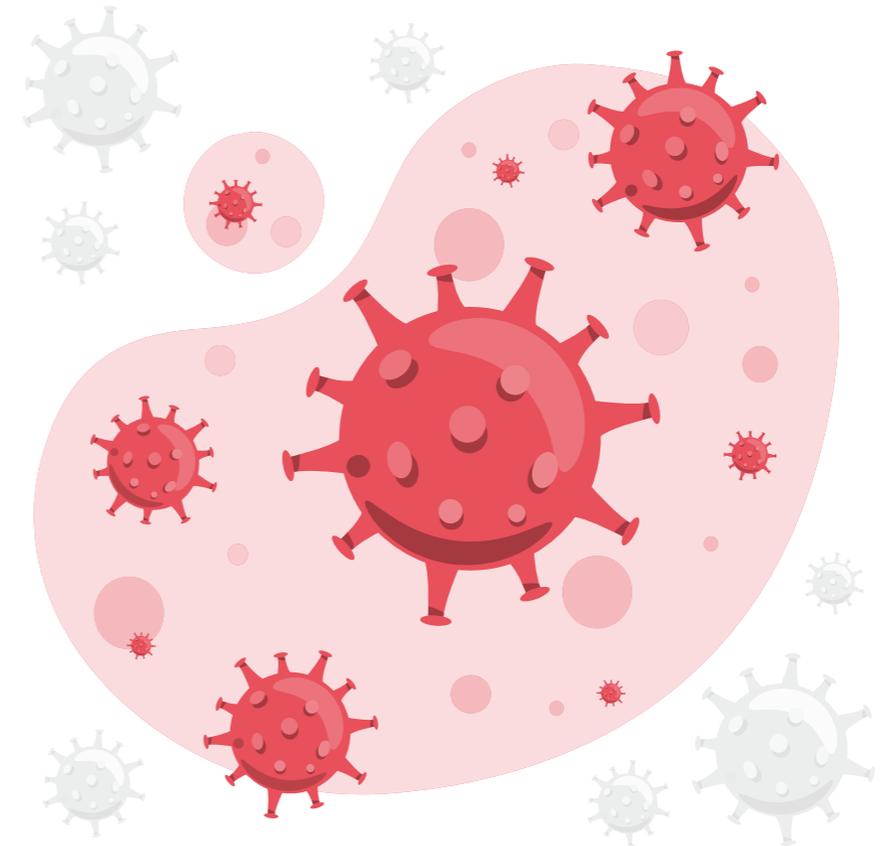


Part of the respondents offered their recommendations for devising measures that can make a valuable contribution to ensuring social and health care, gender equality, protection against discrimination and economic empowerment of rural women.

Some of the recommendations are as follows:

1. Improving the health and social infrastructure
2. Providing paid sick leave benefits for registered farmers
3. Providing paid compensation during pregnancy, childbirth and maternity for registered farmers
4. Improving the legislation on inheritance
5. Subsidizing agricultural holdings
6. Increasing the number of jobs in rural areas
7. Improving the rural infrastructure related to the development of agriculture
8. Education, promotion and training of people in the villages
9. Establishment of mobile information and advisory teams in rural municipalities
10. Support for women entrepreneurship.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rural woman



"We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."

Martin Luther King Jr

Macedonian women in rural areas are affected disproportionately, because the COVID-19 pandemic additionally increased the existing structural, economic, social and technological inequalities.

From unpaid domestic workers to subsistence and seasonal farmers, the rural women who are often part of the informal economy, working in unsafe conditions, achieving lower income, without any protection from labor laws, social benefits, health insurance or paid sick leave are most affected by the socio-economic effects of the pandemic.

The research of LAG AGRO LIDER detected the following challenges that rural women face during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- ***Inaccessibility of information on COVID-19, as well as late information on the safety measures for protection and prevention against COVID-19 and the introduction of quarantine throughout the country***
- ***Unsecured support and protection against misinformation***
- ***Difficult access to health care and social welfare***
- ***Job loss***
- ***Inability to use sick leave allowance for women with the status of a registered individual farmer***
- ***Increase in unpaid home duties including care for a sick family member, as well as the obligation to connect in and supervise the children's virtual education program with the introduction of distance learning***
- ***Increase in gender "gap"***
- ***Decrease of revenues (from 30% to 80%) as a result of the closure of local fruit and vegetable markets***
- ***Recommendations for physical distance had a negative impact on women who are actively involved in agricultural activities. Since women do not have the same capacity as men for physical work, they carry out the activities with mutual help. Fear from the virus, physical distance and social isolation at the critical period of the agricultural cycle contributed to the negative consequences on the agricultural yields.***
- ***Existential insecurity due to limited opportunities for access to resources needed for production due to decreased revenue and limit in the chain of suppliers***
- ***A large portion of the women farmers (76%) taking part in the survey, answered that they live in poverty as a result of the economic situation negatively impacted by COVID-19***
- ***Late payout of subsidies, decreased revenue, increase of the living expenses, in combination with the exclusion of rural women from the economic measures of the Government for dealing with the consequences of COVID -19 has deepened the existing unfavorable economic conditions of the rural women in the Macedonian society.***

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the existing challenges and battles of rural women, which encouraged the countries in the world to focus political interventions and create measures according to the specific needs of the rural women, aware that women involved in agriculture play a key role in the alleviation of the current economic fall, in the acceleration of the recovery from the negative impact of the pandemic in the rural areas and in decrease of the existing gender inequalities.

