

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AREAS IN RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES CAUSED BY COVID-19

## Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women



### 1. INTRODUCTION

In June 2019, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (MAFWE) to promote gender equality in the Republic of North Macedonia. The cooperation is defined through the following steps: institutionalization of gender-responsive budgeting in the strategic planning of agricultural and rural development, policy development and budget processes in accordance with international and national commitments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other UN human rights treaties, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA).

As part of the MoU, the Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women within the MAFWE was established. The Working Group aims to implement activities related to gender mainstreaming in policies and national programmes for agriculture and rural development. The Working Group is composed of representatives from relevant government institutions, scientific-educational institutions and representatives from the non-governmental and civil society sector.

Taking into account the latest developments in the agricultural sector and rural areas related to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, as part of its activities to support women in agriculture and rural areas, assessed the situation and defined recommendations for improving the living and working conditions of women under the circumstances caused by COVID-19.

## 1.1. The effects of COVID-19 on agriculture

The effects of COVID-19 can be observed in the agricultural products market and the manner of operation in agriculture and rural areas. Recent research (World Bank 2020<sup>1</sup>, Lusk et al. 2020<sup>2</sup>) predicts that the consequences shall have more pronounced effects based on:

- Market changes in supply and demand;
- Greater impact on labour-intensive crops;
- Disruption to supply chains (due to limited flow of food products and labour force movements. Disruptions are already evidenced in the fruit and vegetable market (World Bank 2020b<sup>3</sup>);
- Disruptions to agricultural commodity production (lack of input and labour force). According to World Bank 2020b, the low availability of pesticides is already affecting crop protection and is likely to have an impact on yield reduction throughout the year. The availability of labour force in the supply chain is increasingly becoming a problem, especially for very labour-intensive sectors such as fruit production, vegetable production, meat and dairy production;
- Potential long-term changes based on increased transport costs;
- Emergence of unrelated supply chains;
- Change in consumer behaviour;
- Increased product substitution.

This situation with COVID-19 has particularly harsh and direct consequences on the lives and work of women in agriculture and rural areas.

Taking into account this situation, the Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, at its meeting held on 28 April 2020, reviewed the information and reports provided by the National Federation of Farmers, the Rural Coalition and other members of the Working Group and prepared this document with recommendations for addressing the challenges caused by COVID-19 in agriculture and rural areas.

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank 2020, Special Focus, A Shock Like No Other: The Impact of COVID-19 on Commodity Markets; <https://bit.ly/2MrKQCf>

<sup>2</sup> Lusk et al. 2020, Special edition: COVID-19 impact on agriculture, Purdue University; <https://bit.ly/36YcHDD>

<sup>3</sup> World Bank 2020b, Three imperatives to keep food moving in a time of fear and confusion; <https://bit.ly/36Wug76>

## 2. OVERVIEW AND SITUATION OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AREAS

The negative effects of the health and economic crisis in the country caused by COVID-19 affect women in rural areas, because their workload has now increased both at home and in the field, and their work is still not adequately valued.

Globally, women are most often involved in the informal economy and their labour is not recognized and paid for.<sup>4</sup> This situation is particularly evident and increases in scale in times of crisis or emergency.

Our country is also facing this situation due to the global crisis caused by the spread of the COVID-19 Coronavirus. Even more alarming is the fact that only 38% of women in rural areas are considered economically active, and the rest belong in the so-called informal economy where the status of women in terms of their health and social protection is not regulated. This directly increases the gap in the already existing discrimination and makes rural women an even more vulnerable category.

Women in rural areas face a number of challenges, including social exclusion, unemployment, gender discrimination, unequal distribution of income and resources, dominance of traditional norms, deprivation of the right to agricultural land and property, deprivation of the right to paid parental leave, limited access to education, information, health care, public and social services. Such conditions force rural women to endure greater poverty and encourage migration. About 62% of rural women are not active in the labour market due to household duties and childcare, and 47% of unemployed rural women perform unpaid work on family farms. According to the source of family income, households living on agricultural income are ranked second according to the poverty level (57.4%), with the highest level observed among families with income from social assistance (90.6%). Of all rural women, 58% do not have personal income, twice as many as men in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> Women work an average of 11.06 hours a day (41.7% of the total workload falls in the category of unpaid work). Men work an average of 9.68 hours a day - mostly paid work.<sup>6</sup>

The conditions in times of crisis undoubtedly have a greater negative impact on the vulnerable categories of citizens, which also applies to the health crisis caused by COVID-19, that has grown into an economic and social crisis, especially affecting women in rural areas.

<sup>4</sup> UN Women Report on Progress of the World's Women 2019 - 2020; <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2019/progress-of-the-worlds-women-2019-2020-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3512>

<sup>5</sup> Multidimensional poverty analysis - the Republic of Macedonia, <https://bit.ly/3cxO3uC>

<sup>6</sup> "Measuring Women's Empowerment in Agriculture with Survey-Based and Experimental Economic Method", a study implemented by the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food - Skopje and supported by UN Women, 2019

### 3. THE IMPACT OF THE CRISIS CAUSED BY COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 Coronavirus, based on Government's recommendations, has forced most employees to continue to perform their work activities from home, as one of the measures to prevent the spread of the infection. Unfortunately, due to the specifics of the sector, women in rural areas are not able to follow these recommendations because agricultural work requires their presence in the fields. Their workload has increased both at home and in the field, as there is a shortage of seasonal workers in the agricultural sector, and thus families perform the work in the field themselves. However, the burden of domestic responsibilities is fully transferred to women.<sup>7</sup> In addition, due to their engagement in the household, agricultural work is delayed while there are many activities to be performed in this period as plant fertilization, sowing in raised beds, planting some of the crops, and the care for livestock continues on a daily basis.

