Executive Summary

The decision of the Thirty-sixth Session of the European Commission on Agriculture in 2010 to dedicate a permanent standing item in the agenda to review the progress made in addressing gender equality concerns in the work of the Organization in the region aimed to ensure that through regular updates, the attention, support and commitment of Members to this critical topic would be maintained. This paper provides an update to the Members on the progress made by the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia in advancing gender equality in its mainstream work in the region, highlighting some of its key activities, outputs and immediate plans. This includes the adoption of the Regional Gender Action Plan, which will guide the work at regional, subregional and country levels for 2023–2026. Despite the signs of positive developments as a result of FAO interventions at policy and community levels, significant gaps remain. To accelerate progress, address current challenges and prevent backsliding, more systematic and concerted actions are required from multiple actors in supporting the empowerment of rural women and girls.

The European Commission on Agriculture Members are invited to comment on the paper and validate its conclusions, and they are kindly invited to promote this theme in their respective countries through mainstream organizations and institutions relevant to agrifood systems, contribute to awareness, mobilize support and actively contribute to the realization of the recommendations presented in paragraphs 35–37 in this paper.
I. Introduction

1. Gender equality is a prerequisite for the eradication of poverty and food insecurity and ensuring the sustainability of food systems; for this reason, FAO regional governing bodies have been attaching significant importance to gender equality considerations. The Thirty-sixth Session of the European Commission on Agriculture in 2010 decided that the progress made in mainstreaming gender and social inclusion in the work of FAO in the region should be a permanent standing item on the agenda of the Commission. The objective of the decision was to ensure that through regular reporting and adequate attention, the commitment of the Members to this critical theme of agrifood systems will be continuously maintained and a platform provided to discuss challenges, find solutions and facilitate the exchange of best practices in mainstreaming gender into FAO interventions. This decision remains particularly relevant in view of the commitments made by FAO Members towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls is not only an explicit standalone goal under the 2030 Agenda but also a catalyst, driver and accelerator for sustainable and socially inclusive and just development, critical for achieving other goals.

2. The Forty-second Session of the European Commission on Agriculture\(^1\) made an important point, recommending that the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia adopt a gender transformative approach, strengthen evidence relevant to agriculture and rural development, and conduct thorough analyses of gender gaps and their origins so that interventions address structural barriers that rural women face in accessing resources (including inputs, knowledge and skills) that are critical for agricultural production. Reflecting on persistent but also emerging challenges, such as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in the region and the impacts of climate change, the Thirty-third Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe,\(^2\) held in May 2022, recommended that the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia further improve the mainstreaming of gender equality and women’s empowerment into all work in the region.

3. As part of this reporting process, and in an effort to strengthen the further mainstreaming of gender into policies and programming, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia prepared this background paper for the consideration of the Members. The purposes of this document are:

(1) to provide updates to the Members on the gender programming and progress on key activities for moving towards gender-transformative approaches. The work, *inter alia*, includes the development and approval of the new Regional Gender Equality Action Plan (ReGAP) for 2023–2026. The ReGAP aims to enable and pursue a gender transformative approach and implement targeted economic, social and environmental programmes that empower rural women, overcoming persistent barriers that hinder progress among Members towards achieving the SDGs; and

(2) to provide policy recommendations and mobilize action to address structural barriers identified by the regional thematic knowledge products and the country gender assessments, paying attention to the regional challenges due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

II. Development and operationalization of the Regional Gender Equality Action Plan 2023–2026 for Europe and Central Asia

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\(^2\) For information from the Thirty-third Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe, please see https://www.fao.org/events/detail/erc33/en.
4. The FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia adopted its new ReGAP for 2023–2026, assigning concrete actions for the implementation of the updated FAO Gender Policy 2020–2030, aligning itself with the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031 over the upcoming three years. The Strategic Framework 2022–2031 emphasizes gender, youth and inclusion as crosscutting themes and identifies gender equality and rural women’s empowerment as a standalone programme priority area. This is in coordination with the newly updated FAO Gender Policy 2020–2030, which re-commits to a twin track approach – gender mainstreaming and targeted interventions – and raises the ambition towards the adoption of gender-transformative approaches, requiring going beyond merely improving rural women’s access to sustainable livelihoods but also highlighting and challenging the very norms that perpetuate inequalities.

