

How to empower women innovators in agrifood?

**GUIDELINES
FOR PROGRAMME DESIGN**

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Abbreviations

AKIS	Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems	FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods	RFO	Research Funded Organisation
B2B	Business-to-Business	GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation	ROI	Return on Investment
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy	GEM	Global Entrepreneurship Monitor	RPO	Research Performing Organisation
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe	HEI	Higher Education Institutions	SaaS	Software as a Service
D&I	Diversity and Inclusion	HR	Human Resources	SME	Small and Medium Sized Enterprise
EDIH	European Digital Innovation Hub	RIS	Regional Innovation Scheme	STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Math
EIS	European Innovation Scoreboard	ICT	Information and Communication Technology	TEA	Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity
EIT	European Institute of Innovation and Technology	ILO	International Labour Organization	UVP	Unique Value Proposition
EU	European Union	KPI	Key Performance Indicator	VC	Venture Capital
EWA	Empowering Women in Agrifood	NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation		
FemAI	Female Achievement Index	OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development		

The background features a light orange grid pattern. On the left side, there are several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes: a large circle with a gradient from light to dark grey, a vertical rectangle with a green-to-white gradient, and a vertical rectangle with an orange-to-white gradient. The word "Introduction" is written in a bold, dark purple font in the upper right quadrant.

Introduction

Women play a crucial role for the development and economic growth of EU rural communities. They are driving force for the maintenance, conservation and development of rural areas, both in cultural and economic terms. Yet still their contribution is marginalised and often neglected. In the past few years, a lot have been done to support the transition of rural areas toward both greater innovativeness and diversity. This is why examining the role of female entrepreneurs in agrifood is crucial. *'When you dig deep into something that has changed on a farm, sometimes it's often a woman that's the driver behind the change.'* said Professor Maura Farrell during our research project. Women are not only household keepers and caregivers but are also innovators and drivers of change in rural areas.

This has been also acknowledged by the EU, which through various of its policies is aiming to support women in the agrifood sector. The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas is a European Commission initiative to develop a common European vision for 2040. It recognises the diversity of rural territories across Europe while identifying common challenges and opportunities.

Among 10 shared goals of the EU 2040 rural vision, four are specifically tackling entrepreneurship, innovation and diversity:²

No. 5: Inclusive communities of inter-generational solidarity, fairness and renewal, open to newcomers and fostering equal opportunities for all.

No. 7: Fully benefiting from digital innovation with equal access to emerging technologies, widespread digital literacy and opportunities to acquire more advanced skills.

No. 8: Entrepreneurial, innovative and skilled people, co-creating technological, ecological and social progress.

No. 10: Places of diversity, making the most out of their unique assets, talents and potential.

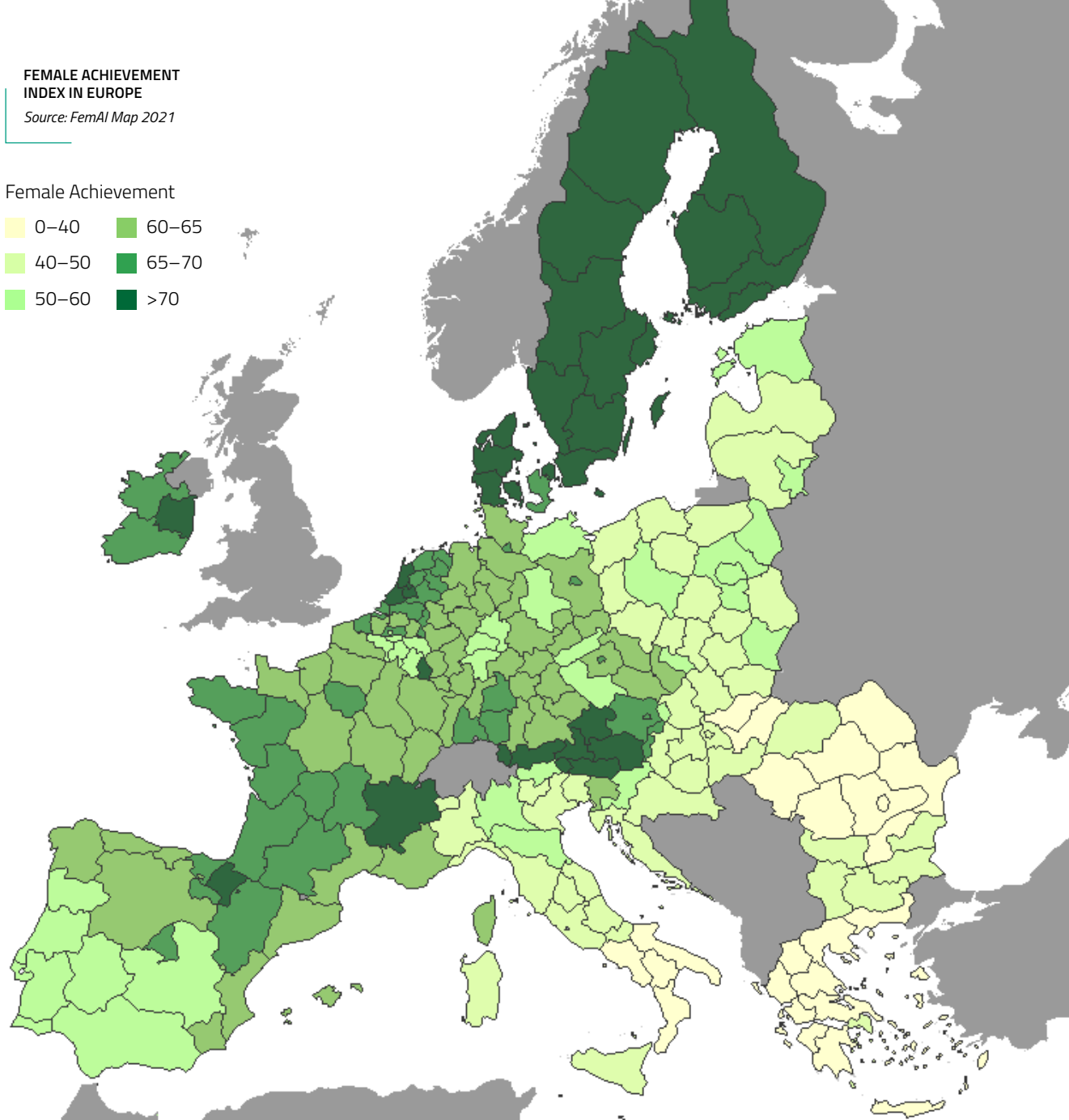
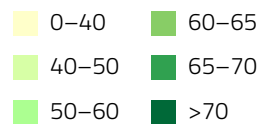
EIT Food³, being the world's largest and most dynamic food innovation community is committed to support women innovators in the agrifood sector. By empowering women leaders in agrifood through various projects like [WE Lead Food](#), [Supernovas](#) and most importantly [Empowering Women in Agrifood \(EWA\)](#) it strengthens its impact in the field of diversity and inclusion.

EWA is a unique project supporting female innovators from RIS countries⁴ with a 'modest' or 'emerging' score at the European Innovation Scoreboard⁵. The project consists of 6-months-long tailor-made training on specific business and entrepreneurial topics; more than 20 hours of personalised mentoring from successful entrepreneurs and experts in business and agrifood; participation in entrepreneurship and networking events with high-level stakeholders; and prizes of EUR 15,000 per country. The project is run in local languages – between 2020 and 2023 it was implemented in 18 countries in Central-Eastern and Southern Europe: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey and Ukraine. Over 360 women took part in the project and the interest is still growing. Therefore, to amplify the impact generated by the project, the EWA team in Central Eastern Europe decided to contribute to boosting female agrifood entrepreneurship by creating a tool that will support public authorities, local governments and NGOs in establishing programmes for women innovators in this sector.

FEMALE ACHIEVEMENT INDEX IN EUROPE

Source: FemAI Map 2021

Female Achievement



This approach contributes also to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which continues supporting gender equality in rural areas through the new CAP Strategic Plans (2023–2027) and particularly under Specific Objective 8, promoting employment, growth, gender equality, including the participation of women in farming, social inclusion and local development in rural areas as well as in the circular bio-economy and sustainable forestry.⁶ However, basic data on the employment rates of women and men in agrifood are not available as of yet, so it will be very hard to measure the impact of CAP in this specific objective with reference to gender equality.

The most recent data about the situation of women in given regions are compiled by JRC and DG Regional and Urban Policy in the Female Achievement Index (FemAI), which measures the level of female achievement at the regional level in 33 areas grouped in 7 domains: Work and Money; Knowledge; Time; Power; Health; Safety, Security and Trust, and Quality of Life.⁷ According to this data from 2021, RIS countries are not only modest to moderate performers on the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS),⁸ but there is a correlation with lower levels of FemAI. It is hard to compare the EIS and FemAI one to one

as currently EIS is country-based and FemAI is region-based, but the map below shows clearly that there is a correspondence between the low levels in the European Innovation Scoreboard and Female Achievement Index.

Regions that are more innovative have overall higher levels of gender equality. It supports the hypothesis that women are often drivers of innovation, especially in rural areas. As explained Professor Farrell: *'I often find that women on farms are less emotionally attached to the farm than the men. It's a succession kind of thinking that men have been handed this farm and they don't want to change the patterns of lifetimes that have happened previous to them. Whereas women think about feeding and educating their children, they think about the broader aspects of what is actually happening and how the farm could pay and could work. So women sometimes can be much more entrepreneurial on farms than men can be because they strive to try and make that farm financially viable. So you'll often find if a farm switches to something like organics or something else innovative, it will be the woman who will be the driver behind that.'*⁹

That is why transition towards more innovative agrifood sector cannot only ensure that women are not left behind but shall put women in the centre of this transformation as key driving force. Obviously, the EU cannot provide the sole support for accomplishing the bold aim; therefore, enhanced awareness and integration of all available and relevant EU and national funding tools and policies is needed. The Guidelines for successful female entrepreneurship programmes in agrifood prepared by EIT Food are aimed to support regional agencies, publicly funded organisations, NGOs and private companies in

“designing female entrepreneurship support programmes in agrifood in such a way to accelerate the transition towards more innovative, sustainable and equal agrifood sector.

Based on extensive experience in running Empowering Women in Agrifood programme as well as thorough research of agrifood entrepreneurship and women entrepreneurship programmes in Central and Eastern Europe, we created a framework to design and implement successful programmes for women entrepreneurs in agrifood.

In this document at first the overview of entrepreneurial and agrifood landscape for women in 15 CEE countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine) is made. Later, a matrix analysis and clustering of available programmes in the region is presented. In the following section an analysis of 14 in-depth interviews examining success factors and barriers in the implemented programmes is provided. The summary of existing gaps in female agrifood entrepreneurship in Central and Eastern Europe closes the research part of the document, which is followed by practical Guidelines for successful female entrepreneurship programmes in the agrifood sector.



Methodology

In order to understand how the female agrifood entrepreneurship is supported in the region covered by the research, the following possible variables were taken into consideration:

1 Entrepreneurship support in the agrifood sector

2 Entrepreneurship support for women idea owners and startup founders

Our understanding of entrepreneurship in the RIS countries is based on an integrated perspective following The Seven Stages in the Entrepreneurial Life Cycle:¹⁰

STAGE 1. Opportunity Recognition – the ‘pre-start’ usually takes place in universities along with entrepreneurial education.

STAGE 2. Opportunity Focusing – still a ‘pre-start’ level but entrepreneurship is just a potentiality related to a concrete research project result, possibly generating a spin-off. It can take place in universities, research centres, fab-labs and even within companies (intrapreneurship).

STAGE 3. Commitment of Resources – this stage requires the development of a business plan, such a stage being supported in the accelerators and business skills-oriented programmes.

STAGE 4. Market Entry – usually covered by seed capital programmes, start-up programmes and other transversal tools like small grants, vouchers etc.

STAGE 5. Full Launch and Growth – being in the area of high-growth strategy, the role of the local ecosystem knowledge resources and funding schemes/grants targeting mature business are usually common.

STAGE 6. Maturity and Expansion – we are in the scenario of support to export, scale, and adopt technologies that transform the businesses, and provide mentoring programmes and even venture capital.

STAGE 7. Liquidity Event – exiting the business stage, that is usually done outside the general policies and public instruments.

Given that EWA is a programme supporting early-stage entrepreneurs (up to 3 years of operations), we will **focus the analysis on the programmes that tackle first 5 stages** of the Entrepreneurial Life Cycle.

In the project we have done extensive desk research to diagnose the situation of female entrepreneurship and women in agrifood sector in 15 countries Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine.

In the second stage we mapped those countries to understand the current level of female entrepreneurship support and agrifood entrepreneurship support. We were using the great support of EIT Food RIS Hub network, to which we are grateful for their commitment. As a result, 3 frameworks of support were identified (explained in detail in the section 4: Analysis of female entrepreneurship support

and agrifood entrepreneurship support programmes in 15 countries) and we performed case studies identifying key element of this support mechanisms based on 14 in-depth interviews with representatives of organisations deploying female entrepreneurship support programmes ([Aspire](#) – Balkans; [Garage48](#) – Estonia; [iHUB](#) – Ukraine; [Perspektywy Foundation](#) – Poland; [RAPIV](#) – Bulgaria; [Riga TechGirls](#) – Latvia); agrifood entrepreneurship support programmes ([AgriVentures](#) – Bulgaria; [BioSense Accelerator](#) – Serbia; [Foodtech AC](#) – Poland; [Future Verticals](#) – Bulgaria; anonymous representative of a retailer company – Poland) and specific programmes regarding women in agrifood ([Empowering Women in Agrifood](#) – EIT Food; [Fliara](#) – Horizon Europe project; [TalentA](#) – Corteva Agriscience). The selection of projects examined within case studies and in-depth interviews was based on the clustering and matrix analysis and projects with highest outreach and exceptional educational, business creation and innovation tools used in the acceleration.

“ At the end the existing gaps in support of female entrepreneurship in the agrifood sector were identified based on the desk research, mapping exercise and case studies. Based on that guidelines for successful female entrepreneurship programmes in agrifood were formulated.



**Overview of
the situation
of women
entrepreneurship
in agrifood
in 15 countries**

Women's entrepreneurship, once a marginalised area of research, has gained significant importance in recent years both in the academic realm and among international organisations. This dynamically growing interest is reflected in the increasing number of studies and initiatives focused on women-led enterprises. Although women's entrepreneurship is a global phenomenon, the differences in its level and nature across various countries are substantial. Although the situation varies by country, a common characteristic across these regions is the smaller number of women entrepreneurs. Data indicate that the participation of women in self-employment and in managing both smaller and larger enterprises remains less than that of men.¹¹

In the agricultural sector, the trend in women's entrepreneurship is similar, yet the specificity of the sector introduces additional diversification. The variety of factors influencing women's entrepreneurship, such as economic context, cultural conditions, access to financing, legal regulations, and support from the business environment, underscores the complexity and multidimensionality of this issue.

Given the diversity of its manifestations, it is not feasible to conduct exhaustive or fully satisfactory comparison using a single method. Therefore, in this chapter, we will primarily rely on data collected as part of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM)¹² research project. Initiated in 1997 by Babson College (Boston) and the London Business School, the GEM project enabled the first comparative study of various aspects of entrepreneurship. According to the definition adopted by GEM, entrepreneurship involves activities undertaken by individuals, teams, and companies to establish new businesses or expand existing ones. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor provides comprehensive information on the characteristics of business owners, including their motivations for starting enterprises and the cultural aspects that influence their decisions to create new ventures.

In the following analysis, data concerning the percentage of adults who have initiated their entrepreneurial activities, as well as those whose businesses have been operational for at least three years, will be presented. One of the indicators analysed in the annual studies is the Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA), which refers to the proportion of the adult population who are

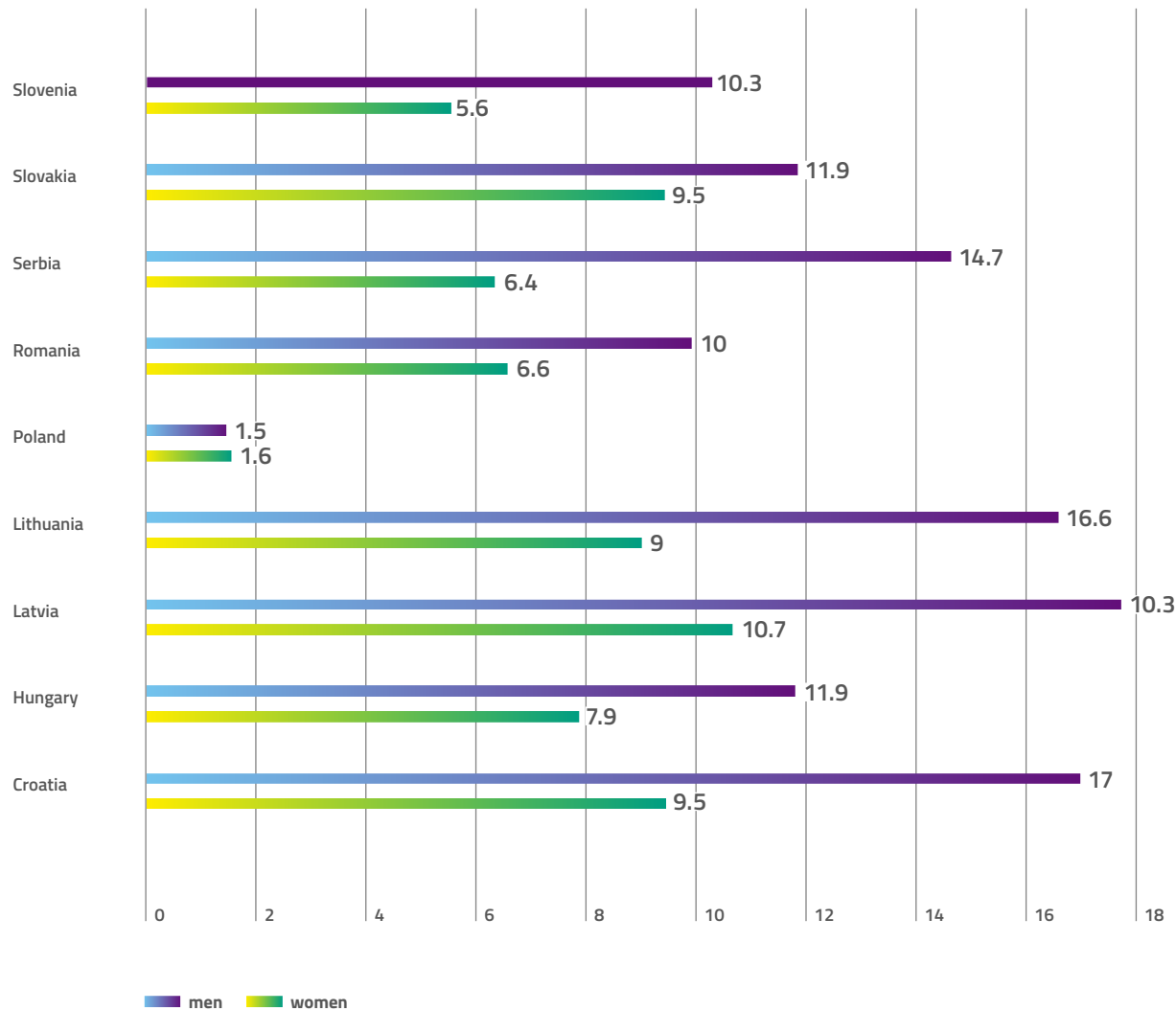
either in the process of starting or are actively running a new business.

As can be discerned from the chart below presenting data for countries analysed in our study, which are also covered by GEM, in 2022 in most countries the numbers of men who own a business operating for less than three years is greater than that of women. The most substantial disparities – exceeding seven percentage points – are observed in countries such as Serbia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Croatia. In Poland alone, this percentage is marginally higher for women than men, though the values of this indicator for both sexes are significantly lower than in other countries.