Increased domestic responsibilities also pose a difficulty for single parents, persons caring for the elderly and families that include members with disabilities. In such situations, the care activities are completely transferred to women. These factors, complemented by the traditional values that are dominant in the rural population, put women in agriculture and rural areas in a difficult and extremely unfavourable position and limit their movement, access to information and available opportunities for development.<sup>8</sup>

Women in agriculture and rural areas face limited access to information and the Internet. Some of them have minimal computer literacy skills, while one additional challenge is access to the Internet, in conditions where they need to help their children in attending on-line teaching and educational courses.

Regarding health and social protection, there are evident differences that exist in the legislation regarding insurance, i.e. the lack of compliance of the Law on Health Insurance with the Law on Performing Agricultural Activity and the Law on Pension and Disability Insurance. The insurance of registered women-farmers is not fully covered, depending on the basis on which they are insured. In addition, there are larger numbers of bases or ways to be insured, which creates complete confusion for women in rural areas.

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<sup>7</sup> Second field analysis of the National Federation of Farmers (NFF) on the impact of the health and economic crisis caused by COVID19 on agriculture

<sup>8</sup> According to the latest survey of the Rural Coalition, 96% of rural residents need to receive daily, regular and up-to-date data and information.

This condition poses a serious risk and an obstacle to adequate health care for women in agriculture and rural areas who do not have any health protection during the health crisis caused by COVID-19.

During this period, women do not go to the markets to sell their products, do not sell some of their products from door to door, and do not sell directly from their farms, for which reasons their income is reduced and the economic survival of their small family agribusinesses is threatened. For these reasons, of particular importance is the adoption of the “Rulebook on conditions and hygiene standards for production and market placement of food of non-animal origin for direct supply, and general and specific requirements for the application of traditional methods of production, processing, and distribution of food with traditional characteristics”, which provides opportunities for women to make direct sales of agricultural products and processed food products. In addition, the importance of this Rulebook was emphasized in the work of the Group, while developing the criteria for measure 115. Essential to the success of the investment and the effectiveness of the measure is to enable easier access of women to markets and sale of their products in order to achieve faster effects of the measure and return on investment.

These conditions require urgent intervention and a long-term strategy to reduce the harmful consequences in line with international recommendations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In line with CEDAW’s recommendations referring to rural women, the 2018 report on RNM of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women states the following: “Rural women should be provided with access to subsidies and rural development measures to the highest possible extent and fast implementation”. Our country, as a member of the United Nations, has an obligation to observe and implement the CEDAW recommendations.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rapid and sudden developments and responses to the health crisis caused by COVID-19, both on a global level and in the Republic of North Macedonia did not allow governments and institutions in the affected countries to recognize the extent to which the economic consequences of the crisis will differently affect women and men, particularly in rural areas.

Hence, the Working Group proposes the primary and secondary effects of the current crisis on different individuals and communities to be taken into account, as a fundamental step and precondition for the development of further effective, fair policies and interventions.

The Working Group hereby proposes the following recommendations for defining future measures that would address the needs of women in agriculture and rural areas:

1. Publish, in the shortest possible time, the results of the public call for financial support for measure 115 for support of an active female member - holder of a family agricultural holding to ensure timely implementation of future activities related to the measure. Proposal: By 30 June 2020, the Agency for Financial Support of Agriculture and Rural Development (AFSARD) should review all applications and approve those that meet the requirements. This will directly support women in agriculture and rural areas, facing a number of challenges during the pandemics.
2. Increase the number of approved applications, which will enable to support all applicants who **meet the requirements and have submitted complete documentation** for measure 115 for an active female member of an agricultural holding under the Programme for financial support of rural development 2019.
3. In the shortest possible time adopt the “Rulebook on conditions and hygiene standards for production and market placement of food of non-animal origin for direct supply, and general and specific requirements for the application of traditional methods of production, processing, and distribution of food with traditional characteristics”.
4. Conduct an analysis of specific problems and critical points in order to develop a successful model for linking agricultural products with end consumers. Connect women producers with end consumers in order to overcome the disruptions to the supply chain as a consequence of the current market situation.

5. Improve the availability of public information, as well as advisory information on production and placement, which can be implemented by the regional units of MAFWE, the National Extension Agency and municipalities. This recommendation is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 (example: via telephone infoline service, timely posting of information on their websites, social media, timely announcements in local media addressing current problems and possible solutions).
6. Encourage and promote the registration of women as individual farmers with full health and social insurance, as well as initiate complete adjustment of the laws related to the registration.
7. Increase the level of digital/computer literacy of women in agriculture and the rural population in general.
8. Improve inter-institutional cooperation in order to provide timely, regular, accurate and complete data from AFSARD to conduct relevant analyses. Relevant gender-disaggregated data and thorough analysis are the basis for planning and development of future strategies, policies and measures for supporting women in agriculture and rural areas.



These recommendations are developed by the Working Group for Gender Equality within the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of Republic of North Macedonia, supported by UN Women in the framework of the project "Promoting Gender Responsive Policies and Budgets: Towards Transparent, Inclusive and Accountable Governance in the Republic of North Macedonia", funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency - Sida.

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