- In the Republic of North Macedonia, the current pandemic set back the progress made in improving the socio-economic situation of rural women, and the many gains that have been made are still at risk of being lost, if no initiatives for health and social protection, gender equality and economic empowerment of rural women are undertaken immediately.

Conclusions

The analysis has shown that rural women face a host of serious barriers for access to important social services, health care rights and economic benefits that restrain them from attaining better living conditions and developing their potentials for a sustainable community development.

On the basis of the presented data, several general conclusions can be drawn on the position of rural women in the Macedonian society:

- **Gender inequality between women and men is especially emphasized in the rural areas.** Rural women give significant contribution to the development of rural communities in all the regions, however, they face more restrictions than men on access to key production resources, such as land and services, then access to finance, property rights, land or equipment and aids; they face discrimination in terms of their participation in the labor market and the remuneration or salaries for their work, unpaid work on domestic chores, low level of involvement in the family decision making process, etc. The equal access to resources and opportunities and empowering women to participate fully in the household and community decision making processes leads to progress and an improved outlook for the future generations, decreasing the poverty for posterity and contributing to the long-term socio-economic development. Therefore, closing the “gender gap” for access to assets, resources, services and opportunities has been identified as one of the most effective approaches to combating rural poverty.

- **The availability of the health services is low, accompanied by inability to access health care rights in accordance with international recommendations, as well as a low level of health insurance.** The majority of rural women and rural inhabitants in general must travel to the city for medical specialist examinations, visits to gynecologist, dental checkups and procurement of prescription drugs, so as a result, many of them delay regular health assessments and cut on their own health care.

- **The inability to exercise the right to paid compensation in case of illness and work incapacity for rural women registered as individual farmers or holders of family farms,** further aggravates their position, and brings them into health and existential risk.

-The triple load from the reproductive, productive and the social sphere deepens with the burden of **unpaid leave due to pregnancy, childbirth and maternity for women registered as individual farmers or holders of family farms.**

Maternal protection is a fundamental right of working women provided for in key universal human rights treaties. In the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights it is stated that mothers and children are entitled to a special care and assistance, as well as social security. In the International Covenant on Eco-

conomic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR2) of 1966 a special maternal protection is included for part of the period before and after childbirth together with paid leave or leave with appropriate social benefits. The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women – CEDAW calls for special measures to guarantee maternity protection, acknowledged as essential and fundamental right. Maternity protection is of paramount importance for the International Labor Organization (ILO) following the adoption of the first Maternity Protection Convention in 1919. Maternity protection is accompanied by the right to financial compensation during maternity leave, a right guaranteed in the legislative framework in many countries. In North Macedonia this right is regulated in the Law on Labor Relations and the Law on Health Insurance. However, women registered as individual farmers or holders of family farms, despite their status of health insured persons, are not entitled to health benefits under the national legal framework.

- **Social welfare services are largely unavailable for a higher percentage of the rural population,** which relies traditionally the provision of social services on its own resources.

Due to complete lack of social infrastructure, or small capacity of the existing social infrastructure, rural women are taking over the full-time care for their children as well as care for the elderly in the family and / or persons with disabilities that are part of their family. Discrimination against rural women may be indicated due to difficulties in exercising social welfare rights, difficulties in accessing social services, limited opportunities for access to higher education and retraining programs. A large number of rural women are not informed and have no knowledge of the social security rights, as well as on the application procedures for any measure of social welfare. Therefore, they are unable to exercise their rights from the social sphere, due to limited access to information in combination with the local authorities’ disregard for the law recommendations on providing a social worker in the service of the rural population. The low level of awareness on the importance of pension and disability insurance, as well as the procedure to regulate social security should be highlighted.

- **The participation of rural women in decision-making processes is at a very low level locally.** There is an unfavorable environment to establish equal opportunities for women and men as well as their promotion in separate areas of social life, which is determined in the unequal representation of both sexes in the processes of policy making and decision making for programs and interventions of development at the local level. Low awareness and disinterest of women about participation in the creation of public policies at the local level, followed by lack of political will on the part of local authorities to involve women in political and public life and disregard for the legislation on the representation of women in decision-making processes, all lead to the inability to achieve full equality of the rural woman in society.

Unlike the majority of the population, and in spite of the introduction of poverty reduction programs, **the economic situation of rural women and agricultural holdings shows that they live in relative poverty.** Due to inadequate

distribution of statistical data, it is difficult to determine how much worse the economic situation of women in rural areas is in relation to that of the average of women in urban areas. This makes it impossible to create programs and measures that would respond to the real needs of rural women.