However, the ultimate aim of every entrepreneur is to establish a business that succeeds in the market. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) methodology, established business are those that have been operating in the market for at least 3.5 years.¹³ As evident from the chart below, in the case of such enterprises, for all countries the indicator values are lower for women than for men. The largest gender disparity is seen in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovakia. Intriguing data can be observed in Poland. In Poland, the difference

TOTAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP ACTIVITY (TEA) BY GENDER AND COUNTRY [%]

Source: own study based on GEM data

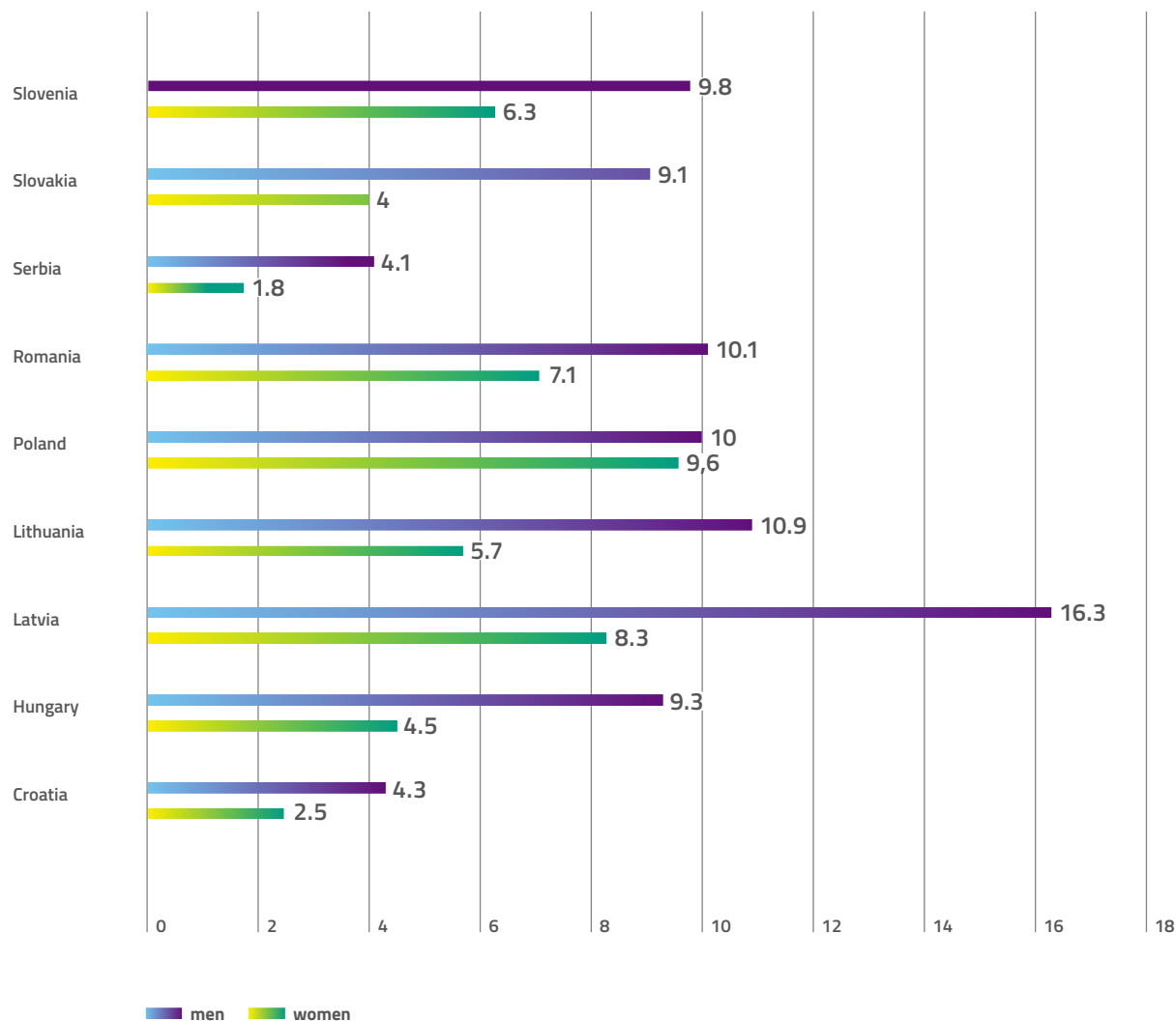


between women and men is small, but also the percentage of people running established firms is decidedly lower (9.6% for women, 10% for men) than the percentage of those owning total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity. This situation is likely linked to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which adversely affected business operations in Poland. Additionally, the onset of the war in Ukraine introduced further difficulties for entrepreneurs, notably in the form of significant increases in energy and gas prices.¹⁴

It is also worth examining how women and men differ in their perceptions of the difficulties in starting their own business. As seen in the chart below, starting one's own company is more often perceived by men to be easier than it is perceived by women. Only in Poland does a higher percentage of women than men assert that it is easy (80.8%). In Poland, the percentage of people with such beliefs is the highest among the countries analysed. Following Poland, Slovenia has a significant proportion of people believing it's easy to start a business: 70.7% of men and 64.5% of women. The lowest percentages were observed in Slovakia (24.5% for men and 16.5% for women) and Latvia (33.2% for men and 25.5% for women).

ESTABLISHED BUSINESS BY GENDER AND COUNTRY (%)

Source: own study based on GEM data



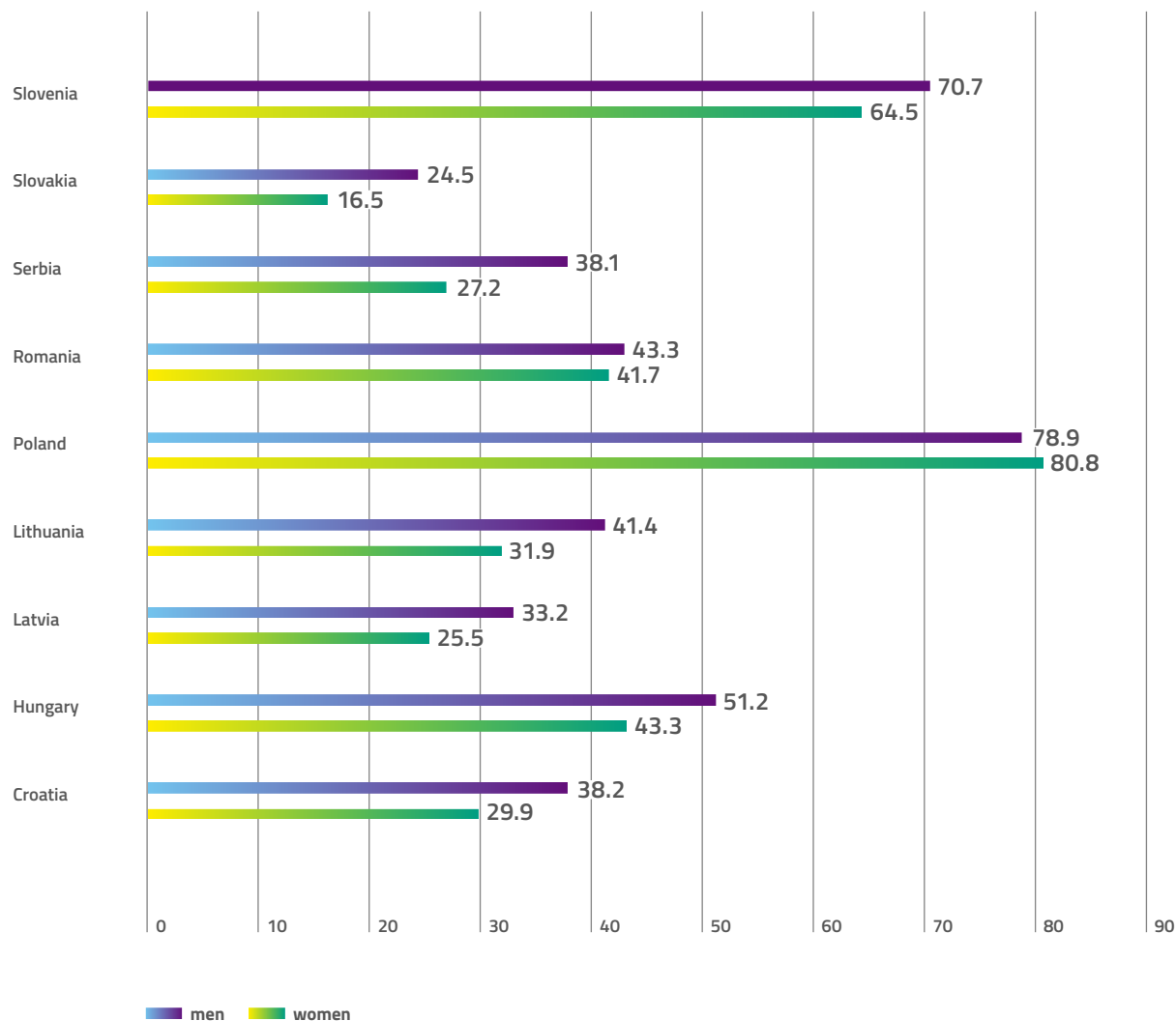
As part of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) study, the sectors in which women establish startups were also analysed. The agriculture and mining sectors are chosen significantly less often by women than by men.¹⁵ As can be seen in the chart below, in countries such as Hungary, Latvia, and Lithuania, this disparity is significant. The only country where women establish startups in agriculture relatively more often than men is Romania (15.3% vs. 12.5%). Also in Poland, these percentages are even, while for other countries the differences between genders are significant.

Regarding the data that distinguish agriculture as a separate sector, in many countries such data disaggregated by gender are not available. For example, while data on women's employment in this sector are usually available, there is a lack of information on their occupying managerial positions or on companies engaged in agricultural activity run by women. It should also be emphasised that in this sector, the phenomenon of unpaid women's work often occurs, and there are no exact statistics on its scale.

In countries where these data are available, it is evident that this sector is also more often chosen by men. Women in agriculture generally

PERCEPTION THAT IT IS EASY TO START A BUSINESS BY GENDER AND COUNTRY (%)

Source: own study based on GEM data



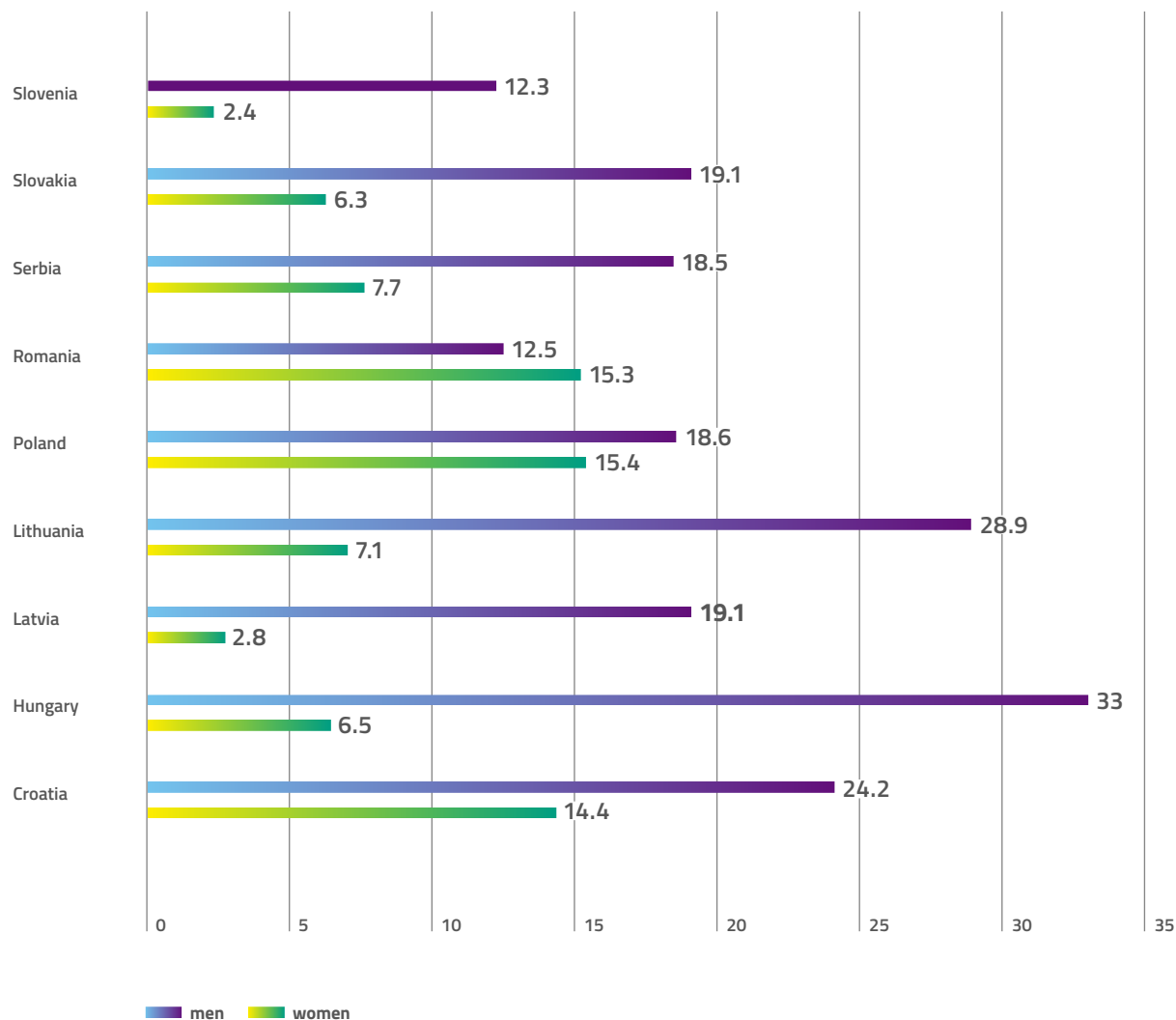
have less access to land and agricultural infrastructure. Considering data for European Union countries, female farmers typically have smaller farms – on average 5.84 ha, compared to 12.88 ha for men. The literature also indicates that they have less access to loans, and their innovative ideas are not appreciated to the same extent as men’s proposals.¹⁶ This situation is changing in favour of women, but the change is slow.

Analysing the participation of women in the agricultural sector, the presented chart illustrates the dynamics of changes in various countries over the years. The data shows that the most significant decrease in women’s involvement in agriculture was recorded in Romania, Poland, Lithuania, and Estonia. On the other hand, the smallest reduction was noted in Montenegro and Ukraine. In 2021, the highest percentage of women’s participation in agriculture was recorded in Romania (19%), Ukraine (15%), and Serbia (11%). Meanwhile, the lowest values were observed in Slovakia (2%), Estonia, and the Czech Republic (both at 3%).

It is valuable to investigate the proportion of women working in agriculture who are managers.

SECTOR AGRICULTURE AND MINING BY GENDER AND COUNTRY (%)

Source: own study based on GEM data



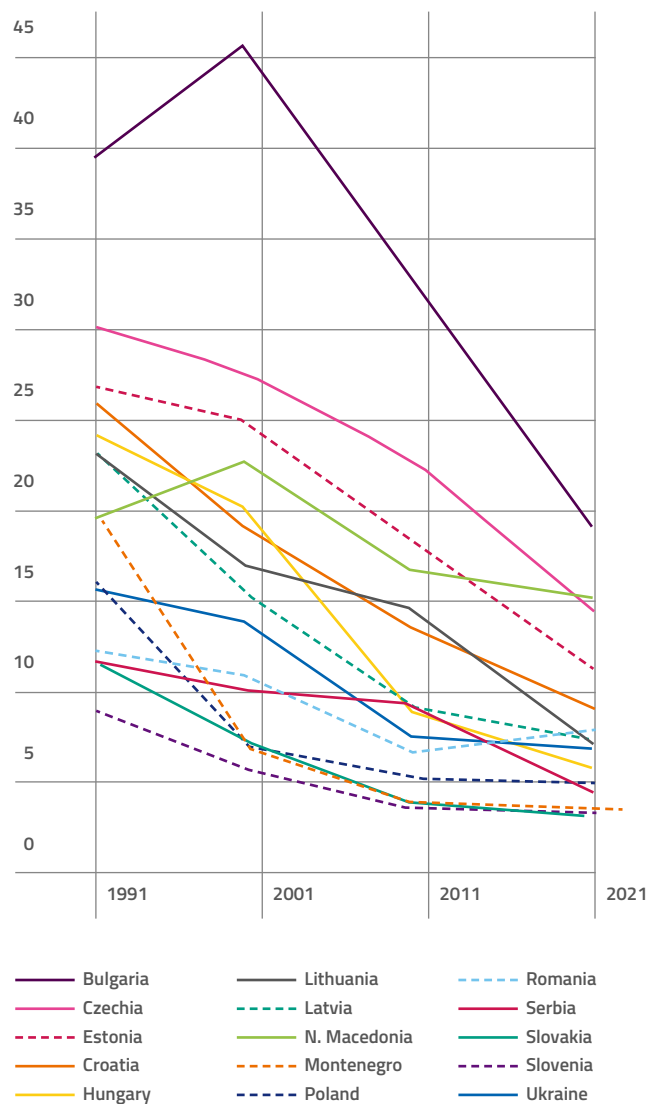
Analysing the available data from 2016, it is evident that the countries with the largest share of farm managers are Latvia, Lithuania (45%), followed by Romania (34%), Estonia (32%), and Poland (29%). In those three countries mentioned, this indicator is higher than the average for European Union countries (28%).¹⁷

Data from 2022–2023 regarding women’s entrepreneurship reveals a significant disparity disadvantaging women in owning long-term businesses. Women are more likely to engage in solo ventures (as solopreneurs) and are underrepresented in the startup sector, even though many believe that starting their own business is relatively easy.

In each of the countries studied in the agricultural sector, there has been a significant decline in employment over the past two decades that affects women as well. This trend is mainly linked to economic transformations, with the role of agriculture decreasing in favour of the service sector, which offers more employment opportunities for women. Despite this, women in agriculture in many countries continue to face barriers in accessing, controlling, and owning land and other key resources. The reduction in women’s

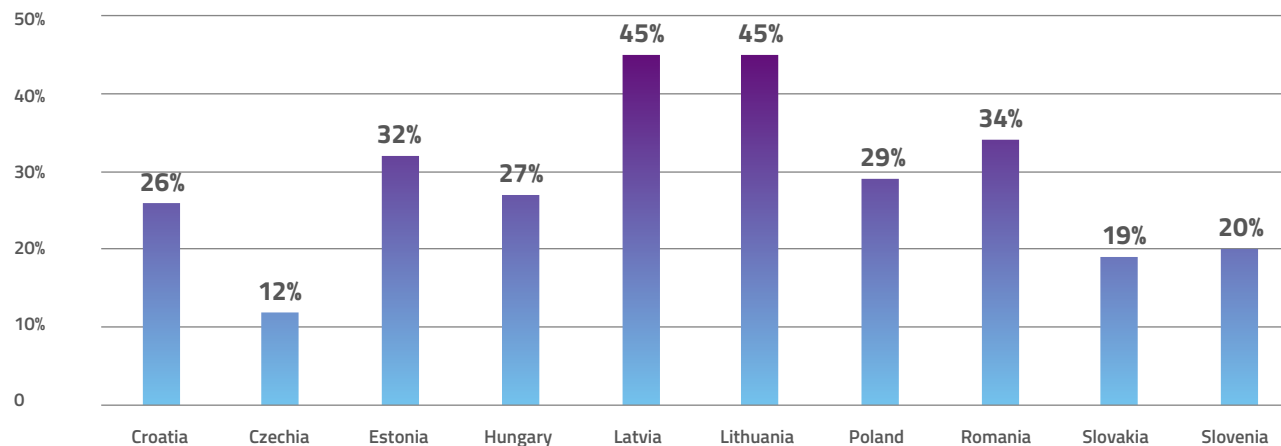
EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURE [% OF TOTAL EMPLOYMENT]

Source: International Labour Organization.
ILO modelled estimates database' ILOSTAT.



PROPORTION OF FARM MANAGERS WHO ARE WOMEN, 2016 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2016



employment in agriculture and the low percentage of women running their own businesses result in a limited interest among women in developing entrepreneurship in this sector. Eurostat data from 2016 shows that in countries like Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Estonia, and Poland, the percentage of women managing farms is above the EU average. However, given the low participation of women in agriculture, the actual number of women in managerial positions in this sector is relatively small. Moreover, the data are not regularly updated, leading to a lack of current information on the participation of women in farm management as of 2024.

It should be emphasised that the above analysis pertains to countries for which data were available. Currently, there is a general lack of detailed, comparative data and analyses regarding women in agriculture and in its various sectors. This information gap makes it difficult to definitively determine the situation of women in this sector, assess the changes that have occurred in recent years, and analyse the development of their entrepreneurship in agriculture. To obtain a more comprehensive and accurate assessment, it would be worthwhile to conduct an international comparative study, developed according to a specially prepared methodology for this purpose.



**Analysis of female
entrepreneurship
support and
agrifood
entrepreneurship
support
programmes
in 15 countries**

OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

The current analysis was made based on the information gathered in each target country. The approach was to merge the information made available by the EIT Food RIS Hubs engaged voluntarily in the process, acting as local sources of information that have the know-how on the national ecosystem. At the same time the consultants have been reviewing and completing the information and covering the gaps in the countries where the Hubs haven't been engaged.

Two types of research areas have been covered:

1 Agrifood entrepreneurship support programmes, instruments, initiatives and projects

Firstly, the general hypothesis was that both type of research areas could provide a reference point that will lead to finding programmes designed for women in agrifood. Practically this means that agrifood entrepreneurship support programmes might cover some specific support for women or alternatively some of the female support programmes might address some agrifood companies.

Secondly this approach could be more fruitful for the mapping activity and would help to understand different types of support programmes, instruments, initiatives and projects in a broader sense related to the existing support ecosystems.

2 Female entrepreneurship support programmes, instruments, initiatives and projects

Another variable was the year when the programme, instrument, initiative or project started, and who is providing financial support. Several funding organisations and models have been identified:

1. Government institutions that are supporting national, regional and international programmes through various instruments;
2. EU funding covering usually projects and policy instruments specially dedicated to entrepreneurs and sectors;
3. Higher Education Institutions/Research Performing Organisations (HEI/RPO) implementing programmes where entrepreneurship, innovation and access to infrastructure are intertwined;
4. NGOs – usually such programmes are implemented by organisations that are hosting incubation and acceleration programmes having a governmental mandate or based on public funding;
5. Private companies – initiatives that are usually developed by corporations or by private actors,

where the access to resources is paid by the user;

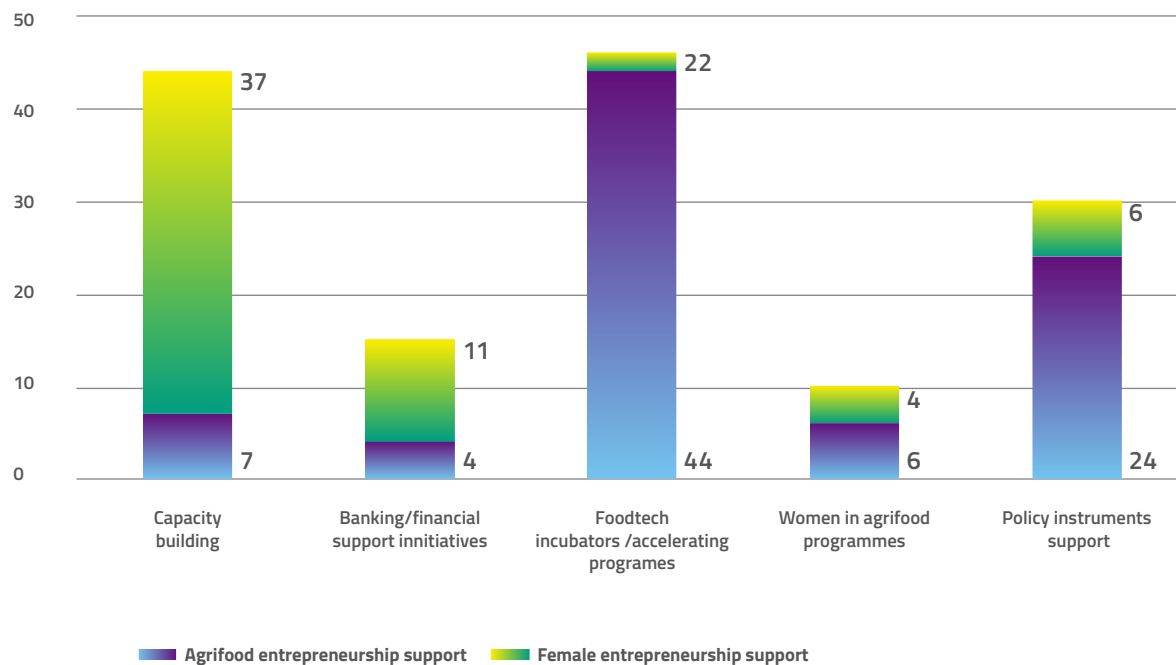
6. International donor countries –covers a mix of countries (Israel, Switzerland, Sweden, Baltics) and organisations (ex. UN / FAO, Swiss Fund) that are supporting different social and environmental causes at the national level.