5. The ReGAP provides a framework for gender-specific work at regional, subregional and country levels and builds on an analysis of the trends and priorities identified by 12 country gender assessments of agriculture and the rural sector conducted in the region in recent years (and also a review of the available data for reports coming in the near future, information regarding which is provided below in this paper). These reports generated a body of information about key gender gaps and priority issues among Members and involved comprehensive consultations with country offices, gender focal points and their alternates, and FAO technical staff in the region. During the preparations, stakeholders provided inputs through a regional workshop convened in November 2022; the draft then was presented and discussed with technical officers from the region in February 2023. Additionally, FAOs headquarters’ Inclusive Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division reviewed the document and provided support in finalizing the action plan.

6. The plan builds on the progress, achievements and lessons learned from the Regional Gender Equality Strategy for Europe and Central Asia 2019–2022, taking into account persistent and new challenges emerging in the region in recent years, such as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate change. It responds to the recommendations of the Thirty-third Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe to improve the social sustainability and inclusivity of agrifood systems by empowering women as agents of change. Finally, it builds on the FAO Report on the Status of Women in Agrifood Systems, released in April 2023. The global report represents an update to The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–2011 on women in agriculture. The report shows how gender equality and women’s empowerment are central to the transition towards sustainable and resilient agrifood systems and how the transformation of agrifood systems can contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment.

7. While the overarching objective of the FAO Gender Equality Policy 2020–2030 is achieving equality between women and men in sustainable agriculture and rural development for the elimination of hunger and poverty, the ReGAP aims to translate this into the context of its work in the region in order to:

(i) contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment towards the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems, in line with the FAO Policy on Gender Equality 2020–2030 and the FAO Strategic Framework; and

(ii) minimize gender-related risks, respond to new and emerging challenges and safeguard and advance rural women’s rights in all actions.

8. To reach these objectives, the ReGAP prioritizes concrete actions and focuses on promoting gender-transformative approaches that address the structural causes of inequalities, such as discriminatory
gender roles and harmful practices, and thus are essential to achieving food security and eradicating rural poverty, contributing to the following regional and country-specific outputs:

a) Policies for agrifood systems supporting the inclusion of women and men are enabled through knowledge building, awareness raising and experience sharing.

b) Capacities are enhanced in the region and FAO programme countries to formulate, implement and monitor gender-responsive and transformative agrifood policies and programmes.

c) Agrifood systems are more efficient, resilient and sustainable. Women have access to markets, knowledge and innovation, and they have sufficient control over natural and productive resources.

9. The plan has clear indicators for outputs, which should facilitate monitoring and reporting on the progress made. The senior management team approved the ReGAP on 3 May 2023. The responsibility for the implementation of the plan is with the regional management team, FAO Representatives (FAORs) and Assistant FAORs (AFAORs), with support from FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia gender focal points and alternates and regional, subregional and country technical and project staff and with technical support from the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia Gender Team and national gender consultants available in some FAO country offices (e.g. Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye).

10. Currently, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia is in the process of recruiting a gender officer (P4 level) to lead the gender work in the region and act as a resource in implementing the Gender Action Plan. The recruitment process is expected to be concluded by the end of 2023.

III. Key activities towards gender-transformative approaches

11. The data and evidence are essential to identify and address systemic gender inequalities and effectively design interventions that promote gender equality and social inclusion through gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches. The FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia continues its efforts in strengthening the evidence base and collecting country-specific and thematic gender statistics to inform policymaking, programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

12. Over the reporting period, national gender assessments were conducted in the countries and territories of the region in compliance with the FAO minimum standards. This includes published assessments for Azerbaijan\textsuperscript{10} and Republic of Moldova,\textsuperscript{11} draft assessments of Kazakhstan and Belarus (in progress) and updated versions of the assessments for Albania and Tajikistan. The above-mentioned reports represent comprehensive analytical reviews of the gender-specific issues of rural populations and overall agrifood systems, including the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate change-related challenges and pressures.

13. Based on an analysis of the country gender assessments produced in recent years, a comprehensive regional review of gender issues has been prepared and made available for policymakers, civil society and academia.\textsuperscript{12} This was partially reflected in a background paper presented to the Forty-second Session of the European Commission on Agriculture on advancing gender equality in the region.\textsuperscript{13}

14. During the last biennium, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia prioritized the generation of knowledge products, driven largely by the movement restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, starting from the previous year, the focus and activities of the


\textsuperscript{13} This report to the Forty-second Session of the European Commission on Agriculture is available at https://www.fao.org/3/nif094en/nif094en.pdf.
current Gender Action Plan is shifting towards raising awareness, engaging in policy dialogues and implementing capacity-building initiatives in the countries. These efforts aim to effectively utilize new knowledge products and policy briefs while addressing the new challenges arising from the deprioritization of women’s equality issues due to emerging macroeconomic and geopolitical concerns and the associated setbacks. Thematic gender-related knowledge products play a crucial role in agrifood systems by providing evidence-based recommendations for the development of inclusive and targeted policies and programmes for fostering the economic empowerment of women in agriculture and related sectors. To bridge existing gaps, a series of region-specific knowledge products are currently being finalized.