- The economic position of women is unfavorable and their access to services for economic empowerment is limited. **Women in rural areas stand a slim chance to be employed outside from the household and in the non-agricultural sectors of the economy.** It is important to note that there are no job positions that correspond to professional orientation of women in rural areas, so despite their educational status and professional affiliation, they are involved in low productivity agricultural activities, and many of them do not make an income of their own.

-Employment support services and economic empowerment through formal and informal programs and vocational trainings are poorly available in rural areas. Programs for acquiring new knowledge and skills, especially programs that would be tailored to local economic conditions and goals for development do not exist at all. Hence, it ignores the fact that for local development and reduction of disparity between urban and rural areas, human resources are crucial. Women in rural areas have the potential to diversify the economy, but they need information, education and mentoring programs and support to create sustainable diversification of the rural economy at a local level.

- **There is poor access to information on support programs for employment and self-employment,** so rural women are unable to realize their development projects and to secure their economic independence through entrepreneurship and self-employment.

- **Awareness of rural women on available programs and measures that are designed to create favorable conditions and opportunities for women in rural areas is low,** as indicated by the small percentage of participating women in the use of these support measures. There are a number of measures from the National Program for Support of Agriculture and Rural Development, but also from the EU program IPARD which are directly or indirectly aimed at supporting rural women, but their rate of utilization is low. There is scarcity of information, advisory services and institutional support for capacity building of the rural women through good practices, modernization and digitalization in order to achieve agricultural development and sustainable rural development.

Services that are important for establishing a quality living standard, quality of life and socio-cultural participation are not readily available for rural women. The data indicate **existing forms of deprivation of rural women from the aspect of social protection, health care, education, economy, culture and public participation.**

Measures focused on **creating decent jobs** are required, such as **entrepreneurship training and access to education, infrastructure and finances.** Likewise, **safeguarding rural women from unacceptable forms of work, strengthening health care and social welfare, and respect for their voice in politics and public life and closing the discrimination gap** is considered necessary. These are all key elements needed for transformative action in the direction of improving the situation of rural women in the Macedonian society.

“Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.”

Martin Luther King Jr

Rural women - THEY who have the greatest responsibility for feeding and growing the next generations are left without support though they daily face a number of challenges and are hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is time to recognize the significant contribution they make to our families, communities and our country, and to ensure that they are supported and protected, especially in this uncertain time.

Recommendations

In order to ensure gender equality, social justice, livelihood and economic independence of rural women, sustainable and inclusive rural development should be achieved through a stimulating economic environment and quality living conditions. Such a comprehensive approach implies acting in several directions - economic, social and cultural sphere; action at several levels - national, local and rural community level; as well as the active participation of various stakeholders.

This approach meets the goals and priorities of the EU in terms of gender equality, protection against discrimination, the fight against poverty and social exclusion, economic growth and more.

In accordance with international values, and based on the results of the analysis of the position of rural women in Macedonian society, the following recommendations have been identified, listed in order of priority:

Recommendations aimed at exercising rights and improving the quality of health care services

- Exercising the right to compensation for sick leave for individual farmers
- Exercising the right to compensation for leave due to pregnancy, childbirth and maternity for women with the status of a registered individual farmer
- Increasing the coverage of health insurance for women in rural areas
- Increasing the availability of preventive health care and health promotion in remote rural areas.

Recommendations aimed at exercising rights and improving the quality of social protection services

- Reducing the gender “gap” in rural areas
- Raising awareness of the importance of pension and disability insurance and increasing awareness of the possibilities for regulating this form of insurance
- Increased availability of social protection services
- Increasing the availability of childcare and care services, care for children with disabilities, as well as care for the elderly
- promoting the involvement of women in decision-making processes at national and local level

Recommendations aimed at economic empowerment of rural women

- Creating active employment measures according to the needs and potential of rural women
- Support for women entrepreneurship and self-employment
- Establishment of institutional infrastructure
- Support for independent “projects” of women in family holdings
- Facilitated access to property and land ownership
- Improving the potential of rural women involved in agricultural production by supporting their access to production inputs, modern technologies and providing access to a modern agricultural production market
- Support to civil society organizations that will offer advisory and mentoring support

In order to reduce the negative consequences of COVID-19 on rural women working in agriculture, it is necessary to establish **gender-sensitive policies** through:

- Provided access to information and counseling support for women
- Expansion of health care and social welfare programs, including financial compensation for sick leave and financial support for a dignified life
- Provided access of women farmers to fruit and vegetable markets and agricultural resources
- Digitalization of the agricultural market through networking of small producers with consumers
- Introduction of incentive packages and subsidies for agricultural holdings

In order to limit current and future income uncertainty, the Macedonian government should consider *expanding access to unemployment benefits for vulnerable groups, including women farmers, as well as providing them with financial support that ensures that their agricultural holdings would outperform the negative effects of the crisis.*

It is important to invest in women’s leadership in rural areas so that they could actively participate and contribute to the design of policy programs for dealing with and overcoming future crises.

The rights and empowerment of women must be a key element of the pandemic response in order to achieve social and economic prosperity and long-term resilience, and the active participation of the civil society in this process is a necessity.

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