One limitation during the desk research is the capacity to accurately estimate the number of women beneficiaries according to the information gathered. Overall, 94 information entries have been identified regarding agrifood entrepreneurship and 60 information entries regarding female entrepreneurship.

The information has been discussed and reviewed by the consultants and the first conclusions have been drawn.

- There is not necessarily a country-specific profile on the existing policies and instruments supporting agrifood entrepreneurship or female entrepreneurship.
- Programmes deployed in the region have diverse foundations – some of them are embedded in national/regional policies and supported by public funds, others are private sector programmes driven by companies or a business accelerator. A large number of programmes are run by NGOs and local communities, which is connected with grants that usually cover one or two editions of the programme.
- There are some international programmes that are present in several countries, very much dependent on the funding institutions that are pushing the implementation at local level through various forms of partnership.

SUPPORT PROGRAMMES, INSTRUMENTS, INITIATIVES AND PROJECTS IDENTIFIED BASED ON CLUSTER DISTRIBUTION



After corroborating the gathered information, four general thematic funding clusters have been identified mostly based on the level of ambitions, sophistication of services provided and funding sources. Although the thematic funding clusters are robust based on their own characteristic, this does not mean that all are present in all the countries. Furthermore, with the exception of cluster 4, not all the clusters are covering explicitly the agrifood companies or woman in agrifood, although both categories might be present among the beneficiaries.

	AGRIFOOD ENTREPRE- NEUR- SHIP SUPPORT	FEMALE ENTREPRE- NEURSHIP SUPPORT	TOTAL
Cluster 1: Capacity building	7	37	44
Cluster 2: Banking/financial support initiatives	4	11	15
Cluster 3: Foodtech incubators/ accelerating programmes	44	2	46
Cluster 4: Women in agrifood programmes	6	4	10
Cluster 5: Policy instruments support	24	6	30
Total	85	60	134

CLUSTER ANALYSIS

Cluster 1: Capacity building

There have been identified 44 information entries related to capacity-building support programmes, instruments, initiatives, and projects.

	AGRIFOOD ENTREPRE- NEURSHIP SUPPORT	FEMALE ENTREPRE- NEURSHIP SUPPORT
Cluster 1: Capacity building	7	37
Since when has it operated? (earliest year identified)	2011	1997
Who funds it?	NGO 4 EU funds 2 Government institution 1 Private company 1	Government institution 13 NGO 9 EU funds 8 Private company 4 International Donor Countries 3

The focus is on improving capacity of running businesses and new technical skills based on a standardised curriculum of technical skills as well as soft skills. The implementation formula is very much dependent on:

- the level of existing skills and resources within the organisation/consortia,
- the funding instrument (project, programme, funding consortia etc.),
- the level of geographical ambition (regional, national, international),
- content provided (entrepreneurship, e-commerce, leadership etc.).

The programmes in this cluster are usually creative, have a diverse approach, they are sustained by leading local organisation and based on the 'power of the network'.

However, there is a challenge that those based on a single project may lack the financial sustainability in the future. Their role is to fill an existing demand, but there is no possibility to foresee their continuation on the long term.



FIGURE 1. VALUE CREATION CLUSTER 1: CAPACITY BUILDING

The technical aspect that may help such programmes to scale up is to provide access to online content to newly registered participants. In this way, the knowledge bank may be accessed beyond the duration of the project/programme and generate the critical mass needed to develop further initiatives.

Such an example is [Akademia Rozwoju dla Kobiet](#) that is offering their online content for free, targeting women entrepreneurs willing to develop their basic business and technical skills.

Regarding the focus on agrifood specific challenges, the programme [Antreprenor în Agricultură 4.0](#), implemented by The Romanian Farmers Club, might serve as an example. The programme is meant for managerial development and improvement of the financial, technical, and legislative

knowledge of farm managers, with at least 5 years of management experience in a farm or in agriculture business.

One interesting example of using capacity building programmes is when international organisations and countries are deploying support activities towards specific target groups within the community of female entrepreneurs, such as Ukrainian refugees ([International Mentoring Programme: Ukrainian Women in Business](#)).

Value creation is focused more on the specific content provided, however there are cases where the content is combined with workshops and mentoring activities.

The initiatives described below constitute leading examples in the thematic funding clusters that

are standing out due to the reach and complexity of services provided.

Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE)

– is a perfect example of a ‘franchise programme’, developed in the US and adopted by the US Department of State as a diplomatic tool across more than 100 countries. It was designed to be able to scale, empower and promote the entrepreneurial spirit of women around the world. It is implemented by the national Embassy based on a national partnership with governments, but usually having a local NGO running it. The Unique Value Proposition (UVP) consist in the online platform DreamBuilder and several months of online training, mentoring, networking, and pitching, culminating in providing EUR 5,000 grant to leading finalists.

Officially it is present in Europe in several countries covered by the analysis: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovenia and Ukraine.

Aspire (MKD) – is a business pre-accelerator programme started in 2022, targeting women who are looking to build a sustainable start-up in Balkan countries. It offers a mix of networking

capacity, mentorship and support from Israeli ASPIRE women mentors, leaders, and experts. The end goal of the programme is to launch and create more business that are led by a woman as well as to build collaboration between women from Israel and women from the Balkan region and to establish educational and business collaborations. As of this writing, 30 women have been provided with this support.

Women in Business (BG) is a successful Danube project that started in 2018, managed by the Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovations – Varna. It has been engaging Romania, Hungary and Slovenia, which together decided to create a common programme for different entrepreneurship experiences. The content covered a total of 17 topics and managed to engage 243 beneficiaries in all partner regions. In Bulgaria, 25 women have been supported.

TOP Women w e-biznesie (PL) has been running since 2020 and has already certified 640 participants in e-business. The programme is free of charge and is backed by a consortium of organisations, including private ones.

Empowering Women Entrepreneurship Programme Estonia (EE) has been running since 2019 and has already supported 100 women to develop their business ideas. The value of the programme consists in the mix of workshops, hackathons, business incubations and mentorship programmes. Since 2023 the programme has targeted Ukrainian refugees together with a mix of organisations: Garage48 and Estonian Refugee Council, in partnership with the British Council in Estonia, Swedbank Estonia, LHV and BPW Estonia – Business and Professional Women Organisation Estonia.

iHUB Development of Female Entrepreneurship (UA) – is a programme funded by the Embassy of Finland and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia and implemented in Ukraine between 2014 and 2019. It promoted awareness-raising, provided training and educational activity, access to business incubator services, iHUB business centres and provision of consulting activities to boost development of female-led startups. Several Seed Forum events were provided online to allow women from all over Ukraine to access information.

Cluster 2: Banking/financial support initiatives and projects

There have been identified 15 information entries related to Banking/financial support initiatives and projects.

	AGRIFOOD ENTREPRE-NEURSHIP SUPPORT	FEMALE ENTREPRE-NEURSHIP SUPPORT
Cluster 2: Banking/financial support initiatives and projects	4	11
Since when has it operated? (earliest year identified)	2011	2006
Who funds it?	Government institution 3 Private company 1	Private company 11

The financial system has based their policies on an inclusive approach towards female-led businesses, probably as a concrete way to share CSR values and to explore new market segments.

These are essentially international instruments, policy-driven and focused on funding schemes, financial services, subsidised loans, or special conditions for female entrepreneurs. They are dependent on the capacity of international financing actors to have a locally reliable financial hub to reach the existing clients or to attain a certain level of operation in the country. For example the [EaSI programme](#) run in the Czech Republic by Moneta acts as an interface for the European Investment Fund and offers micro-funding for women-led business and social businesses.

Some of these instruments managed to evolve from providing funding to adding some additional consultancy ([Smart Lady](#)), training ([She's Next](#)) and mentoring ([Women in Business](#)) services.

The instrument seems to provide a consistent amount of money and to be continuously present on the international markets and enables the creation of a community of female alumni entrepreneurs. However, they usually suffer from insufficient provision of ecosystem services, which are more related to accelerator programmes.

The additional ecosystem services can be received within a particular sub-cluster that has been identified as woman-led VCs in Romania ([Brava Angel](#)) and in Poland ([Black Swan](#)).

Value creation is focused more on funding and on financial awards than on mentoring programmes. Some programmes managed to move forward with workshops and mentoring activities.



FIGURE 2 VALUE CREATION CLUSTER 2: BANKING/FINANCIAL SUPPORT INITIATIVES AND PROJECTS

The below-described examples in the thematic funding clusters are the leading examples that stand out due to the reach and complexity of services provided.

Visa She's Next – is a leading example of a corporation, building a standardised international programme through the IFundWomen, and placed under the CSR values – Empowering People, Communities and Economies. The UVP consist in providing a EUR 5,000 grant and one year of mentoring services along with a central promotion event. The performance varies from country to country according to the existing hub. The programme is present in the following countries covered by our analysis Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine.

Smart Lady (BG) – was launched by the private Bulgarian bank Fibank in 2018 and is designed for women in business. It combines business and personalised support: credit opportunities, additional health insurance, support when applying for EU funded projects, a loan when the application is successful, reduction of payment during maternity leave, etc. In addition to the funding it provides, this programme manages to offer training programmes. Overall,

it has been quite successful, having gathered 350 beneficiaries as of this writing.

Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development – HBOR (HR) has been implementing women's entrepreneurship lending programmes since 2011, based on the Strategy for the Development of Women's Entrepreneurship. In accordance with the action plan for the implementation of this strategy, the goal of the HBOR loan is to encourage the establishment and development of economic entities majority-owned by women. With HBOR's funds, entrepreneurs can finance 100 percent of investments in the amount of up to HRK 700,000 with an interest rate of 2 percent, and for larger investments, all other credit programmes of HBOR are at their disposal.

Women in Business (ME and RS) is a programme run by the EBRD since 2006 and offers a mix of funding (competitive loan, not subsidised), a business assessment service 'Business lens analysis' and growth support mentorship and skills. There are five types of workshops/seminars which are free: Leadership in Action, Digitise Yourself, Keys to Financial Management, ICT Solutions and From Entrepreneurs to Businesses. The programme has had success funding 60 businesses financed with

EUR 571 million and 100 businesses supported through consulting & training.

Cluster 3: Foodtech incubators / accelerating programmes

There have been identified 46 information entries related to foodtech incubators/accelerators support initiatives and projects.

	AGRIFOOD ENTREPRE-NEURSHIP SUPPORT	FEMALE ENTREPRE-NEURSHIP SUPPORT
Cluster 3: Foodtech incubators/accelerator programmes	44	2
Since when has it operated? (earliest year identified)	1992	2016
Who funds it?	Private company 20 Government institution 12 NGO 7 EU funds 3 HEI/RPO 2	Private company 1 International Donor Countries 1

The programmes gathered in this cluster might be the closest to the definition of how a local ecosystem can perform and how policies, innovation, and community-building activities are supporting each other. They are usually based on public and European policies and funding since they are building their services around a physical infrastructure. Universities, already in possession of the research infrastructure, are able to develop entrepreneurial programmes based on research and development spin-offs.

For example, the [EntreCompFood project](#) (SI) is an initiative lead by the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana, funded by [COSME](#) which is developing entrepreneurship competencies among young people.

There is a possibility that other research infrastructure exists which supports some varieties of training and acceleration, but due to their focus on the local market, they may not have appeared in our research. Another finding is that this cluster is focusing on technology development and business acceleration in a large sense, without focusing solely on agrifood.

Additionally, the information sources show a high number of private companies running the full spectrum of accelerators, incubators and investment. There are several potential scenarios behind this finding:

- Private investors (ventures) are willing to recruit and accelerate technological companies that show potential towards markets ([Ment2grow CZ](#) and [AgriTech Hub PL](#));
- Agrifood corporations are willing to act as investors in the ecosystem ([Foodtech Lab PL](#)) in order to secure their supply chain;
- Corporate investors are willing to directly invest in promising companies ([Seed Starter](#) and [Laboratoř Nadace Vodafone CZ](#));
- Networks of locally-funded/-operated impact innovation incubators, accelerators, coworking spaces, and nonprofit organisations are performing similar activities ([Impact Hub – CZ](#)).

The second large group of incubators are supported by the government institutions as instruments to support specific policies related to innovation ([BIC Plzeň – CZ](#)) or to act as hubs for several

European instruments like EEN and EDIH ([JIC – CZ](#) and [Tehnopolis Centre – ME](#)).

Although the possibility of creating and sustaining an ecosystem is high, they are not able to supply all the needs and stages of an entrepreneurial endeavour. This means that once the acceleration has come to an end there is a need for a connection with the following stages: going international, scale-up, meeting the investor, etc.

A particular sub-cluster has been identified as research centres that are offering diverse additional services like incubation in Serbia ([BioSense Accelerator](#)) or access to enabling technologies in Slovenia ([ITC Cluster](#)).

Value creation is focused on connecting the infrastructure-specific services with everything from acceleration to funding, financial prizes and ventures. Those programmes developed by corporations may provide the access to their industry ecosystem, meaning that the solution or the product developed may be tested or marketed inside the group of business partners.



FIGURE 3 VALUE CREATION CLUSTER 3: FOODTECH INCUBATORS / ACCELERATING PROGRAMMES

The following examples within the thematic funding clusters stand out due to the reach and complexity of the services provided:

Żabka Future Lab (PL) – was founded by Żabka Group, a leading retail chain in Poland. Based on the existing infrastructure and its relationship with customers and suppliers, it offers the perfect environment for consumer testing, commercial piloting of a product or solution and potentially full-scale implementation. Their focus is currently on 9 ‘challenges’, and applicants are offered access to a network facilitating easier access to potential partners and the sharing of experiences with other startups. Since 2022, 11 agrifood entrepreneurs have been supported within the programme.

Future Verticals (BG) is a brand-new programme that was started in 2023 and has already supported 17 agrifood entrepreneurs. Future

Verticals is an accelerator that provides the opportunity for startups in FoodTech and AgriTech to validate novel ideas and co-innovate with selected mentors and partners. During its three-month involvement, Future Verticals accelerates business development through expert mentoring, sector knowledge, practical training, networking and co-creation opportunities. The programme is hybrid, with some lectures and workshops done in person and others online. The UVP consists in engaging all possible partners, meaning that the programme is designed with startups, mentors, and partners in mind, and it offers innovation know-how and insights as well as co-creation opportunities.

Tehnopolis (ME) – was founded in 2016 by the Government of Montenegro, having the ambition to be one of the key actors in the creation and reshaping of the Montenegrin innovation

ecosystem. In this sense, Tehnopolis is the most important centre for the development of startup companies and entrepreneurship in Montenegro. Tehnopolis provides a range of infrastructure and support measures that enable the opening of new companies and the development of business based on new and innovative ideas and technologies. Tehnopolis supports students, young people, startups, entrepreneurs, development teams, micro, small and medium enterprises, agricultural producers, institutions, investors, and local, national, regional, and international partners.

32 tenants have been supported since 2016 by the centre; currently there are 10 active tenants. It acts as a ‘classical’ incubator that after programme ends, the new cohort is brought in. Their ‘scale’ is supported by a network of 150 internal and external experts and fuelled by cross-border Interreg projects.

Biosense Accelerator (RS) – BioSense is a research institute having its own research infrastructure that acts also as an accelerator, being supported by public money since 2019. Its mission is to provide agri-tech entrepreneurs and teams with an intensive personalised 8-week acceleration programme. The teams are receiving individually tailored support from selected international and local mentors. Together they work on customer development, fine-tuning value proposition, focusing on marketing channels and tools that will drive customers to your doors. Teams are granted access to BioSense resources, niche expertise, networks and the community. The offered support doesn't require any equity, and or there are no strings attached to the participation in the programme.

Point One (CZ) – is a stand-alone business developed by Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague. It offers support in the form of mentoring and access to office spaces. It is dedicated specifically to the food sector and to smart farming, ecology and biotech.

ITC Cluster (SI) – is a non-profit Business Support Organisation operating since 2011 whose vision is to foster cross-sectoral innovation and implementation of novel technologies

and ICT in rural-based sectors. ITC's focus is to bring together target groups (such as SMEs, food system actors, farmers and other rural actors) and turn them into being 'Smart', thus creating a unique Europe-wide innovation-based ecosystem, supporting the shift towards more resilient, healthier, and environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable rural areas. Beside the current mission, the Cluster acts as a regional technology transfer intermediary, as well as an innovation centre and business support cluster. It is currently integrated with the national EDIH consortium and covers the agrifood sector.

Cluster 4: Women in agrifood programmes

There have been identified only 10 information entries that can be considered agrifood programmes that emphasise the participation of women, including references of EWA programme (Czech Republic, Lithuania, Romania and Serbia). This shows a lack of a gender approach for agricultural programmes, or at least a tailoring of programmes towards women in agrifood comparing to over 40 references in case of women entrepreneurial support and agrifood entrepreneurial support respectively.

	AGRIFOOD ENTREPRE-NEURSHIP SUPPORT	FEMALE ENTREPRE-NEURSHIP SUPPORT
Cluster 4: Women in agrifood programmes	6	4
Since when has it operated? (earliest year identified)	2011	2015
Who funds it?	EU funds 1 NGO 5	International Donor Countries 2 Private company 2

These are the 'classical' definition of a programme willing to engage women in agrifood, so they are gender- and sector-focus driven. This niche might not be 100% consistent in all cases and it is limited to fewer examples than the women entrepreneurship programmes. In some places the programmes take form of a cohesive and supportive communities.

The value creation is focused on building the specific community of women in agrifood and support the community with tailored entrepreneurial tools as in any other business: knowledge training, mentoring and funding.



FIGURE 4 VALUE CREATION CLUSTER 4: WOMEN IN AGRIFOOD PROGRAMMES

Grass Ceiling (HR) – this is a project initiative started in 2023 being financed under the Horizon Europe programme. Its aim is to encourage innovation led by women in rural areas and agriculture. The project is intended to establish living labs in nine countries and train 72 rural women innovators, and at the same time establish a networked learning and innovation system.

TalentA (RO, UA, PL) – is an international programme ran by an agrifood corporation (Corteva Agriscience) that is willing to consolidate their position on the market by providing a free programme regarding financial and professional training for innovative women in the agricultural sector. They offer a mix of business development education, access to funding, prizes, and new technologies for agriculture.

For the countryside! (LV) – is an example of an already specialised local programme for young farmers dedicated to learning and training that has

been in continuous implementation since 2011. In 2023 it was targeting agricultural activities and non-agricultural activities (production & services) in areas with fewer than 15 thousand people. During this period its composition included more and more females, thus creating inclusiveness in the rural areas. It creates a learning opportunity and cohesion between graduates. It is a system based on providing training activities and funding for the business ideas.

Pletenia (RS) – is a network of five women’s associations based on the idea of a rural community which offers the possibility for a joint marketplace to sell products designed by women.

Cluster 5: Policy support instruments

There have been identified 30 information entries that can be considered policy support instruments that derive from European or national policies

towards agriculture and entrepreneurship. Since these are policy support instruments, they are mostly funded and managed at the national level by governments, and there are cases where there is international mixed funding by several donor countries.

	AGRIFOOD ENTREPRE-NEURSHIP SUPPORT	FEMALE ENTREPRE-NEURSHIP SUPPORT
Cluster 5: Policy support instruments	24	6
Since when has it operated? (earliest year identified)	2007	1997
Who funds it?	Government institution 18 EU funds 3 International Donor Countries 3	Government institution 3 International Donor Countries 2 EU funds 1

Programmes derived from local policies and international relations enjoy strong institutional support, but their effectiveness relies very much on the policy-making process and international agreements that usually takes years to define. Their strong point is their ambition is to reach as many beneficiaries as possible and they act as transversal instruments for structural changes. From all possible services to be deployed, funding is the most accessible.

Most of the instruments are derived from Rural Development Programmes and in the case of international programmes there is an element of knowledge transfer between countries.

The value creation is focused on implementing in different countries funding instruments and consistent amounts of money along with the methodology that support all the delivery process and monitoring instruments. This is contributing to the policy-making and impact-measurement loop.

Women farmers (ME) – Unlocking Growth for Women Farmers is a programme offering grants to fuel business expansion. With a focus on gender-responsive budgeting, this programme

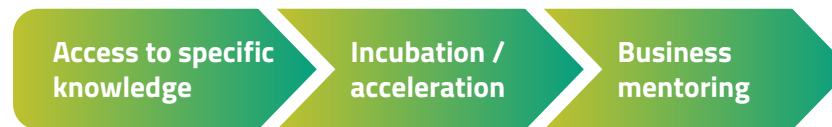


FIGURE 5. VALUE CREATION CLUSTER 5: POLICY SUPPORT INSTRUMENTS

empowers women in rural areas, doubling its support to 250 women producers. The programme is supported by UN Women and backed by Swiss and Swedish development agencies.

The Entrepreneur Woman (RO) – is a national programme that started in 2022 in order to support the establishment and development of private economic structures initiated by women, promoting an information and training system to facilitate women’s mobility in the labour market and enhancing their entrepreneurial skills for engagement in private economic structures. This is within the context of addressing issues related to balancing family and professional obligations and overcoming existing local prejudices.

Food Industry Supplier Development Programme (HU) – is a national programme started in 2020 that targets food industry enterprises, as well as

small and medium-sized enterprises producing primary agricultural products that do not require processing, as well as producing and/or processing fishery and aquaculture products.

Fast Path – Agrotech (PL) – is a national programme started in 2020 that provides grants to organisations planning to implement research and development projects in the field of development of new technologies in the agricultural sector. Areas envisaged are including: robotisation, automation, digitalisation and environmentally friendly agri-food production.



Main success factors and barriers for supporting female entrepreneurship and agrifood entrepreneurship

Based on the matrix analysis presented in the previous chapter, we have performed 3 case studies to examine best practices in supporting female entrepreneurship in the agrifood sector in Central and Eastern Europe. We dove deep into specificities of female entrepreneurship support programmes to understand what the crucial elements are to design an inclusive curriculum that will empower women participants. We also made a thorough analysis of programmes specifically targeting agrifood entrepreneurs to be able to explore tools and practices, which are most important for startups in this sector. We managed to have a closer look at the programmes designed for women entrepreneurs in the agrifood sector to validate the results of the analysis of the above-mentioned areas.