15. This encompasses:

   a) the first-ever overview of rural advisory services in the region from a gender perspective;
   b) the first-ever study that reviews the situation in fisheries and aquaculture from a gender perspective in five member countries of the Central Asian and Caucasus Regional Fisheries and Aquaculture Commission (CACFISH);
   c) the first-ever study on trade and gender, which will examine the role of women in specific export-oriented agrifood value chains; and
   d) a regional study and policy brief on the gender, socioeconomic and health dimensions of the impacts of pesticide use. A regional overview on how FAO can assist in improving social protection for rural communities in Europe and Central Asia and a policy brief on improving social protection for rural populations in Europe and Central Asia have been released and made available online for the public.

16. A regional resource guide on gender mainstreaming in climate investments in the agriculture, forestry and other land use sectors in the region has been published online. The resource guide is the result of extensive collaboration and experience sharing between FAO and national counterparts. It highlights six region-specific promising practices from Global Environment Facility experiences.

17. Effective gender mainstreaming for achieving the sustainable and profound impacts of development interventions requires regular, systematic and continuous learning based on region-specific data and knowledge. This process supports the formulation and implementation of evidence-based food and agricultural policies and programmes.

18. After a long break caused by the pandemic, FAO resumed face-to-face capacity development activities in the region. The regional workshop “Towards gender equality and transformative agrifood systems,” held 24–25 November 2022 in a hybrid format, addressed the capacities of participants through learning and exchange with policymakers. Its contents were triggered by the conclusions and recommendations of new knowledge products from the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, such as gender and climate change, access of rural populations to social protection and rural women’s access to extension and advisory services. The two-day workshop updated participants on the corporate requirements in implementing the FAO Gender Equality Policy 2020–2030 and introduced the new regional knowledge products developed and released by the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia Gender Team over the past two years.

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14 Gender, socio-economic and health dimensions of the use of pesticide and management in Central Asia and Türkiye: The status in the Republic of Azerbaijan, in the Kyrgyz Republic, in the Republic of Tajikistan and in the Republic of Türkiye (GCP/SEC/011/GFF) (not published)
15 This regional overview is available at https://www.fao.org/3/cc2703en/cc2703en.pdf.
16 This policy brief is available at https://www.fao.org/3/cc1925en/cc1925en.pdf.
17 To read this resource guide, please visit https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc6412en.
18 Capacity development in both online and in-person formats ensured higher engagement and commitment of FAO professional staff and other key stakeholders, and accessibility for all interested parties. In-person interaction among FAO gender focal points, national gender experts and key technical staff from the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia and the FAO Subregional Office for Central Asia ensured effective learning and efficient exchange and enhanced a sense of ownership in view of the new regional gender action plan for 2023–2026. Out of 35 participants, 80 percent attended the workshop in an in-person format; others attended online but were able to participate in question-and-answer sessions).
19. While the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia has longstanding partnerships in improving technical capacities and providing policy advice at the level of respective ministries and agencies, similar engagement with parliaments, including dedicated interparliamentary groups and committees, is relatively new for the region. In order to better understand the roles and entry points for technical support, a dialogue with invited prominent parliamentarians from Georgia and Uzbekistan was organized to facilitate experience exchange and visioning of FAO’s technical support in policy advocacy and contributing to the discourse on the ground.

20. Reflecting regional trends and the situation of rural women due to the war in Ukraine, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia systematically addressed the gender-related impacts through contribution to FAO notes on gender-related impacts of the Ukraine conflict and the impacts of the war in Ukraine on people and guidance for planning gender-responsive and inclusive interventions. FAO also is actively contributing to the interagency efforts in an evidence-based analysis of gender in the regional response to the war in Ukraine and co-leading a gender brief on livelihoods and access to work of refugees from Ukraine in neighbouring host countries with UN Women, the International Labour Organization and Care International.

21. Specific programmes that target rural women to empower them economically have been an integrated part of FAO development interventions in the region for several years. European Commission on Agriculture members have been kept informed about the ongoing work, its challenges, lessons learned and promising practices. Over the reporting period, a successful women’s economic empowerment project, implemented within the framework of the FAO–Azerbaijan Partnership Programme, facilitated rural women’s access to agricultural information and knowledge by strengthening rural advisory services. At its concluding conference in December 2022, rural women who were beneficiaries of the project spoke highly of the support they received that helped them significantly improve their livelihoods. Additionally, FAO provided capacity development in gender mainstreaming to representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and other government and non-government agencies and organizations and assisted in formulating a Gender Action Plan to the ministry.