1st area: Supporting female entrepreneurship in Central and Eastern Europe

The landscape of female entrepreneurship programmes is diverse and consists of various formats of support. They can be broken down into three main categories:

1. Leadership programmes – focused on developing soft skills and providing meaningful networking opportunities;
2. Business development programmes – focused on providing knowledge and tools to successfully start or grow businesses led by women;

3. Financial support programmes – focused on providing financial resources to women-owned companies through loans and credits.

According to the interviewees, that took part in this research, really successful women entrepreneurship support programmes are a combination of all 3 categories – providing community and network to foster leadership; giving specific expertise on various aspects of business creation, and providing access to funding. In our research, we talked to 6 organisations running entrepreneurship programmes in Macedonia, Kosovo, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Estonia, Ukraine and Poland. Based on those interviews we came up with the success factors – of and obstacles to – running such a programme in Central and Eastern Europe. It is important to highlight that these facilitations and hindrances are connected strictly with programme design and operations and not the women entrepreneurs themselves. As representative of Riga TechGirls mentioned, *'Our experience shows that the most critical aspect of success can vary for each team. It might be the programme participation itself, mentorship, investor connections, or something entirely different. Each team's journey is unique, and our programme aims to provide multifaceted support to cater to these diverse needs.'*¹⁸



SUCCESS FACTORS

→ Real world connection – success stories, role models and access to the startup ecosystem and market opportunities

One of the elements that was mentioned by all our interviewees was embedding the programme in reality. There are many startup support activities that are simply providing generic support through Business Model Canva. What makes the programmes we selected for the case study unique, is the access to real life examples – success stories, failures, role models. It is important to all entrepreneurs, but to women especially, as they often face barriers related to reconciliation of work and family life. In the Aspire programme organised in Macedonia, just such a dilemma occurred among participants: Can I have, let's say, family obligations and still be an entrepreneur? The answer of the programme organisers was bringing 'one woman who is an investor and had exits [companies accelerated and sold for high price – AN] of millions of euros and still has six kids. This was impressive to all of us (...) So they are learning that our goal is not just to go through what the business

*itself needs and how to grow. But also shows them all the challenges they have as women and humans and that everything is possible.'*¹⁹ On the other hand, along with extremely successful examples, it is also important to show other women from local market sharing their story, who are not necessarily owners of a business with one million euros in turnover, but are successfully running a café or online shop. *Then you need to make local women talk to them directly and to make it more informal, not like a training, but more like a celebration of women's entrepreneurship at all levels.'*²⁰

An important aspect in the context of Eastern Europe is the perception of local entrepreneurs, especially those who have gained capital straight after their countries' transition to democracy, as those who got rich thanks to shady connections and corruption. Such an image of an entrepreneur can hinder women from pursuing this career path. A way of demystifying this is to show real life examples of women who started their career at that time and thanks to hard work have built business that are running successfully, as it was done in case of the project 'Development of Female Entrepreneurship' by iHUB in Ukraine. a female entrepreneur who owns one of the biggest retail chains in Ukraine was invited to speak at a local

event. She described her journey: '*Together with my man I had two huge bags of products bought in Europe. We were bringing them here [Ukraine – AN] and sold without sleeping for half a year. That is how I gathered my first capital. I started paying. But the first two years I was doing it with my own hands and smartly investing. And my first money was not coming from the state contracts. They were coming from retail. Maybe it was not all by the book. But I did it with my own hands.'*²¹ Those kinds of stories are powerful and allow women to relate with the role model.

Another important element that increases the impact of the programme is to show success stories of the programme alumni. '*What is truly impactful are the success stories emerging from our programme, which we then use to empower and inspire the next group of women. In the context of Ukraine, the initial programmes were highly successful, and the entrepreneurs who started with us played a significant role. We invited them back to share their journeys and successes with new participants, making it relatable and inspiring for them.*

“ ***These success stories foster a community of women, empowering them with the thought, ‘I could do this too,’ and instilling the courage and self-confidence to take the first step.*** ”

*In Estonia, the shift has been even more significant.*²² Therefore, an essential educational tool is the use of success stories and role models that are relatable to the participants. For programmes focusing on empowering women in entrepreneurship, it’s particularly important to showcase female role models who have successfully navigated the path of entrepreneurship. These role models share their journey and the challenges they faced, providing practical insights and inspiration to the participants. But it is not only about successes all the time. As one of the interviewees said *‘We are very interested in failures. Because if we can learn from failures, then it’s not a failure. It’s a lesson and it’s a step forward to succeeding.’*²³

Ensuring that the programmes provide real world examples and reflect most accurately the conditions of running a business were mentioned as most valuable for participants. Access to investors, startup ecosystem are indispensable to create benefits for women entrepreneurs. *‘One of the biggest advantages of our programme are mentors. Because we picked the ones who are stars in the ecosystem. We had some from Switzerland, Sweden, Balkans, Israel and other places. Some of them are investors themselves. We are now collaborating with few accelerators globally. We want to give our women entrepreneurs not just the capacity but also opportunities to be part of other international programs and meet with different investors. We also take them to study tours to different ecosystems’*²⁴

Mentoring – knowledge providers, connection-creators, performance controllers

The second aspect identified as crucial for a well-run women entrepreneurship programme was mentorship. Thanks to the figure of a mentor, women can build meaningful relationships, going beyond strictly business purposes and the same time enabling them to acquire expert knowledge,

access to networks and have the means to double-check the most important decisions. One of the prerequisites for successful mentoring is to give mentors maximal freedom in how they work with their mentee. *‘Each mentor has its own style of work, so we don’t interfere with the mentors. They know how to do their job.’*²⁵ Mentoring is of course not enough; it has to be based on a solid educational programme, but it *will bring added value to the education or the training activity.*²⁶

Another factor for the successful implementation of mentoring activities is to ensure that everyone involved understand this concept. *‘Many participants have never worked with a mentor before. The programme introduces them to this format, emphasising that a mentor’s role is to guide and ask the right questions rather than doing the work for them. This aspect of the programme is highly valuable for personal and professional growth.’*²⁷

To reinforce the power of mentoring it is important to create not only community of mentees, but also a community of mentors. They become more attached to the programme and become its natural ambassadors. *‘The educational approach is two-layered, focusing not only on empowering the participants but also the mentors. Most*


mentors in women's entrepreneurship programmes are women, with a few men present. This setup empowers the mentors by acknowledging their competence and success, and they in turn share their valuable experiences with other women in the programme.

“ This mutual empowerment between participants and mentors creates a supportive and inspiring learning environment.”²⁸

Mentoring proved to be especially important in case grants or other financial resources are distributed among the participants of the programme. For example, in the iHUB project in Ukraine, women received grants to carry out business operations. *'They [women entrepreneurs – AN] take care more about salaries than about the operations and it's a big problem. And so they have a person who will support them, supervise them, who will double-check, for example, if you have a contractor that you work with for the first time, you are not sure if he's a truly*

*good contractor, if the price is fair. So you can ask your mentor, can you check it? What how do you feel about it? (...) Mentorship is the must. They have a double control on the money because they have to get approval from their mentors and it's in the contract. So, if you see something goes wrong, spending money the wrong way, you can quickly address it, and at the same time, they feel that they succeed in business because they have somebody experienced working with them.'*²⁹

Similarly, in the project run in Ukraine and Estonia by Garage48, monetary grant recipients are chosen in the post-evaluation phase. *'Grants can be used for infrastructure investments, equipment, services like marketing, website development, legal support, etc. A six-month mentoring programme follows, offering needs-based mentoring and additional workshops and facilitates supervision of expenditures.'*³⁰

 **Community building – networking and meaningful exchanges**

A very important element of successful women entrepreneurship programme is ensuring that support services are delivered not just to an individual person, but to participants who are part

of the broader community. This way they can *'share the troubles, share the gains, share the pains and can feel they have the support they need.'*³¹

A significant value of such women entrepreneurship programmes lies in the community of women that forms around each participant. This community provides support, understanding, motivation, and the ability to share challenges. It's a highly valued aspect as expressed by both participants and mentors. *'There are many entrepreneurial support programmes out there, but they often aren't specifically designed for women. In our experience, women feel more secure and heard in communities tailored to them. Many existing programmes are great, but they might not feel like the perfect fit for women. This is particularly true in the tech and startup sectors, where we typically see more men participating. This can create an environment that doesn't feel as inclusive for women.'*³²

Apart from providing emotional support, such community is also an important source of knowledge and information about development opportunities for their businesses. *'They are sharing information among each other about possibilities for funding, programmes, opportunities, name it, a lot of things.'*³³ Such an approach requires building trust among participants and creating a safe space where

they can feel that they can share all information they want to share. Some of the programmes are also including alumni of previous editions in those communities to allow meaningful exchange of experiences between participants.

*'This community is aimed to share information – each month to organise one event that will also be gathering alumni where they will speak about challenges they have with their startups, with their businesses.'*³⁴

A similar approach was taken by Perspektyw Foundation in their Shenovations project.

“ We are also building a network of programme alumni, as it is important for us that the participants create a supportive network of contacts.

Women are creative and need to give each other energy, strength, and reinforcement. Culturally, we often focus on competition rather than creating supportive teams. It's our role to give the girls an

*understanding of how important mutual support is.'*³⁵

Some of the programmes are still developing their approach towards alumni engagement, but they already recognise the need to strengthen relations with participants of previous editions.

*'When we finish the programme, I am still in contact with all of the women and they say, 'let's make a group because there are a lot of opportunities from EU funding programmes, acceleration programmes, entrepreneurship programmes, exchange programmes, and we are trying to create a group for all the alumni and all our partners so they can have opportunity to share, especially here in the Balkan.'*³⁶

In the case of Women in Business Fostering the Young Women Entrepreneurship in the Danube Region coordinated by RAPIV there was an interesting approach of creating physical space where women could really meet in the real world. *'We thought about the centres as a place in which they can meet, participate in seminars, workshops on demand, or receive information on sources of funding, policies, etc. (...) What we actually aimed at was to create an opportunity for women to meet each other, to network, and it proved working well.'*³⁷ The centres were located in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania and were designed to serve local communities

after the project closed. Lack of funds was the main obstacle to keep them up and running.

A very interesting aspect of community building, especially important nowadays in Europe, is bridging gaps between communities of nationals and migrants. In the Empowering Women project run by Garage48, which was aimed at supporting female entrepreneurship among Ukrainians, the community-building activities allowed for a better understanding of Estonian-, Ukrainian-, and Russian-speaking groups. *'In Estonia, there's a noticeable divide between the Estonian and Russian-speaking populations, often leading to parallel but separate activities. However, our women empowerment programmes have effectively bridged this gap, creating a more integrated and mixed community.'*³⁸

 **Make it fun – combine serious business stuff with a bit of laughter**

Women have often double burden of work on their shoulders, working in their professional life and in the household. Additional activities around entrepreneurship support programmes shall therefore give also a bit of happiness and detachment from the reality of obligations and responsibilities.

Two of our interviewees mentioned this aspect as an important success factor. *'Fun should be very important element. To combine humour with seriousness of the topic, it is amazing. We had fun at the lectures, and we had fun at the demo day. This is something important to keep in mind, a very good ingredient in the whole programme.'*³⁹; *'A less formal atmosphere encourages them to ask questions, interact – sometimes you just need to throw them a party to celebrate their entrepreneurial journeys, because they will not do it for themselves.'*⁴⁰

→ **Exit stories – show women how far they can reach**

Providing access to role models and possibility to share challenges and dilemmas with experienced entrepreneurs is one thing, but observing real exit stories is a different level of motivation and inspiration. Especially exit stories of programme alumni proved to be very powerful. *'We had some good exit stories. Somebody selling the company for over one million dollars and going to another country to do the same thing.'*⁴¹

Sometimes showing the possibility of an exit strategy can make a woman believe she is able to become a serial entrepreneur. As the coordinator

of 'Development of the Female Entrepreneurship' tells of one of the participants: *'She never thought about what she wants at the end. She was building the company forever. Like, it will work forever with her, but her mindset totally changed thanks to the programme. She felt the idea of being a serial entrepreneur. So first, she liked that idea, so she changed. She started working more on different metrics. She put a lot of efforts to make the investment cover look nice. Maybe it was not so perfect, but she had a good metrics. She was working on the metrics to sell the company, and she sold it to the big tourist aggregator.'*⁴²

→ **Programme structure – well-thought and flexible**

All interviewees mentioned that the key to success is well-thought-out, well-designed programme structure. Almost all programmes analysed within the case study were designed in two phases. The first educational part was available to larger group of participants and the second was more targeted and catering to the specific needs of each entrepreneur was available only to selected ones, who were chosen to participate in more advanced part of the programme.

Most of the programmes are designed to cover the educational part at the beginning. *'In the first part you work on the basics – business model canvas, some basics on the market, not very deep.'*⁴³ The second part usually consists of working with a dedicated mentor to flesh out a specific business idea.

The biggest challenge of the women's entrepreneurship programmes is the diversity of female entrepreneurs taking part in it, in reference to the maturity of their business, the sector they work in, and their experience in running business activities. Two of the analysed programmes have designed two separate paths for the entrepreneurs:

In Garage48's Empowering Women in Entrepreneurship, they consisted of:

New Business Generation: *This track is designed for women to transform their hobbies, work expertise, or family background into a functioning micro business.*

Support for Existing Businesses: *This focuses on female-led micro businesses disrupted by the war. We help them relocate within Ukraine, find new markets, and reestablish their businesses.'*⁴⁴

In case of the programme run by Riga TechGirls the paths are as follow:

Green Track: *This track is for startups that are not yet fully developed and require more support, including informational lectures and group work.*

Advanced Track: *Startups in this track have already formed a team, have developed a prototype, and are further along in their entrepreneurial journey. Our focus here is on pushing them forward, including arranging meetings with investors and providing individualised support.’⁴⁵*

In other cases, the solution to the challenge of diverse pool of entrepreneurs is the flexibility of the programme implementation. *‘The most important aspect of the programme is flexibility and adaptation to the needs of the participants, as they are very diverse.’⁴⁶* Online courses and webinars are two of the best tools to adapt to different learning styles and availability of the participants. Women can take part in it when they have time and adjust the pace of their learning to accommodate family obligations and professional duties. A good example of well-functioning online platform is the project Women in Business – Fostering the Young Women Entrepreneurship in the Danube Region. The online

platform functions even after the project closes and 300 participants have already undergone training there. Different types of courses are available: *‘You have the beginners, the intermediate and advanced level with the distinction between them that at the beginners’ level we target zero business experience or up to one year of experience, then the intermediate is between one and three four years of experience, and the advanced is for people with more than three years or four years of experience.’⁴⁷* Some of the content on the platform is in English so that it is available to participants from all countries. Others are country-specific and available only in the local language.

Obviously, with this project, digital literacy was not an issue since the programme targeted young entrepreneurs up to the age of 35. In case of programmes with more diverse age groups, a good practice borrowed from Ukraine, namely online onboarding sessions. *‘In the Ukrainian programme, which is fully online, there is a focus on onboarding women aged 18 to 64 who may be digitally illiterate, teaching them basic digital skills like using Zoom and Slack, and navigating the application platform.’⁴⁸*

Despite the online format’s certain advantages, some interviewees highlighted the necessity

of organising physical meetings. *‘There should be more physical meetings. Of course, if women are coming from different parts of the country, you can organize one event, but it is very important for them to meet and to interact with each other’⁴⁹*

All programmes were designed to foster the startup mindset. Even if participants were running rather small companies or social initiatives, this specific approach to solving problems proved to be useful in all the analysed programmes. *‘We are working in the paradigm of problem-based approach over a product-based one. It encourages participants to think about who their customer is, to develop a minimally viable product, and then test and iterate based on customer feedback. This approach is valuable not only for technology startups but for every micro-business. (...)*

“ The programme fosters an entrepreneurial mindset that is beneficial not only in starting a business but in life generally.

*This mindset is about adapting to different situations, and it can be beneficial even for those working as employees. The aim is to induce a minor shift in thinking towards entrepreneurial ways, which is considered a marker of success for the programme.'*⁵⁰

At the end, the pitching event is considered an indispensable part of well-designed entrepreneurial support programme for women. *'Regardless, whether you're a woman or a man, people like competition. They really want to have this prize. To say, 'I'm number one.' It makes motivation much higher.'*⁵¹ The fact that the whole learning course leads to final competition mobilises participants and gives them a sense of the competitive startup world. *'When you pitch your idea in front of a jury, it encourages you that you can compete. And women want to succeed because during the programme they understand what they can do.'*⁵²

However, one of the programmes decided to forego the classic pitching event for the sake of real demo day with investors present. *'Instead of a simple contest, we create a startup stage, which is more than just a competition. The participants present their ideas in front of investors. We invite around 100 people who are interested in technology development, who invest in technology, and who support women in business.'*

*The aim is to provide them with the best possible platform to showcase their projects.'*⁵³

Inclusive programme design – ensure that every woman who is eligible can participate

The programme should be designed in a way that accommodates the everyday lives of its participants, particularly if targeted groups like women who might have additional responsibilities such as childcare and household duties. *'This could involve providing childcare facilities during the programme or designing schedules that are flexible and considerate of these responsibilities.'*

“ The goal is to make the programme accessible and feasible for all participants, regardless of their personal circumstances.”⁵⁴

The startup environment and its culture aren't always women-friendly, especially for those with families. *'Many startup events happen late in the evening or on weekends, making it difficult for women with children to participate. We aim to create a more comfortable and accommodating environment for women in our programme. While there are entrepreneurship programmes available, very few cater specifically to women, and support in the startup field is even scarcer. Our goal is to bridge this gap and offer more suitable support for women in the entrepreneurial world.'*⁵⁵

Empowerment – empower women in a gender-equal framework

Key element that differentiates entrepreneurship programmes dedicated to women for the regular ones is the focus on boosting women's self-confidence. *'It is not about the support of women, but empowerment of women because they need this. Men probably need sometimes to calm down.'*⁵⁶

Through its intensive workshops and mentoring sessions, the programme helps restore participants' self-confidence. *'Completing the programme, which involves learning and applying*

*new skills, serves as a success experience, which is particularly important for those in vulnerable situations. This boost in self-confidence is seen as a crucial element in motivating and moving participants forward, serving as an inspiration to others in similar circumstances.'*⁵⁷

Most of the programmes are making a lot of effort to work with women's self-esteem and their ability to realistically evaluate their capabilities, which are usually underestimated by female entrepreneurs.

“The awareness and pride of being a founder and a woman in technology have a value of their own.

*We emphasise that being an expert, having diverse skills and viewpoints is a tremendous value. We want to make women aware that their presence and diversity are valuable and meaningful.'*⁵⁸

However, even in programmes specifically designed for women, it's important to foster a mindset where

women are aiming to compete on equal footing with men, not just within a female-only context. *'The programme should avoid creating a scenario where women feel they are given opportunities only because of their gender. Instead, it should emphasise the unique strengths and qualities that women bring to entrepreneurship and leadership roles.'*⁵⁹ This approach encourages women to embrace their attributes and to contribute uniquely, rather than trying to fit into a traditionally male-dominated business world.

Personal touch – building close relations

Another aspect which makes women's entrepreneurship support programmes unique is the individual approach to each participant taken by the programme coordinator. It is not only about a personal relationship with the mentor, but also the person who is responsible for the programme's operations. *'You have to be very active in communication and try to keep things even on a personal level. Because when you're communicating with female entrepreneurs, they have a different way of approaching and communicating. They need this personal communication, and you have to be eager*

*to put more effort. It's not a traditional startup that you are dealing with.'*⁶⁰ *'Women entrepreneurs require not only financial support but also emotional backing to foster a sense of support.'*⁶¹

It is very much connected with flexibility of programme structure. *'A programme like ours should offer a diverse structure of support. The key is to have an individualised approach to each person and to tailor the assistance to their needs. It's important to really know these people and provide them with the maximum of what they need over these six months. This is crucial due to the significant differences among the participants.'*⁶²

Monitoring – quality management and feedback

Last, but not least, a well-designed programme for women entrepreneurs needs to have quality management and evaluation system. The role of experts in reviewing educational materials and ensuring that the learning experience is properly elaborated is crucial. *'When we're constructing the programme, we use the feedback and the participation of the quality management experts. These experts were present at our meetings.*

And when we were discussing the educational content, the materials, they provided the feedback on the materials.’⁶³

As brilliantly explained by the expert from Perspektywy Foundation, the approach of iteration and constant learning, which is key of the entrepreneurial mindset, should be also applied by organisations providing entrepreneurial support services. *“Fail fast, fail often’ applies to us just as it does to everyone else. Our approach is continuous improvement. If something doesn’t work out, we feel it, talk about it, and consider what we can do about it. I think that’s important in any team that someone wants to build, this deep trust and a sense of security is crucial.’⁶⁴*

BARRIERS

Most of the barriers mentioned by interviewees were related to the startup ecosystem in general and not necessarily women entrepreneurs. Lack of investment funds, limited support for mature startups. However, there were also gender-related challenges mentioned in the interviews, such as less confidence among women to apply and focus on most of the acceleration programme on

technology, which is less appealing to women than innovation as such.

Lack of support for startups with specific level of maturity

Interviewees from Central Eastern Europe claimed that there are fewer opportunities for startups with a specific level of maturity in their countries, however it was not consistent within the region. While in Macedonia the programmes are focused mostly on idea owners and early-stage startups and the more mature business endeavours are underserved, in Bulgaria there is a need to strengthen the support system for startups at the beginning of their journey. As a result, women entrepreneurs are often applying to programmes which do not necessarily match their level of maturity. Furthermore, mixing in one cohort women from various stages of business development might be inspirational, but also poses challenges for startup incubators to manage such diverse group and provide educational content relevant to everyone.

Lack of a funding component in women’s entrepreneurship programmes

Some of the analysed programmes provided funding for certain activities or reimbursement of costs related to participation in the programme (travel, childcare, etc.), however they were not connected with any specific investment mechanism. *‘You can teach them, but they will have no money. In Ukraine they do not have the stream to open anything at the moment, because it’s very tricky.’⁶⁵*

The fact that venture capital and investors in the region are not strictly focused on women’s enterprises limits to great extent the impact of incubation and acceleration programmes for women. *‘There are different types of programs for women entrepreneurs, different opportunities. We hear that the problem with the existing programs is that they provide support only to a certain level. When women entrepreneurs reach higher stage of development, they need more serious investment and funds, they need access to investors, investment funds. Here in the Balkans, we are lacking those opportunities.’⁶⁶*

Lack of investors and business angels interested in women entrepreneurship poses also challenges in terms of implementation of some of the programme's components. For example, the organisation of a Demo Day understood as a presentation of startups to investors seems impossible in Ukraine nowadays. *'I would never call it a Demo Day again because Demo Day foresees that you can get the investors there and profile investors in some topics. Ukraine not only does not have a lot of VCs, but of private equity investors, too. It's not a demo day, it's just showcasing.'*⁶⁷

On the other hand, in more mature startup ecosystems like in the Baltics, it is feasible to engage investors. For example, in the Riga TechGirls accelerator a mid-demo day is organised – *'The workshop series culminates in a mid-demo day, where all participating startups present their progress. An investor panel provides feedback during this event.'*⁶⁸ They also provide participants with the possibility to have individual investor meetings – *'For startups in the advanced track, we organise individual meetings with investors. We have a network of investors who are partners in the accelerator. These startups meet individually with investors, receive feedback, and build relationships. The goal is to secure investment*

agreements by the end of the programme. The meetings with investors are extremely beneficial.

“ These sessions save time and effort as the programme provides direct access to a network of investors.

*This is crucial for teams ready to launch their product or idea, as it eliminates the need for them to independently seek out and establish these vital connections.'*⁶⁹

Sometimes banks bridge this gap by offering specific financial mechanism dedicated to women (learn more from the previous chapter), yet such support usually lack an educational aspect as well as a community building element. *'One of the biggest banks operating in Bulgaria offers a special programme called Smart Lady. I think this is a very, very good opportunity. Loans intended strictly for women entrepreneurs taking into account different situations that they might be facing during maternity leave or some other hurdles they face during their development.*

*As for the governmental funding and the VCs, I don't think something changed. It is still very problematic for very early phase companies to have access to any type of funding, not only grants and VCs, but also governmental funding.'*⁷⁰

 **Lack of opportunities for women in rural areas and remote areas**

Women's entrepreneurship programmes target mostly women from the capitals and biggest cities in the country. Apart from iHUB's 'Development of the Female Entrepreneurship' which targeted women from 5 different regions in Ukraine: Kyiv, Lviv, Vinnytsia, Chernivtsi and Chernihiv, other programmes were delivered in one city. As a results, women's entrepreneurship programmes are serving mostly women who in general have best access to various opportunities thanks to being residents of bigger municipalities. Ralitsa Zhekova from RAPIV pointed out that *'Especially in the rural areas we need to have special programs targeted to them and we mean not only targeted to the female led businesses, but all types of businesses.'*⁷¹

→ Less interest in joining entrepreneurial programmes among women

The observation that women are less interested than men in joining entrepreneurial support programmes was raised by respondents interviewed in the second case study 'Agrifood entrepreneurial support programmes', as they were able to compare the level of initiative to join such programmes among women and men. Some of them suggested that agrifood is a rather masculine sector and that the startup ecosystem is also much more oriented on male founders. *'We were trying to raise applications from women via different initiatives, like women's councils, to promote the programme among women, but they were just not so interested in it. We are merging two very masculine sectors – one is agriculture, another is IT. So maybe that is the reason.'*⁷²

However, much more often the specific attitude of women idea owners and innovators was named as one of the causes of fewer applications from female founders. *'But I think the real reason is more in that women are not so self-confident. I see that also while talking with our researchers, because we also try to push spin-offs and spin-outs of the Institute. When you speak with male colleagues, they're like, yeah, I have something, let's try it, where can I apply, what could be done? Females are not so self-confident and are always trying to do it perfectly. First this, then patent, then publications, then this, then that. And then in 10 years we will have something. We are trying to work with our female researchers on their approach.'*⁷³ This statement only proves how important women entrepreneurship programmes are and how much the leadership component needs to be included in the curriculum.

Similar observation about a lack of self-confidence was remarked upon by Bulgarian expert in agrifood startup ecosystem – Mariya Hristova: *'Female startups face challenges in expressing their activity levels compared to male counterparts, often hindered due to being shy. They require encouragement to proactively engage in networking and establish new contacts, highlighting the necessity for additional support in this regard.'*⁷⁴

2nd area: Supporting agrifood entrepreneurship in Central and Eastern Europe

The agrifood entrepreneurship programmes in the region are providing 360 support for business incubation or acceleration much more often than is the case with female entrepreneurship support programmes. As presented in the previous chapter, they are offering various elements required to develop your business idea: access to infrastructure; incubation/acceleration; business mentoring; venture capital; an industry ecosystem and international reach.

We managed to talk to five experts running agrifood entrepreneurial programmes in Poland, Bulgaria and Serbia. Three of them were business accelerators focused on agrifood, one was a research centre separately running a business incubator and one was a retail company running entrepreneurial programmes for agrifood startups. The latter highlighted the need for more activities around supporting agrifood startups by corporate outfits in the future. *'Right now, a customer can access nearly everything through internet. So if you don't offer the best product in your physical store*

*then he will just find them online. So you sort of have to innovate to stay relevant and with the cycles of innovation becoming shorter and shorter, you basically need to supplement with outside innovation, because it takes too long to develop and work out everything yourself, especially when you're a large, sluggish corporation. And every corporation is sluggish compared to a startup. Probably food tech startups would not replace all products, but the most innovative products will come from startups.'*⁷⁵

A big advantage of delivering agrifood entrepreneurial support programmes within the frames of corporate – FMCG, retailer or research centre is direct access to a lab and the ability to test agrifood solutions. This connection with the 'real world' mentioned also in the case of women entrepreneurship programmes as an important success factor, seems to have an even more crucial role for agrifood entrepreneurs.

Below you will find the main insights regarding other success factors and barriers in running activities specifically for agrifood entrepreneurs in Central and Eastern Europe.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Targeted scouting – knowing exactly whom we want to support

Having a clear vision of whom the programme shall support is a prerequisite of a successful agrifood entrepreneurship programme. Whether foodies and sustainability enthusiasts or scientists and researchers or serial entrepreneurs and businesspeople – the scouting strategy needs to be adapted to a specific group. *'Regardless how much we are enthusiastic and have people to work on this, if you're not targeting the proper way, your target groups will be missing. We were primarily targeting scientists, but also people that are working on master's degrees, that are on faculties or just finished their studies. However, this time we actually got PhDs on board because their ideas were mature enough.'*⁷⁶ In order to achieve this result, BioSense team was travelling all around Serbia, reaching places far from Belgrade or Novi Sad, to attract scientists. *'We were traveling in some parts of Serbia, for example, Nis and Čačak, where we have science parks, we have facilities for agriculture and IT over there, but they are kind of, you know, we say far from fire, far from the heat. So they lack a certain boost,*


and that was one thing lacking was a successful strategy.’⁷⁷

It is also important to have an assessment of the number of agritech and foodtech startups in the country/region to ensure that there will be enough applications, which will provide a pool of potential participants with a high level of business/scientific ideas. The founder of the Future Verticals explained that she decided to go into agrifood field precisely because of high number of startups: *‘FoodTech and AgriTech won because we figured out that the highest number of interesting startups are in Bulgaria.’⁷⁸*

While targeting the startups in the agrifood sector, it is also beneficial to have at least a few product-based ones in the cohort, as they define the character of the incubator/accelerator. *‘The foodie ones [product-based- AN] really made the accelerator a food-centred accelerator, because at every event they would bring samples. So it really gave character to the whole program. It gave warmth to every event we organized and facilitated the connection between all participants’⁷⁹*


The kind of support the programme is providing is also important factor in defining targeted

scouting strategy. If the programme consists mostly consisting of educational components, the more advanced startups might not find it as beneficial as the early-stage ones. Working with already established products available on shelves can also pose some challenges for programme organisers: *‘Some of them were quite advanced in the sense that they already had a very defined brand and brand positioning and markets. And I think those were the ones that maybe benefited the least – if everything is kind of fixed and you’re so in love with it. You have very little inclination to change anything or take advice. I’m sure they took advice from some of the top tier mentors because we also had mentors that are on very different tiers and we had really some top-notch mentors. So, for the most advanced startups, I’m sure even one conversation and one-on-one mentoring with these mentors helped them maybe improve their marketing strategy or, you know, be more ambitious or whatever, but those ones with the prototype only were greater beneficiaries of our accelerator, I think.’⁸⁰*

 **Diversity of the startups in the cohort – inspirational connections**

While in the case of women entrepreneurship programmes the wide variety of different types

of startups was considered challenging due to need to adapt the programme to startups’ different maturity and to the sector they operate in, for agrifood entrepreneurship programmes the diversity seems to be more beneficial than problematic. *‘I think there are just a lot of interconnections in this vertical [agrifood sector – AN]. Even if you produce food in the old-fashioned way and you’re just like a really sexy startup that produces zero waste oil from nuts. This is a real case example. You are happy to be in the same environment as startups that are doing something super technological, for example monitoring the fields of nut trees with a robot. It’s very logical. That’s the feedback we got. It was very meaningful for them to be in an environment with other startups with completely different ideas.’⁸¹* The fact that the agrifood sector is covering such a wide range of activities ‘from farm to fork’ allows to keep inspirational diversity among startups without compromising the relevance of educational content or training.

 **Flexibility of the programme curriculum – freedom for startups to choose their own educational path**

Providing startups with the possibility to choose which elements of the programme to attend

is a strategy that can be implemented only by private accelerators not benefiting from grants or EU funds. Without reporting obligations, they are able to let startups themselves adapt the programme to their needs. *'None of the modules and the knowledge sharing sessions were compulsory – you choose what you want to have. If you are techie, and you're not interested in that topic, you just skip it and you go to another module that is meaningful to you. So*

“we gave this flexibility to the startups to choose what they really should be learning and whom they should be meeting.”⁸²

Such approach would be complicated in case of the necessity to show learning outcomes to donor organisation, however some space for flexibility should be envisaged, so that startups do not feel like they are taking part in a school project.

→ **Putting startups in the core of all activities – ensuring safe space for development**

Often, especially when it is a corporate acceleration programme or funded by business entities, there is an attempt to use startups' know-how and ideas for benefits of bigger companies by buying the startup or hiring some of the key staff. Such activities do not foster an entrepreneurial spirit and are often the reason why some founders do not want to participate in incubators/accelerators. Therefore, programmes selected to the case study as the most successful ones are always putting startups first. *'We were very mindful that this accelerator is first and foremost for the startups. Yes, it's an environment for other stakeholders like corporate leaders to participate, but they should participate with the only purpose to help startups move forward, not the other way around. It was created with startups at the centre, but with other stakeholders in mind.'*⁸³

→ **Mission driven approach – addressing startups purpose**

Our interviewees, when asked about the specificity of foodtech and agritech startups, highlighted their commitment to sustainability and how important the mission and vision is for their endeavours. Therefore, when scouting and supporting agrifood entrepreneurs it is important to address this component with proper educational activities (e.g., including sustainability issues in the curricula) and networking/mentoring with people also driven by passion for better solutions for our planet.

“I think foodtech has a much larger representation of founders with sort of a mission, because they feel that the food that they can create or product that they can create will have an impact.

*So, many times more than in other startup sectors, I think those founders are just fanatics of certain type of food, of certain types of lifestyles, and they want to sort of scale that through the society. And that's, I think, the largest difference when you look at average startups.'*⁸⁴

Combining training and mentoring – giving structure to the incubation/acceleration process

Successful agrifood entrepreneurship support programmes include both components – training and mentoring. Usually, the educational part was implemented first followed by more targeted mentoring process. A good example is the Future Verticals accelerator:

'The first phase was meant for to have more of a structure. So that participants know that first week they will be studying about marketing and user research. Second week, to cover the basics of product development based on user insights and product prototyping and third week we'll do for example financial business model planning, et cetera. The idea was to have some structure to really point startups attention that there are these 10 major

*things they have to be considering in their journey. The lectures were always done by the mentors. The idea of the whole first phase is for the startups to get to know the mentors really well and vice versa. So that they could choose in the second phase, by whom they really want to be mentored and spend time with this mentor. And the mentor also should like the startup they're mentoring and make a commitment. So, it was also for matchmaking purposes. 2nd phase was more practical: one-to-one mentoring; innovation visits, which were at the corporate partners; two days innovation hackathon focused on sustainability and based on the design thinking methodology to give them a blueprint for experimentation and testing because that's what design thinking is.'*⁸⁵

Providing networking opportunities for mentors – keeping them engaged throughout the process

Ensuring the engagement of the right mentors is a key to success for an agrifood entrepreneurship programme. Often, they are experts in other fields, not necessarily in agrifood (e.g., marketing, finance, HR) and they are unsure whether they will be able to contribute to a programme for agritech and foodtech startups. Yet, the Serbian

example shows that they can become very active and also see opportunities for themselves thanks to expanding in to the 'unknown world of agrifood'. *'We had 11 external managers not working in BioSense that were engaged basically on a day-to-day basis in the accelerator and they were providing lectures and mentorship throughout the programme. We had one-on-one mentorship, so every team had a dedicated mentor that was working with them throughout the programme. However, they also had one-on-one after lectures, let's say consultations with different mentors. And mentors were quite happy to work with us because the topic [agrifood] is quite new to them. Most of them hadn't known each other before and they met on our kick-off meetings. And they are quite famous and successful in their field, in HR, in design thinking, in this and that, so it had also networking value.'*⁸⁶

Embedding in the reality – giving access to labs, shelves, end users

Agrifood startups face the challenge of creating a product which is hard to be tested in the real world without a long process of certification. The biggest advantage of the agrifood entrepreneurial support programmes is the ability

to pilot the solution in real life conditions such as a scientific lab, store shelf, restaurant etc.

BioSense is providing access to its lab together with the assistance of experienced researchers to test ideas of foodtech and agritech innovators.


“ We offer open hours with researchers and in our laboratories.

So basically, the added value is that they have the opportunity to improve their solution in a technical way. So not just business modelling, marketing, strategies and so on. However, actually improving the solution technically. That is our specific thing that we are quite proud of and that we can offer.

On the other hand, the programme run by a retailer provides opportunity to put your product on sales. *'Startups from this accelerator are right now available in our quick commerce solution. We found it to be the easiest access point because they are more independent from the entire organisation. So they have their own fast track to deliver new products and they are decentralised. It's easier for them to offer additional*


*space in their warehouse than for the retailer to offer shell space to an unknown solution, basically.'*⁸⁷

In case of agritech B2B solutions the accelerator shall provide access to end users. *'If it is, for example, a system for early detection of diseases in the vineyards, they [programme operators] would need to have vineyards on board. And, specifically funded for working with startups to be ready to take some risks.'*⁸⁸

 **Partner experienced in startup acceleration – do not reinvent the wheel**

Especially research centres and big corporations who would like to start their own agrifood entrepreneurial programmes need to bear in mind that they also need guidance on how to support startups. A good idea is to set up collaboration with an experienced partner who has methodologies, tools and connections to run such a programme. *'I think the huge reason why we succeeded is because we found such a competent partner and they also delivered a tonne of value because they knew the pains of food tech startups from their own experience. They run their own accelerator, so they brought a lot*

*to the table that we didn't have to develop ourselves, so that was definitely very beneficial I think for both sides. Because then startups had a corporate partner that knew what they were talking about and had a competent partner to offer startup support. And for us it was easier because we didn't need to establish all those connections, build everything from ground up, but we had certain ready solutions that we could implement and scale through our organisation.'*⁸⁹

 **Proper monitoring and evaluation system – follow up with your alumni**

Interviewees mentioned several types of KPIs they are monitoring in terms of evaluating programmes impact. The most common included: money raised by startup, number of investments after the programme, number of employees hired by startup, number of commercial users. *'We have checked up every six months to see where they applied, if they had a success, and their number of commercial users.'*⁹⁰

BARRIERS

Most of the barriers pointed out by the interviewees were related to specificities of the agrifood entrepreneurship ecosystem and not the startup ecosystem in general. Problems with regulations and certification, lack of interest in investing in foodtech and innovators not having a typical startup mindset are clearly connected with the agrifood industry.

→ **Agrifood innovators do not necessarily have a startup mindset nor do they understand the startup world**

As was mentioned before, people interested in innovations in agrifood are often mission driven, passionate about sustainability and have less of a drive for quick return on investment and exits. Furthermore, a lot of agrifood innovations are designed by scientists and researchers who are not familiar with the startup ecosystem. The latter was a common problem in Bulgaria and Poland. *'The problem is that researchers don't know what a startup is. The young scientists, they don't know that their career path includes...entrepreneurship.*

In Bulgaria, rarely the scientists are behind the idea of developing a startup.⁹¹ 'We definitely didn't see a lot of scientists, which is probably a missed opportunity because that's also the sector that we want to look at closer, because there are new superfoods and new formulas being developed every day. And we are talking with the best-in-class universities in Poland right now to sort of establish an ongoing cooperation, so that their scientists would know that they have a potential business partner in us. We sort of missed that group in our accelerator. We were more focused on the startups, you know, driven by either people from business or with a very strong sense of mission.'⁹²

Interestingly, the lack of interest in startup ecosystem often derives from the fact that agrifood innovators are very practical, as are farmers and other agrifood practitioners. They see startup acceleration programmes as something for 'techies', who are inventing apps and not people who are making real business and tangible products. *'Somehow people who want to start an agrifood business, sometimes they don't recognize themselves as entrepreneurs and startups. So, they don't find the information and the events useful for them just because they don't consider themselves part of the startup ecosystem. Probably because sometimes the accelerators and programmes are not quite as*

practical as they should be. So they think that they need practical information, more useful than 'you have to have a pitch deck', 'you have to have a business model canvas'. The educational content usually included in the acceleration programs is not very interesting for the real agrifood work. For example, a friend – a farmer and successful entrepreneurs in the field of cosmetics. He produces different oils from hemp seed oil. He founds such programs less appealing due to their perceived verbosity. He wants straightforward, practical information and knowledge.'⁹³

Furthermore, lots of opportunities for agrifood startups are coming from the EU and are described in Brussels jargon, which is hard to understand for people outside of the 'Brussels bubble'.

“ **There are lots of opportunities for funding for startups. However, the information is presented in the Brussels way.** ”

You know, it's difficult for people to understand how to apply, where to find information, what type of programs are suitable, what is EWA, EIT. It's difficult. This terminology is not for the generation Z. We help them navigate through this maze.'

Agritech and foodtech are still new fields for many stakeholders

The stereotype of the agrifood industry being conservative and immune to innovation is changing, and the past few years rapidly reshaped this perception thanks to digitalisation of agriculture, yet still, for many, agrifood and startups are far away from each other. *'In 2015 when we established the Institute, people were telling us, 'Come on, it's like mixing water and oil! Why are you doing this?' I think that now the idea is more understandable to the people.'*⁹⁴

This perception is impacting the willingness of investors to invest in agrifood startups. One of important missions of agrifood accelerators shall be fighting this stereotypical perception of agrifood innovations as less profitable and advanced than fintech or IT startups.

Lack of funding for agrifood start-ups

First of all, there is a lack of specific funding schemes for foodtech and agritech at the national level. The existing schemes are not enough and agrifood startups are competing with companies from other sectors with very different entry thresholds, that do not require so much research and certification.

“ We don't have a specific fund just for agritech [in Serbia]. We have for innovation, for deep tech, for this, for that, but not for this niche.

*So when I am a member of a jury of one fund that is funding the startups, we have startups that are into culture, that are into agritech, that are into fintech, in healthtech. So they are competing among themselves and theoretically the better idea wins, but it is very hard to compare them.'*⁹⁵

If national and regional public funding does not support agritech and foodtech, maybe Venture Capitals are better option for startups from this field. Unfortunately, it appears not. *'VCs are much more oriented towards the traditional, quickly scalable digital startups and often are not so keen to invest in the foodtech sector. And that's a large obstacle while working with retailers or any larger partner because startups need to sort of bridge this gap between a lab in their garage to being able to get certification to work with serious business partners.'*⁹⁶ Usually, this gap is bridged because startups manage to acquire some funding and through that they can scale up the production and professionalise. *'While I see a lot of incubators and semi-public funded programmes that are fully open and supportive of foodtech, I also see that VCs are much more risk-averse towards this sector and they focus on investment this traditionally more startup-oriented, SaaS B2B, that's like the sweet spot for most of them. And I think it's with harm to the industry because it's harder for me to find a partner that's mature enough to fit into the pipeline of potential products to be offered in our shops.'*⁹⁷

If not VCs, then maybe banks could provide loans for agrifood startups to be able to increase production and scale up quicker? Again, those doors are also closed to many foodtechies. *'It's extremely hard. Banks usually need like a contract signed with a large buyer and large buyer wouldn't sign a contract if you don't have the facility and the supplies on hand. So it's like a Catch 22 that you are stuck in this middle. Slow growth of sales, but not being able to make this rapid jump. And startups are about rapid jumps and not slow development.'*⁹⁸

Providing access to investors and teaching how to approach EU funds are therefore indispensable elements of a successful agrifood entrepreneurial support programme.

Agrifood sector is operationally very demanding

Creating innovations in agrifood require high logistic efforts and are not easy to scale through internationalisation due to different regulations regarding food products, even in EU member states. *'So, we try to do that [establish collaboration with startups outside Poland], but oftentimes, for example, when the startup was coming from abroad,*

*they didn't know local requirements or logistics of moving products. Even startups from Latvia, for example, were struggling because they had products that we wanted, but because it's a physical product, it still needed to be moved. It needed the traditional capital-intensive network and they couldn't build it themselves.'*⁹⁹

The regulation and certification in the agrifood sector are also large obstacles compared to startups from other branches, like for example the digital ones. *'An IT startup can start selling as soon as they have their GDPR compliance sorted out. While for a food tech startup, they need certification. Even the most basic one is many times more advanced than anything that traditional IT startups need to tackle. So, I think that some kind of middle ground should be found to basically address that.'*¹⁰⁰

An agrifood entrepreneurial programme should therefore include some hours of support by a competent expert that could guide startups through the certification process.

Lack of connection between early-stage startups and market

Early-stage startups producing food products need to scale very quickly to be able to reach retailers with high volume demands. With such limited access to funding, as stated above, it is basically impossible to connect early-stage product-based agrifood startups with a serious business partner. *'The gap between what a corporation needs and what startups need and can do was just too large for us. So we had some startups that had an early prototypes, but nothing concrete. But it just takes them too long to scale, to reach us as a potential business partner.'*¹⁰¹ Unless the corporations do not have their own investment mechanism they are not able to connect with early stage startups. Providing only expertise or access to a sensory lab will not bridge the gap between the prototype and the market.