22. Similar interventions that focus on improving women’s access to economic opportunities are currently underway in Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Türkiye and Uzbekistan and are in the pipeline in Kosovo. Through these interventions, often implemented in partnership with UN Women and other United Nations agencies, diverse groups of rural women get access to viable income-generation opportunities, decent jobs, participation and entrepreneurship. Addressing time poverty helps reducing the gender pay gap and women’s unpaid workload and contributes to the empowerment of rural women.

23. The ongoing regional project “Leaving No One Behind: Greater involvement and empowerment for rural women,” under the framework of the FAO–Türkiye Partnership Programme, aims to enhance the enabling environment for rural women’s economic empowerment in Tajikistan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan. The project provides technical support to the gender units in provincial directorates of three pilot provinces of Türkiye and promotes best practice exchange and peer learning among the ministries of agriculture of the three countries for formulating and implementing policies and programmes that leave no one behind.

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19 Khatia Tsilosani, Member of the Gender Equality Council of the Parliament of Georgia, Dilorm Fayzieva, Chair of the Committee on International Relations and Inter-parliamentary Relations of Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan
25 All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood to be in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).
and address gender inequalities in agricultural practice. The project team has just completed a training workshop for the extension and forestry staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Türkiye. Regional events are planned under this project from the end of 2023 through 2024, with participation from the ministries of agriculture and other relevant state agencies, civil society organizations and experts to exchange best practices and reinforce commitments.

24. Finally, yet importantly, FAO attaches significant importance to communicating its often-tedious work in gender mainstreaming for advocacy and awareness raising. The FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia Gender Newsletter has been published now in two languages since November 2020 on a quarterly basis.26

IV. Challenges and priorities for future work

25. A brief overview of the regional trends and challenges in agriculture and rural development in Europe and Central Asia from a gender equality perspective,27 released over this reporting period by FAO, points to different forms of instability in the Europe and Central Asia region that are endangering the hard-won gains towards gender equality. These includes the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate change and environmental degradation, which have profound gender-differentiated impacts.

26. However, significant challenges remain for the full realization of gender mainstreaming commitments in terms of implementing systematically concrete actions that support the empowerment of rural women and girls. Reviews of the national context, conducted as part of the country gender assessments in the region, reveal that despite high-level commitments to increasing gender-sensitive public policy, considerable work is required to systematize gender mainstreaming across public policy.

27. In practice, gender equality commitments are poorly reflected in national agriculture, forestry and fishery policies that usually refer to “farmers” or “the rural population,” rendering women’s contributions invisible.

28. Broad national development strategies may refer to gender equality as a high-level goal, but rural development plans generally lack gender-sensitive targets and indicators, seldom specify concrete actions and allocate budgets for gender-responsive measures, and do not specify responsible institutions.

29. At the same time, standalone national strategies on the promotion of gender equality rarely include topics related to women’s roles in agricultural production. In general, a gender perspective is included in policies for issues that are traditionally associated with women, such as health care, education and, at its best, micro or small business, yet it remains virtually absent from agricultural policy. While there are a few positive examples in the region, such as in Georgia, where several key policy documents for the next five years28 have carefully integrated a gender equality perspective, the misconception persists that agriculture is a gender-neutral topic. This failure to recognize gender as crosscutting is resulting in women’s further isolation from key resources. Policies that aim to be inclusive must not ignore the inputs of half of the population. When they do, there is an increased risk that women and girls, as well as those in minority groups, will not fully benefit from the development of rural areas or in agriculture and will be left behind.

30. In light of the above, it is requested that member governments more consistently translate their commitments in gender equality to day-to-day practice and mobilize efforts to formulate, implement and monitor agrifood policies that do not marginalize but rather empower women and girls as a socioeconomic group that faces persistent structural disadvantages. This is an initial but crucial step towards translating the principle of “leaving no one behind” into practice, keeping in mind that the gender-based inequalities reinforce the most critical social divide by assigning different rights, social expectations and entitlements to women and men, girls and boys.

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28 Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy 2021-2027; Agricultural Extension Strategy 2022-2027; Law on Food Loss and Waste Reduction, Food Recovery and Redistribution; Strategy for a Sustainable development of Aquaculture in Georgia
31. Additionally, the need for governments in Europe and Central Asia to transform the region’s agrifood systems and address issues of malnutrition and poverty requires overcoming inequalities through coordinated strategies and action.