Are there women in the agrifood startup ecosystem or not?

In the analysis of women entrepreneurship support programmes we quoted a representative of the BioSense Institute who argued that lack of applications to their accelerator written by women led startups may derive from the fact that *‘...we are merging two very masculine sectors – one is agriculture, another is IT.’*¹⁰² However, other interviewed stakeholders suggested that foodtech is actually the most diverse field in terms of women founders. *‘From my experience, it’s the most diverse field. So when I look at AI solutions, the male founders are a much larger percentage than in the case of foodtech. Nearly in all of our startups, there’s either a female co-founder or main founder or females are much more apparent than in the, let’s call them, AI or traditional IT startups’*¹⁰³ Programme organisers claimed that they didn’t really need to put any specific D&I measures in place to make the cohort diverse. *‘It was just natural because of the fact that the pool is already diverse. We were even a little bit surprised because we don’t want to target only male startups, because that’s a shame because you miss half the population of potential founders. So, in this case, we were really pleasantly surprised at how many*

*female founders organically found us, or we found them through scouting instead of directly targeting female founders.’*¹⁰⁴ The same happened in Bulgaria, where ‘by accident’ the cohort was gender balanced. *‘I honestly don’t know how it happened, but we had quite a balanced list of startup founders who were female versus male. It just happened. We never thought of looking at their gender when we selected them, honestly. Maybe it’s foolish, we didn’t, but at the end we had a lot of female founders. Maybe it’s the sector that attracts them or the fact that we had a lot of females on the selection committee. I guess this helped the balance to happen in a natural way.’*¹⁰⁵

Despite the perception of agrifood being such a diverse field according to agrifood entrepreneurial support organisations, when we look at the available data, we see that actually women from Central Eastern Europe are underrepresented in startups in all sectors, including in agrifood. According to the report published by European Women in VC in 2021, women-founded companies in this region received only 1% of the capital, while 5% went to mixed founders and 94% to all male teams.¹⁰⁶

This is why programmes that deal specifically with women in agrifood entrepreneurship are so important and yet there are still not many of them available in the Central Eastern European region. Only 13% of programmes identified within the analysis were specifically designed for women agrifood entrepreneurs. In the next section we present main insights from the analysis of these specific entrepreneurial support programmes merging women’s empowerment and agrifood.

3rd area: Supporting women entrepreneurship in agrifood in Central and Eastern Europe

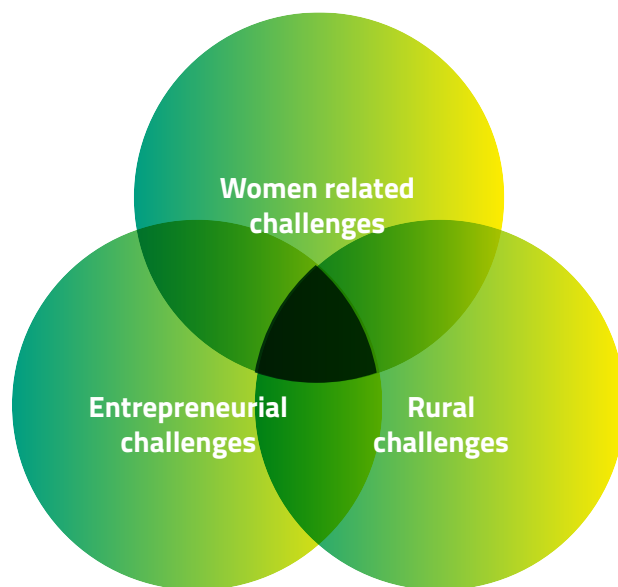
The mapping exercise performed within the project identified only 2 programmes that were specifically designed to support women entrepreneurs in the agrifood sector in the region: Empowering Women in Agrifood and TalentA. It didn't come as a surprise, considering the level of challenges that these kinds of programmes are faced with. On one hand, there are general barriers towards women's participation in the public sphere

connected with gender stereotypes and patriarchal culture still prevalent in many rural areas across Central and Eastern Europe. Complementing this is the perception of rural areas as not being innovative and not really a place to develop and run a startup. Finally, the barriers women face in STEM and in the entrepreneurial world are another layer of challenges such programmes need to tackle. Therefore, women entrepreneurial support programmes in agrifood are at the intersection of these challenges and require very specific types of logic and methodologies to successfully address them all.

What are the key ingredients to the successful implementation of such programmes?

- **FLEXIBILITY:** Being able to reconcile participation in the programme with professional activities and household duties is crucial for women to continue with the programme till the end. Using online tools; adjusting timing and dates of the offline events to school holidays and participants' schedules; providing e-learning courses that can be followed at one's own pace are very important to adjust to women's needs.

*'Nine times out of ten, women get involved in entrepreneurial ideas because it suits their lifestyle. It actually suits their lifestyle. It suits their family lifestyle. It affords them the freedom to have children. It suits their home life. So flexibility is absolutely paramount. And I would always think the more flexible you are with women, they will pay you back 100 times over. They really will. So flexibility is number one. You know, make sure that whatever programme training, whatever you do, it becomes flexible so that women can engage.'*¹⁰⁷



3RD AREA:
SUPPORTING WOMEN
ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN
AGRIFOOD IN CENTRAL
AND EASTERN EUROPE

TalentA by Corteva Agriscience

TalentA program, initiated by Corteva Agriscience, is a unique and innovative initiative focused on supporting and empowering women in the agricultural sector. This program aims to enhance the development of rural communities by focusing on several key areas:

- 1. Food Security:** TalentA emphasizes the importance of ensuring access to sufficient, healthy, and diverse food for everyone. This is achieved through various means such as ensuring the availability of food, access to clean water, reducing food waste, combating climate change, and preserving ecosystems.
- 2. Community Development:** The program encourages the submission of micro-projects that benefit entire communities alongside with positive impact on individual business run by women farmers. These projects are designed to support diverse and sustainable food programs, improve

access to food for all income levels, promote healthy lifestyles, and contribute to local economic development. This includes the creation of partnerships between local farmers and communities to foster a sustainable food system.

- 3. Education and Collaboration:** TalentA also includes educational hub for women farmers. This includes learning sessions on leaderships skills, business and operational knowledge, social responsibility and agriculture technologies.

All TalentA program participants join educational training crafted specially according to women farmers' needs and receive mentoring. Winners receive financial grant. This initiative has led to the development of innovative agricultural projects in various countries, Argentina, Chile, Hungary, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Moldova, Spain and Ukraine.

- **PARTNERSHIPS:** Women in agrifood are not functioning in a vacuum – there might be already some activities supporting female entrepreneurship in this sector, which are up and running. It is better to build on existing initiatives than reinventing the wheel. And even if a totally new programme is developed, it is good to ensure that crucial dates – application process, trainings and pitching/ demo day – are not coinciding. In Ukraine, Romania and Hungary both Empowering Women in Agrifood and TalentA programmes have been run, yet they rather complemented each other, which made both of them more impactful in the local market.

'This is something also to consider when we want to share the examples of EWA or TalentA. One of the recommendations to the NGOs should be to find a collaboration with the organisations who already do this in the country, or to check if there are similar programmes running in this specific time, maybe not necessarily for women in agriculture, but women in rural areas, or any possible programs for farmers and agri-food chain members. Just to make sure that the program is running in the dates when it's not crossed with some other program where participants can join to give them possibility to attend

EWA by EIT Food

The Empowering Women in Agrifood (EWA) program, led by EIT Food, is a comprehensive 6-month entrepreneurial program designed to support and advance female entrepreneurs in the agrifood sector. This program is inclusive and open to women entrepreneurs from a variety of countries in Central Eastern and Southern Europe.

Key features of the EWA program include:

- **Training and Mentorship:** The program offers personalised mentoring and business coaching, along with training tailored to address specific challenges in the agrifood sector. This training covers a range of business and entrepreneurial topics.
- **Community and Networking:** Participants gain access to a vibrant community of over 500 female entrepreneurs and mentors in the agrifood ecosystem. This community provides valuable networking opportunities and access to a wide range of contacts in investment, technology, and other relevant fields.
- **Funding Opportunities:** The program includes a competitive element, with the possibility

of winning substantial financial awards.

These prizes aim to support the development and scaling of the participants' business ventures.

- **Impact and Support:** EWA has supported a significant number of female entrepreneurs, providing them with the skills, confidence, and support needed to start and develop sustainable businesses. This has led to the creation of new female-led businesses and the growth of existing ones.
- **Tailored to Specific Needs:** The program is designed to be flexible and accommodating, taking into account the varied backgrounds and life situations of the participants. It focuses on empowering women with innovative ideas and startups in their initial phases, especially targeting those in rural areas with limited access to other business incubation programs or training.

EWA is a part of EIT Food's broader commitment to transforming the food system into a sustainable, healthy, and trustworthy sector. The program not only enhances the skills of individual entrepreneurs but also contributes to the broader goal of fostering gender equity in the agrifood sector.

all the programs they are interested in.(...) Thanks to partnerships we can distribute our efforts in a more appropriate way so someone is more powerful in one part, someone is more powerful in another, and we can engage even bigger audience because it's very good that we can really cover as many women as possible'.¹⁰⁸

- **ACCESS TO MENTORING:** Women in agrifood are facing so many challenges, that they really need a tailored support from a mentor to be able to overcome them and be able to develop their business. Mentoring ensures the personal treatment, ability to share different types of problems with trusted person and access to top-notch experts in their field who advise on business issues. It was even more important in cases of TalentA project, in which women are receiving grants to implement specific projects in their community and role of mentor is to guide and supervise this implementation.

'We learned that if you give everyone the possibility to develop the project on their own without mentoring support, we will not receive at the end of the day such projects that we can finance. So we really need mentors to lead their way, to guide them how to develop the project in a correct way'.¹⁰⁹

- **ACCESS TO FUNDING:** The research shows that there is lack of funding for both foodtech and agritech startups, as well as women-led startups, which means that women founders in the agrifood area are in an extremely hard position to raise funds. Without providing access to investors, preparing for investing pitches and giving advice regarding applying for EU programmes women will not be equipped enough to tackle this important challenge.

*'Finance is still that issue that we kind of like to believe is not a problem. For agriculture in particular, we have a huge issue in relation to succession. Women might be involved in running the farm, but they usually do not own the farm. They may be involved in working with the farm, but they don't own the farm. When they don't own the farm, they're not the named person on the land, which becomes an issue when they are accessing grants, CAP subsidies, all of that. But even more so, when they go to the banks, looking for financial gain or finance, this becomes a real stock gap. They're not the owners and to get financing for our business without having ownership of land can become a difficulty.'*¹¹⁰

- **ACCESS TO CHILDCARE:** Women are still very much limited in their out-of-home activities due to lack of external support in childcare. Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where in all countries covered by our analysis at least 51.2% of all children aged less than 3 years old are cared for solely by their parents, which most of the time means women. The average for this indicator all EU MS is 50.4% and for CEE is 61.9%.¹¹¹ Therefore programmes supporting female entrepreneurship in agrifood are very mindful about giving access to childcare during events, organising webinars and sessions during the day and not after working hours.

'In rural areas and in agriculture, we have more issues with childcare than anywhere else. If women cannot get past a childcare issue, then what happens really is they may still be able to run a business. They may still be able to start their business. But some of the research I have carried out is they don't want to expand it because expansion means that they need additional childcare. They cannot go to a meeting that's on in the big city so many miles away from them. So, you know, rural childcare, community childcare, additional after school care, those are all, you know, things that people kind of roll off the tongue. But when you have that individual woman who says, you know,

*"I cannot go to the city for that piece of training" or 'I don't want to get too big in my business. I just want to keep it at a certain level because if I get too big, then it's gonna cause all of these problems at home.' You will never hear a man saying that, never ever.'*¹¹²

- **CONNECTIONS WITH ALUMNI:**

One of the biggest advantages of analysed programmes supporting female entrepreneurship in agrifood is community building aspect. It is therefore important not only to create connections within one cohort, but also to allow meaningful exchanges between participants from different editions of the programme.

*'We are just keeping the connections with our alumni. We see what's happening on their farms. We see what kind of other competitions they are winning, what kind of successful stories they have because of having TalentA as a good start. And when we communicate about the project, definitely we provide the examples of these achievements or we are inviting them to be the guest speakers during our next programmes because we want them to share their experiences, they achieved successful results, and we want them to share their story with the new participants, for example.'*¹¹³



**Existing gaps in
support for female
entrepreneurship
in agrifood sector**

The research results presented above show great interest among women in agrifood to participate in entrepreneurial support programmes and in a variety of existing ecosystem organisations ready to implement such programmes successfully. Still there are few such programmes available on the market in Central Eastern Europe. Section 3 presents the main gaps that hinder the development of this entrepreneurial support area.

GAP 1: DATA

Evidence-based policy design needs data to be able to create relevant support programmes and to assess the impact they make. In case of women entrepreneurs in agrifood there is a lack of data, which makes it hard to prepare programmes that will receive funding, as it is very hard to present the background of and rationale for such activities. **The latest EU-wide gender disaggregated data on rural employment are from 2016** and national statistics offices in CEE countries are not providing gender segregated data. Existing CAP-specific objectives by country do not include data on women and men, because they are not available at the EU level.

GAP 2: POLICY-MAKING

Despite general objectives regarding gender equality in CAP 2023–2027, it is hard to set any KPIs without having information on current situation. Policy makers are often scared of not being able to achieve the ambitious targets they have set and in the case of women entrepreneurial activity in agrifood, **without existing benchmarks it is hard even to assess the level of the women's willingness to start a business.** For regional policy makers, this makes women entrepreneurial support programmes in agrifood riskier than entrepreneurial support for youth or migrants.

As explained by Professor Farrell, the current policy landscape is still not favourable for women in agrifood: *'Let's examine the innovation in relation to agriculture and our food system in Europe from the perspective of AKIS, Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems. We have to assess how much of that is geared towards women. How much of that includes women? How are they included within AKIS at the moment? So if we're excluding women within AKIS, how do we expect, I suppose, to create that technological environment which is open to women within rural areas? So I think we have to start at those areas. We have to start at the tech areas of agriculture*

*and make sure that women are included within that innovation of agriculture.'*¹¹⁴

GAP 3: FUNDING

As stated above, investment in foodtech and agritech is considered much less profitable and much riskier than investment in mobile apps or fintech. **Foodtech innovation requires specialised laboratories, sophisticated ingredients and multilayer certification processes.** At the same time investors are much less prone to invest in women led startups. In 2021, the proportion of entrepreneurs in CEE was comparable to that of Western Europe. Currently, there are 2.2 million women entrepreneurs in the region, 450 000 (20%) of whom employ staff.¹¹⁵ Women entrepreneurs comprise 10% of the 22 million women in the region's workforce.¹¹⁶

At the same time, in this region, companies founded by women received only 1% of the capital, while 5% went to companies with mixed-sex founders, and 94% to all male teams. At the same time, VC partners investing in the CEE region are predominantly men (93%), while women are heavily underrepresented, accounting for only 7%.¹¹⁷

This situation creates **a vacuum in funding for women-led foodtech startups, which places programme operators at risk of not being able to show the positive impact of their programme, which is usually measured by the level of investment gathered by the startup after the programme or after successful exits.** With respect to presenting results, there is less risk in investing in women led IT startups.

Being aware of the above-mentioned gaps allows future programme operators to mitigate these risks, by including data collection and feasibility studies at the beginning of the programme, ensuring that gender equality elements are included in all other relevant programmes for agrifood and in this way creating critical mass for women in the agrifood entrepreneurial world and setting KPIs that are not necessarily connected with investments raised or number of exits. In the last chapter of this report, we present you with a ready-to-use framework on how to create and implement a successful women's entrepreneurial support programme in agrifood.

GAP 4: THE MARKET 'CONNECTION'

While many successful female entrepreneurship programmes in agrifood have a great impact in improving business skills and creating a participant journey, it is important not to leave out the focus on the product's journey to its market. **Since agrifood is dealing with physical products and services, they tend to become 'valuable' only when they come off the production line.** Unlike for example the ICT, where an idea may be interesting for investors at early stages, an agrifood product becomes interesting when it is almost reaching the market. This may leave gaps in the support ecosystem throughout the development process.

The other part of the equation is the capacity of the product to scale once it proves its value on the market, and this implies additional logistic efforts. Therefore, it shall not be just about the banks that are developing services for the female entrepreneurs from agrifood but also about the logistic hubs to use innovation and tailor their services to create new markets and cover the existing gaps.

The connection between programmes and retailers and marketplaces is very beneficial as they provide additional insights and support on putting the product on the shelf. For the moment the existing cases seem to be the exception and more effort is needed.

The background features a light gray grid on a dark gray background. A large, semi-transparent sphere is positioned in the upper left. A thick, diagonal bar with a rainbow gradient (from green at the top to red at the bottom) runs from the top center towards the bottom left. A blue triangle with a gradient from dark blue to light blue is located in the bottom right corner. The text is positioned in the upper right area of the grid.

**Guidelines
for successful
female
entrepreneurship
programmes
in agrifood**

Using design thinking process to develop successful female agrifood programmes

Creating an entrepreneurial support programme is a process of social innovation. When tackling niche segments like female in agrifood, the process of designing it is even more challenging, as local data may be unavailable, thus making it more difficult to create an efficient formula.

A possible solution is to use design-thinking methods to create that common group approach needed when tackling the process of transforming policies into something operational. Based on mixing the existing data with creativity, a problem solving approach and a structured process, the design-thinking method is breaking the boundaries of the linear processes and makes it more appropriate for social innovation.

The use of numerous types of canvases is already a mainstream method in business, project development and social initiatives as it provides a good overview on how the components and assumptions are working together to generate impact.

From all the existing canvases that are on the market we have selected the following Business Support Canvas and tailored it to the specificity of women entrepreneurial support in agrifood. The Business Support Canvas have been developed by Designmine Ltd. & Verticalbones Ltd., in 2010, under the Creative Commons¹¹⁸ and successfully

used during the SEE Project¹¹⁹ co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the INTERREG IVC programme. One of the project deliverables was the guide to help policy makers to develop support programmes Building Next Generation Design Support Programmes – *Putting policy into action.*¹²⁰

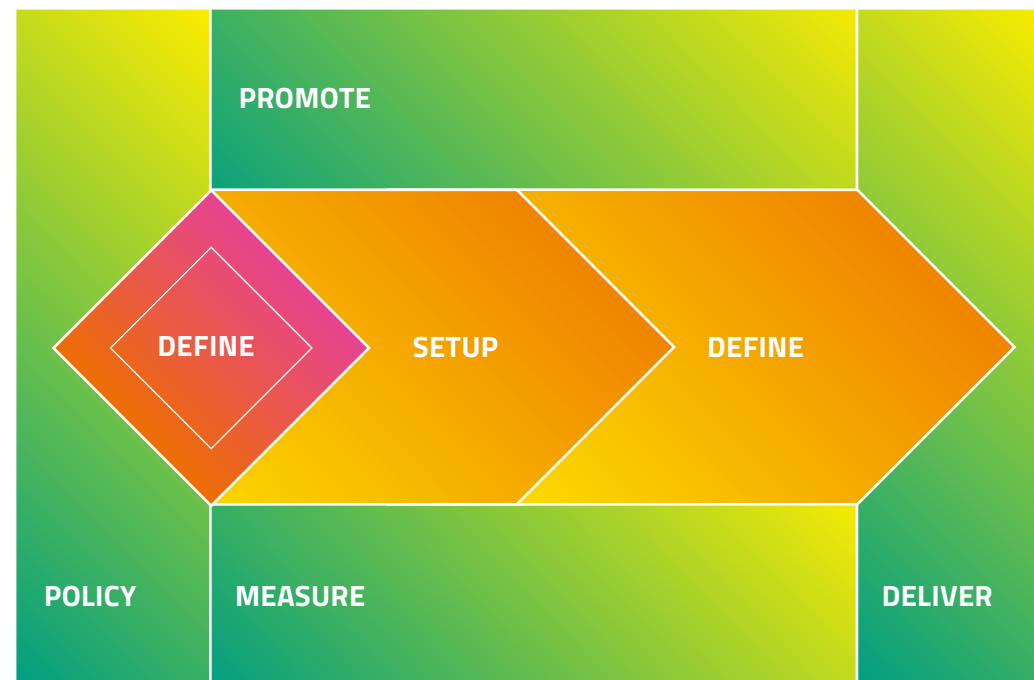


FIGURE 6. BUSINESS SUPPORT CANVAS¹²¹

The questions that underpin the Business Support Canvas and which help users to design their own ideas are shown in the table below:

POLICY

What are the current and future policy drivers?
Will policy change during the term of the programme?
Where is the funding coming from? Is it fully funded, or part-funded?

DEFINE

What is our ambition?
Are we prototyping, piloting or scaling?
Based on our ambition and the policy context, what is the offer?
What are the different levels of service?
Do we have the funding to develop and deliver that offer?
Who will develop the content?
Where will the content come from?
How are we managing the IP of content? Creative Commons?
Is client readiness defined?

SET UP

What is free and what do clients need to pay for?
What resources do we need?
Right people. Sufficient time.
Have we identified key client touchpoints?
How will we manage the client selection process?

PROMOTE

Is there a promotional campaign?
Do we have the right messaging?
Are we telling a compelling story?
Who are the key referral networks?
What are the key target markets or sectors?

DELIVER

What tangible projects will it deliver?
How is implementation managed?
Who will manage delivery?
What are the key milestones?
Does it scale over time?
What does a finished project look like?

MEASURE

Are there reporting mechanisms in place?
How often will progress be recorded?
At what stages will the programme be evaluated?
Who will perform evaluation?

IMPACT

What is the desired impact?
What stories will we want to tell and to whom?
Who is the audience for the evaluation?
Are measures in place to quantify impact?
– Number of completed projects
– Economic impact (Profit, Turnover, GVA)
– Jobs created or saved
– Efficiency and savings
– Numbers of case studies
– Process improvements
– Cultural change
– Social impact
– Environmental impact

For the purpose of this guide and based on the information collected during the data collection, we are proposing an adaptation and additional guidance related to the internal logic, so the future user may better design successful female agrifood programmes. Some of the elements will remain as they are still relevant, but the novelties will be highlighted.

The general structure of the *Support Programmes Canvas* is defined by:

- 12 thematic areas;
- internal sequence logic defined by the number of the titles;
- clustering logic defined by the proximity and colour.

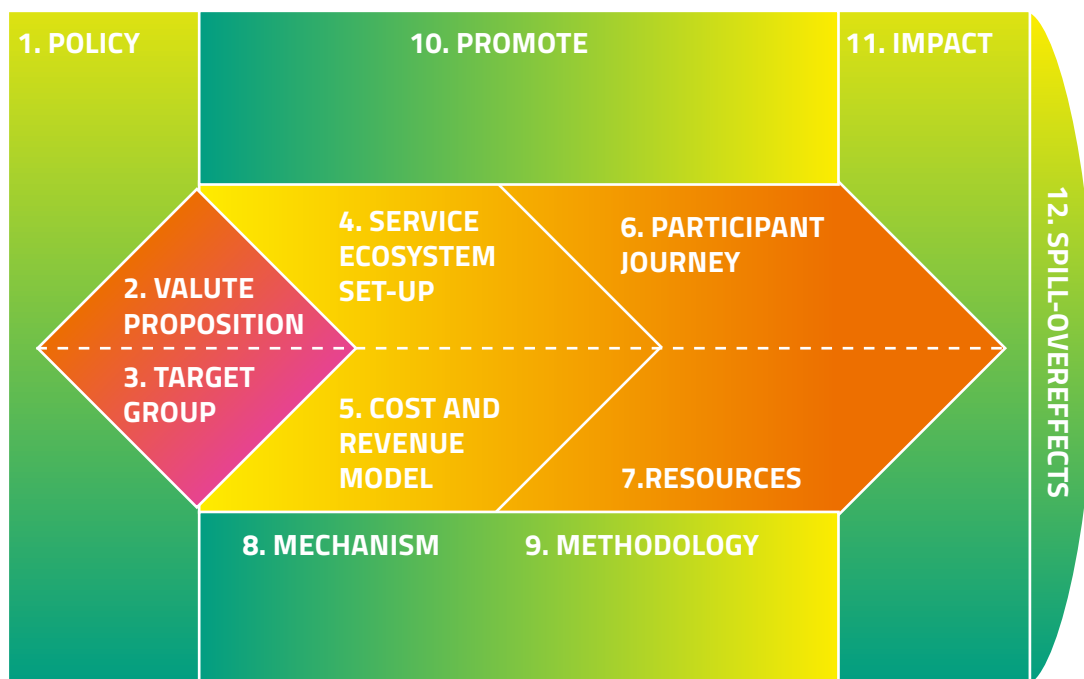


FIGURE 7. SUPPORT PROGRAMMES CANVAS

Thematic areas

1. POLICY – when developing a support programme or a specific initiative is important to have the policy back-up. The support programmes are concrete interventions in well-defined sectors in order to tackle the already defined challenges. The advantage when building on the existing policies is that users can exploit the already existing perspective, the ‘paradigm’ along with the research behind it. Developing a support programme based on a mature policy, increases the chances of triggering the existing funding, as the final result is addressing an already existing need.

To fill the policy thematic area, any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

What are the current policy statements that we are building on?

Are there any specific gender equality policies related to agrifood in place or being developed?

How are gender-related challenges defined by the policy?



FIGURE 8. THE VALUE PROPOSITION STATEMENT

What is the real need behind the policy?
 What do the studies that the policy is based on say about the current challenges?

2. VALUE PROPOSITION – having different policy instruments, it is important not to duplicate investments. Also, providing value is essential for the success and for the financial sustainability of the programme. The value proposition is meant to create the needed tailoring for the target group needs, as well as promoting differentiation and identity in the current market. In terms of women entrepreneurial support programmes in agrifood it shall consist of mentoring, community building aspects and the ability to reconcile participation in the programme with professional activities and household duties. Address those issues based on the maturity of your programme (prototype, scale-up) and take into consideration the market

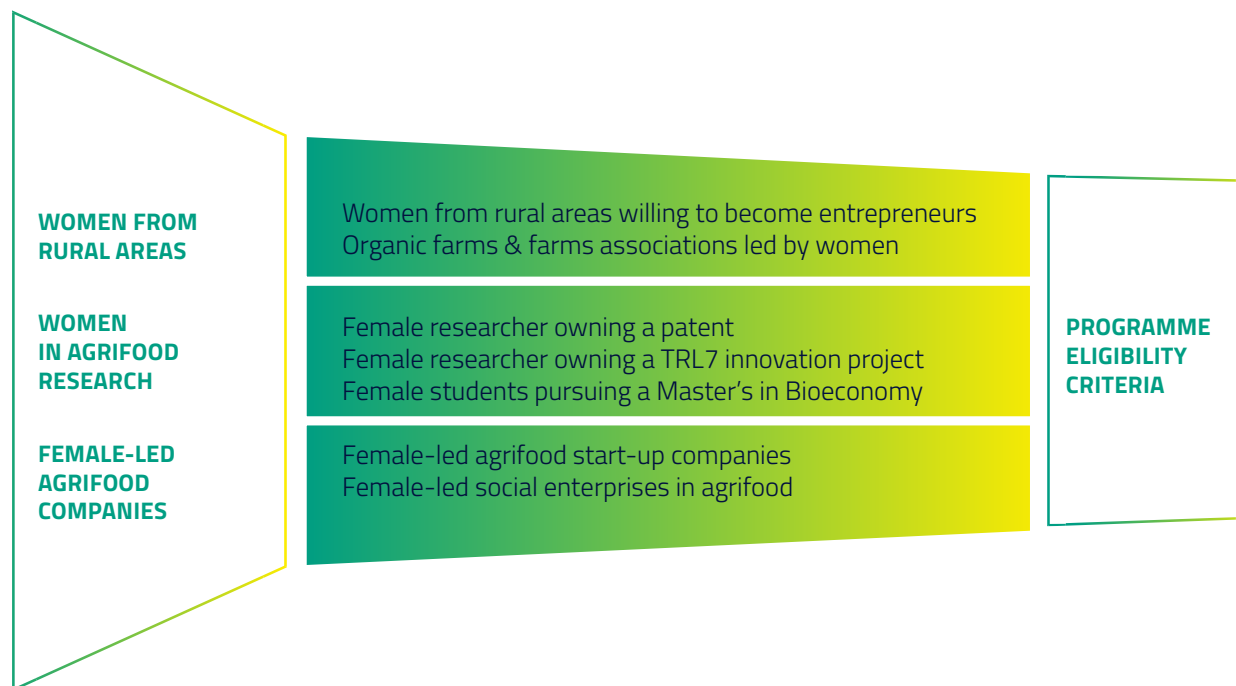


FIGURE 9. FROM POLICY TARGET GROUP TO PROGRAMME ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

readiness level. Consequently, balance between the existing experience and the market capacity to use the services delivered by the programme. When formulating the value proposition, try to build on the already existing structure that has been developed by Alexander Osterwalder.¹²² In this specific context, the value proposition may use the following adapted structure:

- 3. TARGET GROUP** – is the segment that is specifically targeted by the programme and for which the value is created – women entrepreneurs in agrifood. Such a broad definition of the group will not allow the programme to be able to measure its impact. Programme designers need to be more specific with defining the segment. The idea behind the process is to transform the policy target group into the support programme potential beneficiaries. In ‘policy terms’ this helps establishing the eligibility condition for the design programme. Whether the programme will address social innovators, scientists, young startup founders, women farmers, women led SMEs from rural areas. The example below may offer inspiration.

- 4. SERVICE ECOSYSTEM SET-UP** – in order to have a successful programme, it might deliver more than one service, covering different needs of the target group. Complex programmes also need to cover some services that are needed but they are not available within the organisation running it, so there might be a need to engage with local resources and engage different organisations in supporting the programme.

To fill the Service Ecosystem area, any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

What are the services provided by our organisation within the programme?
Are these services accessible to women?
Is there a childcare component included?
What are the services that the programme partners are providing within the programme?
How do the services create synergies? How do they reinforce and complement each other?

- 5. COST AND REVENUE MODEL** – in order to support the service delivery process there is a need to be based in the cost and revenue model. Some of the programmes may be supported by the existing policies, by some of the project budget but in the long term they need to achieve financial sustainability and possibly be monetised.

To fill the Service Ecosystem area, any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

What are the main costs related to support the service delivery within the programme?
Who is covering the costs?
What are the possible revenue streams?
Which of the services are for free and which could be monetised?

- 6. PARTICIPANT JOURNEY** – refers to how the participants are interacting with the resources offered by the programme. The services that are offered might be delivered to beneficiaries according to their capacity and needs.

Checklist:

- Access to alumni, real stories of women successful in the agrifood business
- Access to mentors prepared to work with participants with impostor syndrome and lower self-confidence and at the same time be top-notch experts in agrifood
- Opportunities for networking and community building with other agrifood programmes for entrepreneurs
- Fun element, which makes women relax a bit and forget about their responsibilities at home and at work
- Clear programme structure for women to be able to plan accordingly well in advance
- Curriculum containing apart from educational elements and business knowledge, empowering aspects
- Building meaningful relations with programme managers for women to feel safe and have a space to grow

Any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

How will participant enter the programme and will she complete the programme?
Are there differences regarding participants' access to services? How to make the programme inclusive to all women interested?
What are the milestones that the participant needs to reach in order to unlock other services?

- 7. PROGRAMME RESOURCES** – refers to the content and facilities provided to participants that are the core of the service delivery process. Usually, a programme may offer a mix of resources and services: funding and consultancy; workshops, mentoring and prizes; mentoring, pitching events and access to investors network, etc. Different resources combined offered by the ecosystem are forming the essence of the programme and the front desk of what the beneficiary can access when entering the programme.

Any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

What are the core services?
What are additional services the programme beneficiary can have access to?
Will they have access to it at their own pace, if they are not able to take part in a physical meeting or join online?
Are there differences regarding participants' access to services?
What are the milestones that the participant needs to reach in order to unlock the next services?

- 8. MECHANISM** – refers to the overall rules and governance of the programme. It concerns the rules regarding the implication of the ecosystem in delivering their services. The applicant's eligibility criteria and mechanism are the aspects that need to be clarified.

Any of the following questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

What sort of women can access the programme?

What are the criteria of selection?

What does the application process look like and is it inclusive for all the women we target? E.g., if the target women are seniors, is an online application the best approach?

What are the Quality Management processes?

What is the scenario for the drop-out cases of beneficiaries? How to ensure that women do not drop out because of childcare and household duties?

9. METHODOLOGY – refers to the specific programme rules and governance of the programme and to the theoretical perspective on how the services are delivered to the beneficiaries. It concerns the rules regarding the implication of the ecosystem in delivering their services.

Any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

How are the beneficiaries accessing the resources? For example, online, offline.

Are the resources accessible to all women within the target group?

What is the service sequencing process behind the participant journey? E.g., idea assessment, idea development, skills improvement, public idea, pitching.

How to ensure that the programme addresses stereotypically masculine elements of startup support programmes such as competition and the focus on ROI? Are women prepared to face the very patriarchal world of investors?

How does the programme community work? What is the role and engagement of the alumni?

Does the mentor choose the mentee, or vice-versa? Do we accept male mentors?

Is there a method to monitor the participants' engagement in the programme and their output?

10. PROMOTION – is to envisage the translation of the value proposition and services to be provided into a compelling communication campaign. It concerns the rules regarding the implication of the ecosystem in delivering their services.

To fill the policy PROMOTION area, any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

Is there a promotional campaign?

Do we have the right messaging? Is it compelling to women, without too much startup or EU jargon?

Are we using gender-inclusive language and visual communication?

Are we telling a compelling story?

Can we use the networks of women NGOs and agrifood NGOs?

Who are the key referral networks?

What are the key target markets or sectors?

11. IMPACT – is 'naturally' connected with the policy area, as everything in between is the policy operationalised for a specific target group in order to generate the desired impact.

To fill the policy IMPACT area, any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

What is the desired impact?

How will the programme impact women's situation in the targeted region?

What stories do we want to tell and to whom?

Who is the audience for the evaluation?

Are measures in place to quantify impact?

- Number of completed projects
- Jobs created or saved
- Efficiency and savings
- Numbers of case studies
- Process improvements
- Cultural change
- Social impact
- Environmental impact

12. SPILLOVER EFFECTS¹²³ – refers

to unintended effects beyond the impact that beneficially derive from the programme.

This area can be filled after the programme iteration as it is harder to really estimate them during the design phase. Its role is to assess if the programme managed

to create additional value margin beyond the design of the framework. Taking them into consideration helps future iterations, specialisation, diversification and the eventual pivot to new variants and new internal support processes.

Any of the following guiding questions can be used:

Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas

What are the surprising effects that the programme had? What was the gender dimension of its impact?

Can these effects to be measured?

What have participants been experiencing beyond the services? For example, community support, empowerment, etc.

Internal sequence logic

We are proposing filling the Women Entrepreneurial Support Programmes in Agrifood Canvas based on the number order as it matches the general logic behind it. However, since we are dealing with a creative process of translating group ideas into a living concept, we are aware that skipping some points and getting back to them afterwards might

be the best approach.

At the beginning there might be more unknowns and ideas dispersed, but as the process continues, ideas will become more and more concrete and gaps reduced.

At the end of the process, reading the canvas in the proposed order will help with checking the internal consistency and create the common ground if performed in a group.

The cluster logic

The thematic areas can be organised in several clusters that can help understand the general logic beyond the simple sequencing:

- **Policy cluster** consisting of the Thematic areas 1, 11 and 12 – any policy shall generate the desired impact and transformation based on a theory of intervention;
- **Market defining cluster** consisting of the Thematic areas 2 and 3 – its role is to generate value creation for the target group by making it specific and relevant;

- **Service design and delivery cluster**

consisting of the Thematic areas 4, 5, 6 and 7 – it is the core of the programme by assuring that the services are supported with the cost and revenue model and that the participants will have best possible experience based on a tailor-made journey;

- **Supporting mechanism cluster** consisting of the Thematic areas 8, 9 and 10 – its role is to assure that the appropriate resources are engaged and that the service delivery goes as planned.

Annex: Women in entrepreneurship and agrifood in 15 CEE countries

A statistical overview of women's roles in the entrepreneurial field and agrifood sector across 15 countries is presented below. Some of the data cited in the descriptions of the countries below are included in the chapter titled 'Overview of the Situation of Women's Entrepreneurship in Agrifood'.

BULGARIA

In recent years, Bulgaria has seen a gradual increase in the number of women entrepreneurs. Data from the National Statistical Institute reveals that women account for approximately 30% of all company owners in the country, positioning Bulgaria around the midpoint compared to other European Union nations, where the average percentage of women entrepreneurs is also around 30%.¹²⁴ These women entrepreneurs in Bulgaria are predominantly involved in running small retail and service businesses. There has also been a notable rise in the number of consultancy firms owned by women, reflecting an expanding influence in various sectors.¹²⁵

Furthermore, there is a positive trend in the adoption of computer and Internet services

by women entrepreneurs, which suggests an increasing involvement in technology-related fields.

World Bank data on female employment in agriculture in Bulgaria shows a continuous decline over three decades. In 1991, women made up 12% of the agricultural workforce, a figure that decreased slightly to 11% by 2000. By 2010, this number had dropped more significantly to 5%, and in 2021, it further declined to 4%. This trend primarily stemmed from the development of the service sector in Bulgaria, where women have increasingly found employment over the years. Despite this overall decline in agricultural employment, the 2016 Eurostat data indicate that among women still employed in agriculture, 25% are farm managers in Bulgaria, highlighting their substantial contribution to the country's agrifood sector.

CROATIA

The entrepreneurial environment in Croatia is dominated by men. Data from 2022 collected by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor¹²⁶ regarding Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA)¹²⁷ reflect

a noticeable gender gap. While 17% of Croatian men are involved in TEA, the percentage for women is considerably lower at 9.5%. This indicates that although women's participation in entrepreneurship is growing, it is still significantly less than that of men.

In the case of established businesses, the gender difference is visible, albeit slightly less pronounced. Men lead with 4.3% owning established businesses, compared to 2.5% for women. This suggests that women encounter difficulties not only in starting but also in maintaining and growing their businesses.

A sector-specific analysis, particularly in agriculture and mining, reveals significant gender differences. In these sectors, women represent 14.4% of those involved in TEA, compared to 24.2% of men. The gap in sector participation underscores potential barriers that women may face in industries traditionally dominated by men.

Analysing changes over the years Croatia, is characterised by limited self-employment and particularly low entrepreneurial activity among women. The nation's self-employment rate has been declining since 2010, falling below the EU

average in 2014 and reaching 11.8% in 2016, compared to 14% in the EU. Women are significantly underrepresented in entrepreneurial activities, with gender gaps larger than the EU average.¹²⁸

According to data from the World Bank, the percentage of employment in agriculture in Croatia has shown a decreasing trend over three decades, including women. In 1991, women constituted 25% of the agricultural workforce. By 2000, this number had dropped to 17%. A decade later, in 2010, the percentage further decreased to 15%. By 2021, it had significantly reduced to 5%. Additionally, data from 2016 shows that among those working in agriculture, women made up 26% of farm managers in Croatia.¹²⁹

CZECHIA

According to OECD data, about 15% of workers in the Czech Republic are self-employed, which is slightly above the EU average. In the Czech Republic, support for self-employment and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is widely promoted, and many projects offer customised training and coaching for women. Despite this, men

are about twice as likely to be self-employed as women.

The typical Czech female entrepreneur is on average 45 years old (77% of them) and has one child. Additionally, the percentage of self-employed men who employ workers is higher than that of women (19.5% for men compared to 15.1% for women).¹³⁰

Agriculture is a pivotal component of the Czech Republic's economy, with the agrifood sector being a primary driver. With farms occupying 44% of the country's area, this industry stands as one of the Czech Republic's most vital economic sectors.¹³¹

In the Czech Republic, over the last three decades, a consistent decline in employment in the agricultural sector has been observed, with a period of stabilisation in recent years. This trend also applied to the employment of women. In 1991, women constituted 7% of the agricultural workforce. By the year 2000, this percentage had decreased to 4% and continued to fall, reaching 2% in 2010. Since then, this rate has remained steady, with 2% of women employed in agriculture in 2021.¹³²

Furthermore, data from 2016 indicate that in the Czech Republic, only 12% of women working in agriculture held managerial positions¹³³. This was one of the lowest rates of female leadership in agriculture in the entire region.

ESTONIA

In Estonia, the entrepreneurial environment is notably well-developed and sophisticated. This advanced landscape extends to the inclusion and participation of women as entrepreneurs especially in the startup ecosystem. The proportion of female start-up founders has gradually increased in Estonia in recent years. In 2020, the proportion was 15 per cent, reaching 17 per cent in 2022. Data from Startup Estonia and Statistics Estonia reveal that in 2021 there were 2,983 women working in Estonian startups, making up about 36% of all startup employees. Among these, 196 startups have at least one female founder. The sectors where startups founded by women are most prominent include health (30%), education (28%), and communications (23%). Women make up 24% of the founders of communications and food and agricultural

technology startups, and 22% of founders in deep-tech. Notably, around 10% of all female startup employees occupy managerial positions. The proportion of startups with female founders in Estonia stands at approximately 20%, aligning with the average in Europe and surpassing the global average of 14%.¹³⁴ The proportion of female startup founders is 16%, showing a slight increase compared to 2020 (15%).¹³⁵

The data regarding employment in the agricultural sector shows a consistent and significant decline over the years, which also applies to women's employment. In 1991, women made up 14% of the agricultural workforce. However, entering the 21st century, by the year 2000, this percentage had significantly dropped to just 4%. A decade later, in 2010, the number continued to fall, reaching a mere 3%. By 2021, the percentage of women's employment in agriculture had further decreased to just 1%.¹³⁶

In 2016, in the agricultural sector, among women working in agriculture, women accounted for 33% of farm managers in Estonia, which is one of the highest rates of female leadership in agriculture in the region¹³⁷.

HUNGARY

In Hungary, there are fewer women entrepreneurs than men. The 2022 GEM data indicates a clear gender gap in terms of Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA), with women's participation being 7.9%, significantly lower than the 11.9% for men.

The situation in established businesses further emphasises this gender disparity. Women only make up 4.5% of established business owners, compared to 9.2% for men. This significant difference suggests that women face considerable obstacles not just in starting but also in maintaining and developing their businesses.

In terms of perceptions regarding entrepreneurship, Hungarian women and men show almost equal levels of optimism, with 63.8% of women and 64.2% of men viewing starting a business as a good career option. This indicates a positive overall attitude towards entrepreneurship in both genders.

However, differences emerge in perceptions about the ease of starting a business. A smaller percentage of women (43.3%) compared to men (51.2%) believe it is easy to start a business.

The primary barriers to women's entrepreneurship in Hungary, as revealed by the research, include: difficulty in accessing financing, cost of business registration, lack of personal savings, high interest rates, lack of information, insufficient entrepreneurship skills, limited prior business experience, and inadequate mentoring and advisory support.¹³⁸

In the sectors of agriculture and mining, the gender gap in TEA is even more pronounced. Women represent only 6.5% in these sectors, significantly lower than the 33% for men, reflecting a considerable gender divide in this industry.

In Hungary, the percentage of people employed in agriculture, including both women and men, has undergone significant changes over the years. In 1991, 12% of employed women worked in agriculture, but this number decreased to 3% in the year 2000. By 2010, this percentage had further reduced to 2%. However, by 2021, there was a slight increase, with the figure rising back to 3% of women's employment in the agricultural sector.

Moreover, data from 2016 indicate that women working in agriculture represented 27% of farm managers in Hungary, demonstrating women's

participation in this sector.¹³⁹ Despite this, the percentage remains significantly lower compared to men.

LATVIA

According to the 2022 data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) indicates a significant gender gap. While 17.8% of Latvian men are engaged in TEA, the percentage for women is lower, at 10.7%. This suggests that although women participate in entrepreneurship, their involvement is significantly less compared to men.

The difference is more pronounced in the case of established businesses. Only 8.3% of women own established businesses, in stark contrast to 16.3% of men. This difference highlights the challenges women face not only in starting but also in maintaining and developing their businesses.

In terms of perception, women's enthusiasm for entrepreneurship as a career choice is slightly lower, with 55.6% of women viewing it positively compared to 57% of men.

The perception of the ease of starting a business also varies significantly by gender. Only 25.5% of women believe it is easy to start a business, compared to 33.2% of men. This difference may indicate additional challenges that women perceive or encounter in the business startup process.

In the sectors of agriculture and mining, the gender gap in TEA is significant. Women represent only 2.8% in these sectors, much lower than the 19.1% for men, suggesting that these are still male-dominated sectors.