32. It is important to recognize and address both explicit and implicit gender biases in policy and decision-making through advocacy and capacity development. As part of its technical assistance and policy support, FAO is transitioning towards a more coherent and dynamic approach to assisting governments in this endeavour. A positive trend is the focus on the capacities of public institutions to integrate or mainstream gender considerations in their work, with initiatives implemented in Azerbaijan and Georgia and now in Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye. Initiatives have included the creation of gender units or networks of gender focal points in line ministries or in interministerial bodies. However, the practice of appointing gender advisers within ministries of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, or ministries concerned with rural development or the environment, is not consistent. The ministries of agriculture in Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina (both Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine have directives referring to gender advisers, but the gender mainstreaming practices of these institutions have not been widely disseminated. Furthermore, the responsibilities and authority of gender focal points vary considerably. In many cases, this role is an additional responsibility to other work, without terms of reference, funding or time allocated for this function. Thus, while a promising practice, gender focal points’ ability to influence policymaking in the agriculture sector remains very limited.

V. Policy recommendations

33. This document reiterates the recommendations made by FAO in its prior submissions to the European Commission on Agriculture as well as proposals raised during regional review events, such as the 2017 FAO/European Institute for Gender Equality regional conference on promoting socially inclusive rural development in Europe and Central Asia.

34. These recommendations should also be considered in the context of the recommendations made by the Thirty-third Session of FAO European Regional Conference, held in May 2022, and unprecedented challenges in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine. The consequences for each country and the region as a whole are far-reaching, with implications for food security, nutrition and agriculture. With the threat of inequalities widening more than they were even three years ago, there has never been a better justification for gender analysis and the gender mainstreaming of agrifood systems.

35. Recommendations for FAO and Member governments:

1) Address longstanding challenges and barriers to gender equality:

1.1) The contributions of rural women to agricultural production as household members and farmers remain largely invisible. Therefore, the development of normative, legal and policy frameworks should reflect a gender perspective and include the collective views and priorities of rural women. In light of potential austerity measures as part of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery, there is an urgent need to ensure that rural women are not further deprioritized in public policy and budget allocations.

1.2) The evidence base and gender statistics relevant to agriculture and rural development must be strengthened so that policymaking and programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation are gender responsive and, thus, effective and sustainable. The methodological revision of agricultural censuses and relevant household surveys is needed at the national level to improve the production, collection, dissemination and use of gender-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive and specific indicators.
1.3) Further support is required to empower rural women as leaders in their households, as farmers and as stakeholders in rural development to enter governance at all levels. Strategic planning and decision-making should be inclusive of rural women from diverse backgrounds.

1.4) Rural women, especially those working in farms, have limited access to resources that are critical for agricultural production. Precise analysis of gender gaps in access to inputs, and the origins of these gaps, is needed so that interventions can be designed to remove persistent barriers.

1.5) Rural women have very limited opportunities for economic empowerment in on- or off-farm work, leaving them dependent on male family members or vulnerable to poverty. Targeted economic policies and projects are vital to providing rural women with diverse and viable opportunities for income generation through decent work, entrepreneurship and inclusive value chains and by reducing the gender pay gap and women’s unpaid workload.

1.6) Transformative social protection policies have the potential to improve rural women’s lives and livelihoods. In addition to investments in physical and social infrastructure, there is a need to both recognize the role of women in unpaid domestic and care work and reduce this burden.

36. Recommendations for Members:

2.1) Support the advocacy initiatives of FAO around the above priority areas, representatives of Members are important allies in conveying information about critical gender gaps to national stakeholders. Key line ministries, such as ministries of agriculture, can also commit to taking concrete actions to end persistent inequalities that are holding back progress towards sustainable agriculture and food security and ending poverty.

2.2) Invest in physical and social infrastructure in rural areas to reduce the burden of women’s unpaid domestic and care work.

2.3) Stress the crucial role of men in achieving gender equality and recognize and address gender-based violence and precarious working conditions in the agriculture sector.

2.4) Conduct thorough analyses of gender gaps and their origins so that interventions address structural barriers that rural women face in accessing resources (including inputs, knowledge and skills) that are critical for agricultural production.

37. Recommendations for FAO:

3.1) Prioritize gender-transformative approaches and increase support for more effective gender mainstreaming of agricultural and rural development throughout technical assistance. This presumes going beyond merely improving rural women’s access to sustainable livelihoods to challenging the very norms that perpetuate inequalities.