Regarding agricultural employment in Latvia, the data indicates a steady decline in the proportion of women employed in this sector over time. In 1991, women constituted 20% of the agricultural workforce. As we moved into the new millennium, by the year 2000, this figure had decreased to 13%. A decade later, in 2010, the percentage further declined to 6%, signifying a substantial shift. By 2021, the percentage had reached a low of 4%, indicating a significant decrease in female participation in the agricultural sector.¹⁴⁰

Regarding agricultural employment in Latvia, the data shows a steady decline in the number of people employed in this sector over the years,

which also applies to women. In 1991, women constituted 20% of the agricultural workforce. Entering the new millennium, by the year 2000, this figure had decreased to 13%. A decade later, in 2010, the percentage further dropped to 6%, signifying a significant change. By 2021, this percentage had reached a low of 4%, indicating a substantial decrease in women's participation in the agricultural sector.¹⁴¹

However, when women do find their place in the sector, they occupy high positions. In 2016, in the agricultural sector, women working in agriculture represented 44.8% of Latvian farm managers¹⁴².

LITHUANIA

According to the 2022 data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, in terms of Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA), there is a noticeable gender difference: the participation of men is 16.6%, while that of women is 9%. This gap indicates that although women's involvement in entrepreneurship is present, it is significantly less than that of men.

This difference becomes more pronounced when looking at established businesses. In Lithuania, only 5.7% of women are business owners, while among men this percentage is nearly twice as high, at 10.9%. This disparity highlights the challenges women face in maintaining and developing their businesses.

Regarding perceptions, Lithuanian women show a strong positive attitude towards entrepreneurship as a career option, with 68.2% viewing it positively. This is slightly below the 71% for men, indicating a generally positive but somewhat less optimistic view among women.

However, there is a significant difference in the perception of the ease of starting a business. Only 31.9% of women believe it is easy to start a business, compared to 41.4% of men, pointing to potential barriers, real or perceived, that women encounter at the beginning of their entrepreneurial journey.

In specific sectors such as agriculture and mining, the gender difference is stark, with women's participation at only 7.1% compared to 28.9% for men. This suggests that traditional gender roles still play a significant part in these industries.

In Lithuania, the percentage of people employed in agriculture, including women, has consistently declined over the years. In 1991, women constituted 22% of the agricultural workforce, but this percentage steadily decreased over time. By 2000, it had fallen to 15%, indicating a noticeable decline in women's participation in this sector. In 2010, this percentage dropped further to just 6%, showing a significant reduction in women's employment in agriculture. The latest available data from 2021 indicates that this percentage has fallen to a mere 4%, further emphasising the continuous decline in women's representation in Lithuanian agriculture.¹⁴³

However, in 2016, women working in agriculture in Lithuania comprised 45% of farm managers, which was one of the highest rates in Europe.

MONTENEGRO¹⁴⁴

In Montenegro, the landscape of women's entrepreneurship, including their role in agriculture, presents a varied picture. In 2021, 23.7% of all legal entities contributing to the country's GDP had a woman owner or administrator. Regarding entrepreneurs as natural persons registered

in economic activity, women constituted 31.34% in the same year. Although the total number of new legal entities rose by 6.5% in 2021 compared to 2020, specific data related to women's shares in these new entities is not available.

When it comes to property ownership, only 4% of women own real estate and 8% own land in Montenegro. Remarkably, about 15% of women are registered as farm owners, indicating their presence in the agricultural sector.

Focusing on women-led enterprises, about 23% of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) were run by women in both 2021 and 2022. The peak year for women's entrepreneurship was 2018, with women administrators representing 28% of active enterprises across various economic sectors. Over the last five years, the average share of women entrepreneurs (as natural persons engaged in economic activity) has been 30.86%.

In terms of legal forms of business, the largest share of women in Montenegro's business sector was in the category of natural persons, accounting for 31.9% of the total. This was followed by legal persons (23.7%) and farms (14.5%) as of the end of 2021.

Regarding the size of enterprises, in 2021, 99.1% of companies in Montenegro were small, with less than 50 employees. This figure is only slightly lower than in 2020. Medium-sized (50 to 250 employees) and large companies (over 250 employees) are scarce and typically consist of large trade chains, banks, public utility companies, and similar entities. Notably, women do not own any of these medium-sized or large companies.

The majority of companies in Montenegro in 2021, particularly those owned by women, were registered in the service sector. This sector includes trade, crafts, intellectual services, and similar activities where women typically start their businesses.

In the agricultural sector, the Register of agricultural farms in Montenegro recorded 16,803 farmers in 2021, of which 1,683 were women. This represents just over 14% of women in agriculture, highlighting their involvement yet also indicating room for increased participation in this sector.

NORTH MACEDONIA¹⁴⁵

From 2018 to 2021, the economy of North Macedonia grew at a modest rate, about 1.22% each quarter. In this time, the number of businesses owned by women was among the lowest in the region, only 23% to 29% of companies were run by women. Importantly, data from 2017 shows that companies where at least one woman had more than 50% ownership made up 29.4% of all active businesses.

Between 2019 and 2021, there was an increase in active businesses run by women. However, men still own a much larger share of businesses, 71% compared to 29% owned by women. The gender difference is also seen in leadership roles, where women hold only 32% of these positions.

Most businesses run by women are small, with 86.7% having 1–4 employees from 2019 to 2021. These businesses are mainly in the wholesale and retail trade sector, processing industry, and professional, scientific, and technical activities. Larger businesses with more than 50 employees are rare among those run by women, only 0.1%.

Regionally in 2021, the percentage of women owners or administrators varied. In Skopje, it was 30.42%, in the East 33.51%, in Vardar 32.99%, South-West 29.87%, North-East 34.03%, South-East 31.54%, Pelagonija 34.69%, and Polog 22.93%. This shows that women are involved in business across different regions of North Macedonia.

Men are much more active than women in sectors such as construction, transportation, and storage. Women's business activities are more focused on wholesale and retail trade, vehicle repair, and other service sectors. In agriculture, it's estimated that women make up only 0.8% of business owners.

A big challenge in understanding women's entrepreneurship in different sectors of North Macedonia's economy is the lack of detailed data categorised by gender. This makes it hard to fully analyse the number and scale of women entrepreneurs in the country.

POLAND

In Poland, the entrepreneurial landscape for women presents a unique profile, especially in comparison

with the countries analysed in this chapter. The Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) shows an almost equal participation rate between genders, with 1.7% for men and 1.6% for women. This indicates an equal level of engagement in initial entrepreneurial activity in Poland.

The scenario changes slightly when looking at established businesses. Here, women represent 9.6% of owners, slightly less than the 10% of men. This nearly equal number of owners of established businesses demonstrates the significant progress Polish women have made in maintaining and developing their enterprises.

In terms of perception, both Polish women and men view starting a new business as a good career option, equally at 41.9%¹⁴⁶.

However, a significant difference emerges in the perception of the ease of starting a business. More women (80.8%) compared to men (79.8%) believe it is easy to start a business. This unusual trend suggests that women in Poland might encounter fewer barriers or perceive the entrepreneurial environment as more conducive compared to their male counterparts.

In the sectors of agriculture and mining, women's participation in TEA is 15.4%, slightly less than the 18.6% for men. This small difference indicates a level of gender balance in these traditionally male-dominated sectors.

In the Polish agricultural sector, according to data from the World Bank, a decreasing trend in the percentage of people employed in agriculture is observed over three decades. This decline is noticeable among both men and women, but it is more pronounced in the case of women.

In 1991, women made up 26% of the agricultural workforce, a figure that decreased to 18% by 2000. In 2010, this percentage declined further to 13%, and by 2021, it had reduced to 7%.¹⁴⁷ Despite this decline in overall employment, women still have a notable presence in leadership roles within the sector. In 2016, among women working in agriculture, 29% of farm managers in Poland were women, indicating their significant involvement and leadership in agriculture¹⁴⁸.

However, gender income disparities are prevalent in the sector. The average farm size managed by women is 6 hectares, whereas for men it is 12 hectares. Furthermore, the value

of production for farms managed by women is typically around 6,000 euros, compared to 21,000 euros for those managed by men.¹⁴⁹

ROMANIA

Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) reflects a gender gap in terms of entrepreneurial participation. While 10% of Romanian men are engaged in TEA, the percentage for women is 6.6%. This indicates that women's involvement in starting new businesses is significantly lower than that of men.

However, when looking at established businesses, this difference narrows slightly. Men constitute 10.1% of established business owners, compared to 7.1% for women. Although the gap still exists, the smaller disparity suggests that women who venture into entrepreneurship are also able to maintain and develop their businesses.

In terms of perception, Romanian women are extremely positive towards entrepreneurship as a career choice, with 82.4% viewing it positively, slightly higher than the 81.2% of men. This high level of optimism among women is a positive

indicator of changing attitudes towards entrepreneurship in the country.

Regarding the perceived ease of starting a business, the figures are relatively close between genders, with 41.7% of women and 43.3% of men believing it is easy to start a business. This suggests a fairly equal level of accessibility to entrepreneurial endeavours¹⁵⁰.

Importantly, in the sectors of agriculture and mining, women's participation in TEA is higher than that of men, at 15.3% compared to 12.5%. This significant deviation from the usual trend indicates strong female representation in these traditionally male-dominated sectors.

In Romania, women play a crucial role in the agricultural sector, not only in terms of employment numbers but also in leadership and entrepreneurial endeavours. As of 2021, women accounted for 30% of farm managers, highlighting their significant contribution and leadership in this essential economic area. This is supported by data from the World Bank, which shows that female employment in agriculture, as a percentage of total female employment, was 17.89% in Romania in 2021.

Observing the trend over the years, the percentage of female employment in agriculture in Romania has been notably high, although it has experienced a gradual decrease. This is associated with a general decline in employment in the agricultural sector. In 1991, women made up an impressive 42% of the agricultural workforce. This figure slightly decreased to 39% by 2000 and then to 32% by 2010. By 2021, the percentage had declined to 25%, which, despite being lower than in previous years, still represents a significant segment of Romania's agricultural workforce¹⁵¹.

According to the National Statistics Institute, trade and services are the favoured sectors among rural women entrepreneurs, especially those under 35 with secondary education. In contrast, women with a university education and higher income tend to invest in industries such as food or cosmetics and in tourism.

Most rural women entrepreneurs in Romania initiate their businesses with their own capital, usually up to €5,000. They tend to rely more on financial support from relatives or friends rather than banks, possibly due to a lower level of financial management skills.

SERBIA¹⁵²

Serbia has witnessed a remarkable transformation in its entrepreneurial landscape in recent years. Between 2021 and 2022, the number of active entrepreneurs in Serbia increased from 221,541 to 290,387, and the number of companies grew from 102,215 to 118,158. Alongside this growth, the share of women-led businesses in the total entrepreneurship landscape also rose from 28.1% to 31.2%. This increase reflects a significant shift in women's entrepreneurship, moving away from traditional sectors like trade and catering to more professional, scientific, innovative, and technical sectors.

From 2011 to 2021, the share of women among entrepreneurs, including those who are registered and simultaneously act as co-owners or main representatives of companies, increased from 28.9% to 31.2%. This growth has been relatively uniform across different regions, with a slightly higher concentration of female entrepreneurs in the Belgrade region and a lower presence in the region of southern and eastern Serbia. Notably, in 2021, the rate of new business registrations among women was higher at 12.3%,

compared to 9.9% for men. However, the rate of business closures was also higher for women at 64.6%, as opposed to 60.0% for men.¹⁵³

In the Serbian agricultural sector, a consistent decline in employment has been observed over the years. For women, this was a decrease from 30% in 1991 to 12% in 2021.¹⁵⁴ Despite this decline in employment, the role of women as farm holders has been increasing. In 2018, among women working in agriculture, women accounted for 19.5% of all farm holders in Serbia. This increase reflects broader demographic changes, including an aging population and rural depopulation.

Of the total 562,895 family farms registered in Serbia, 109,919 are managed by women, marking an increase of 2.2 percentage points from 2012 to 2018. This growth in women farm holders is observed across all Serbian regions, with the highest increase in south-east Serbia. Despite these advances, women's share in total arable land (10.8%) and livestock (9.9%) is relatively low, suggesting that farms managed by women are generally smaller than those managed by men. This pattern of disparity in farm sizes is particularly noticeable in the Vojvodina region, where women manage larger farms than in other areas but

still hold a smaller share of overall agricultural resources.¹⁵⁵

SLOVAKIA

In Slovakia, the entrepreneurial landscape for women exhibits distinct patterns. Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) reveals a noticeable gender gap, with 11.9% of men engaged in TEA compared to 9.5% of women. This suggests that the involvement of women in starting new businesses in Slovakia is slightly lower than that of men.

This gender difference extends to established businesses as well. Men represent 9.1% of owners of established firms, while women comprise only 4%. This gap underscores the challenges women face not only in starting but also in sustaining and growing their enterprises.

Regarding the perception of entrepreneurship as a career option, Slovak men and women hold similar views. While 52.3% of men view entrepreneurship positively, a slightly lower percentage of women, 48.8%, share this perspective.

A significantly greater gender disparity arises in the perception of the ease of starting a business. Only 16.5% of women believe it is easy to commence entrepreneurial activities, compared to 24.5% of men. This notable difference may indicate perceived barriers that women encounter when considering entrepreneurship¹⁵⁶.

In Slovakia, known for its strong agricultural background and capability to ensure food self-sufficiency, a notable gender gap exists in the entrepreneurial activities within the agriculture and mining sectors. Men's involvement in these sectors is significantly higher, with 19.1% participation, compared to just 6.3% of women. This disparity underscores the challenges faced in the agricultural sector, particularly for women who often encounter limited business opportunities and a lack of sufficient resources.

In 2022, the number of women employed as farm workers increased by 4.0% (500 persons), outpacing the 3.3% growth in male workers. This shift contributed to a decrease in men's dominance within the farm workforce, which decreased to 72.6%. Notably, the number of self-employed women in agriculture surged by 120%, reaching 2,200 persons, indicating a growing

trend of women taking on entrepreneurial roles in the sector.

The agricultural workforce is undergoing an aging process, with the average age reaching 47 years in 2022. This increase was particularly pronounced among women, whose average age rose by 2.3 years to 48.1 years. Despite a decline in younger age groups, there was a noticeable increase in older female workers, especially in the 45–49 and 50–54 age brackets¹⁵⁷.

The food production segment of agriculture also reflected these trends. In 2022, the number of workers in this segment increased by 4.3%, with a modest yet significant 0.7% increase in female workers. This growth in female participation in food production aligns with the broader trend of increasing female involvement in various aspects of agriculture.

Comparatively, in 2021, there was a 9.7% increase in female employment in agriculture, contrasting with an 11.5% decrease in male employment. Despite a modest overall increase in the number of regular employees, the rise was largely driven by an increase in female employees, indicating a growing presence of women in regular employment roles within agriculture.¹⁵⁸

SLOVENIA

Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) in Slovenia shows a significant gender gap. While 10% of Slovenian men are engaged in TEA, the percentage for women is considerably lower, at 5.6%. This indicates that women's participation in starting new businesses is significantly lower than that of men.

This difference extends to established businesses as well. Men make up 9.1% of established business owners, compared to just 4% for women. This gap highlights the challenges women face not only in starting but also in maintaining and developing their business ventures.

However, in terms of perception of entrepreneurship as a career choice, both Slovenian women and men show a high level of optimism, with 72.7% of both genders viewing it positively. This indicates a generally favourable attitude towards entrepreneurship among both genders in Slovenia.

Regarding the perceived ease of starting a business, there is a slight gender difference. About 64.5% of women believe it is easy to start a business, compared to 70.7% of men. Although lower, women's

perception is still relatively optimistic, suggesting growing confidence among female entrepreneurs.

In the sectors of agriculture and mining, women's participation in TEA is much lower than that of men, at 2.4% compared to 12.3%. This gap underscores traditional gender roles and barriers in these sectors.

Regarding self-employment, according to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, there were significantly more self-employed men than self-employed women. In October 2021, 66.1% of all self-employed individuals were men, while 33.9% were women. Both of these numbers increased on a monthly basis, with the former rising by 0.4% and the latter by 0.3%. However, when compared to October 2011, the number of self-employed men decreased by 2.9%, whereas the number of self-employed women increased by 15.6%. In October 2021, the majority of self-employed individuals, both men and women, were engaged in agriculture, forestry, and fishing, accounting for 22.9% and 20.8%, respectively.¹⁵⁹

In Slovenia, there has been a consistent decrease in the participation of women in agriculture over the years, which is associated with the overall declining employment in this sector. In 1991,

women constituted 11% of the agricultural workforce, but this percentage steadily decreased in the following decades. By the year 2000, it had fallen to 10%, and by 2010, it had further reduced to 9%. The most recent data available from 2021 shows a continued decline, with women's participation in agriculture now accounting for only 4% of the total female employment in the sector.¹⁶⁰

UKRAINE

In recent years, Ukraine has witnessed an increase in the number of women serving as managers and private entrepreneurs. In 2023, a considerable increase in entrepreneurial activity among women was observed in Ukraine. They established 56% of all new sole proprietorships, collectively launching over 10,000 new enterprises. This significant growth in women's entrepreneurship is particularly notable in the regions of Khmelnytskyi and Chernihiv. This is a marked increase considering that in 2021, women accounted for 49% of newly established firms. By mid-November 2023, the number of new businesses founded by women had already surpassed the total number for the year 2021. However, the rise in the number of women

occupying executive positions in companies was more gradual, reaching 31% in 2023, up from 28% in the previous year¹⁶¹

In the agricultural sector, one in every six employed individuals in Ukraine works in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. While men account for 71% of all formal employees in these sectors, women are often engaged in informal work. Women represent a larger proportion of migrant labour in rural areas, with 58% of such labour being female.¹⁶² However, only 20% of farming enterprises are headed by women, who typically engage in manual labour tasks like cultivation, planting, weeding, and harvesting.

Additionally, the pattern of employment in the agricultural sector as a percentage of total employment has evolved over the years, and this includes women. In 1991, the proportion of women in agriculture was 19%. By the year 2000, there was an increase, with this figure rising to 22%. However, in the following decade, a decrease was observed, with the percentage of women falling to 16% by 2010. The most recent data from 2021 show a further slight decrease to 15%, indicating a small but steady decline in the proportion of women employed in agriculture relative to the total number of employed women in the country¹⁶³.

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2	https://rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-vision/shared-goals_en	i.e., who are owning and managing	31	IDI iHUB	59	IDI Garage48	
3	https://www.eitfood.eu/	a running business that has paid salaries,	32	IDI Riga TechGirls	60	IDI RAPIV	
4	https://eit.europa.eu/activities/eit-regional-innovation-scheme-ris-closing-innovation-divide-europe	wages or made any other payments	33	IDI Aspire	61	IDI AgriVentures	
5	https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/european-innovation-scoreboard_en	to the owners for over 42 months	34	IDI iHUB	62	IDI Garage48	
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8	https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/european-innovation-scoreboard_en	15	This is likely also related to the combination of the agriculture and mining sectors, where the participation of women in the latter is very low.	37	IDI RAPIV	65	IDI iHUB
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11	For instance, according to data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor in 2022, the gender gap is much larger for women's established business ownership (W/M 0.68) than for startup activity (W/M 0.80)	18	IDI Riga TechGirls	40	IDI iHUB	68	IDI Riga TechGirls
12	https://www.gemconsortium.org/	19	IDI Aspire	41	IDI Aspire	69	IDI Riga TechGirls
13	According to the GEM methodology, Established Business Ownership Rate is understood as percentage of adults aged 18–64 who are currently own-	20	IDI iHUB	42	IDI iHUB	70	IDI RAPIV
		21	IDI iHUB	43	IDI iHUB	71	IDI RAPIV
		22	IDI Garage48	44	IDI Garage48	72	IDI BioSense
		23	IDI Aspire	45	IDI Riga TechGirls	73	IDI BioSense
		24	IDI Aspire	46	IDI Perspektywy Foundation	74	IDI AgriVentures
		25	IDI Aspire	47	IDI RAPIV	75	IDI Retailer
		26	IDI RAPIV	48	IDI Garage48	76	IDI BioSense
		27	IDI Garage48	49	IDI RAPIV	77	IDI BioSense
		28	IDI Garage48	50	IDI Garage48	78	IDI Future Verticals
		29	IDI iHUB	51	IDI iHUB	79	IDI Future Verticals
				52	IDI Aspire	80	IDI Retailer
				53	IDI Perspektywy Foundation	81	IDI Future Verticals
				54	IDI Garage48	82	IDI Future Verticals
				55	IDI Riga TechGirls	83	IDI Future Verticals
				56	IDI iHUB	84	IDI Retailer
				57	IDI Garage48	85	IDI Future Verticals

86	IDI BioSense	age group - EU-SILC survey: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_childcare_arrangements#Childcare_arrangements	(Original work published 2015)	IPOL_STU(2019)608868_EN.pdf
87	IDI Retailer		123 An addition to the existing Business Support Canvas, since usually all policies have already defined their impact indicators and during the evaluation process they are the main aspects to be considered. For our specific niche of female agrifood programmes, which are generally new and dispersed, taking into account the spillover effects is helping the program to discover new potential areas for future iterations.	134 https://estonia.ee/200-female-founded-startups-from-estonia/
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97	IDI Retailer	120 The guide can be downloaded at the following link: https://www.businesssupportcanvas.com/wp-content/uploads/NextGenPublication.pdf	127 Understood as the percentage of adults aged 18-64 who are either nascent entrepreneurs or owner-managers of a new business, meaning the proportion of the adult population that is either starting or running a new business.	144 Data concerning Montenegro have been accessed from: Statistical Office of Montenegro – MONSTAT, Tax and Custom Administration of Montenegro, Ministry of Agriculture of Montenegro.
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About EIT Food

EIT Food is the world's largest and most dynamic food innovation community. We accelerate innovation to build a future-fit food system that produces healthy and sustainable food for all.

Supported by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), a body of the European Union, we invest in projects, organisations and individuals that share our goals for a healthy and sustainable food system. We unlock innovation potential in businesses and universities and create and scale agrifood startups to bring new technologies and products to market. We equip entrepreneurs and professionals with the skills needed to transform the food system and put consumers at the heart of our work, helping build trust by reconnecting them to the origins of their food.

We are one of nine innovation communities established by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology ([EIT](#)), an independent EU body set up in 2008 to drive innovation and entrepreneurship across Europe.



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