Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FOOD POLICY, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY IN EASTERN EUROPE, CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

Summary and recommendations of the international forum (10, 12, 17 March 2021)

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Cover photo:
Eka Mirinashvili – female farmer from Kakheti region in Eastern Georgia. Ms. Mirinashvili purchased new tractor and cultivator with the support from EU and FAO matching grant programme.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CIS	The Commonwealth of Independent States
DHS	demographic and health surveys
ECA	Europe and Central Asia
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDP	gross domestic product
GVA	gross value added
HSE	National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow)
ILO	International Labour Organization
NGO	non-governmental organisation
RAS	rural advisory services
RUB	Russian rouble
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
USD	United States dollar
WAE	women's agricultural employment

1 Introduction and background

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in collaboration with the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow, organized the international forum "Food policy, rural development and gender equality in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia: current trends and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic" which took place on 10, 12 and 17 March 2021.[1]

The objective of the forum was to contribute to a regional policy dialogue on issues pertaining to the sustainability of food systems in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia (part of the Europe and Central Asia [ECA] region[2]), with special reference to the role of rural women and young people. The forum also aimed to strengthen a broad expert platform, comprised of policymakers, academics, farmers and development practitioners, and business community and civil society representatives from different countries of the region. The three virtual sessions (webinars) focused on promising practices and solutions for moving towards transformative and inclusive food systems and contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

During the three webinars, organized throughout March 2021, participants identified and discussed key priority issues in agriculture and food systems policies in the region, their connection to gender inequalities in rural areas and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The keynote speakers provided representation from the different countries of the region and international organizations. The virtual sessions were designed to facilitate discussion and knowledge exchange among 475 participants.

The first webinar was dedicated to "Gender responsive agricultural and food systems policies: status and prospects in Europe and Central Asia region" (10 March 2021) and brought together 8 panellists and over 220 participants from various parts of the region. This webinar's discussion contributed to formulating the policy vision within the FAO-led Regional Dialogue in the leadup to the UN Food Systems Summit 2021.

The second webinar (8 panellists and 155 participants), "Rural women, youth and economic opportunities: cases from Europe and Central Asia to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs" (12 March 2021), had a dual role as a side event for the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development 2021. In this context, the webinar enabled the sharing of promising practices and experiences with wider audiences, focusing on improving the status of young women in rural areas through the expansion of their economic opportunities and providing younger generations with access to healthcare, education, safe living environments and the other benefits of development.

The third webinar, "Leaving no one behind: Gender inclusion in education and professional training for a rural economy of knowledge" (17 March 2021), brought together 12 panellists and over 100 participants. This webinar focused on the strategic needs of rural women, such as access to tertiary education, and how to ensure that rural women get equal access to the benefits of innovation and technologies, including the digitalization of agriculture.

The full forum programme and a comprehensive list of keynote speakers and moderators are provided in

1 Information about the forum is available at https://inagres.hse.ru/en/faogenderwebinars/.

2 The ECA region that is discussed in the context of this report focuses on 18 countries in the following sub-regions: Central Asia (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan); Eastern Europe (Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation and Ukraine); South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia); and Southeastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey). All of the countries except Turkey are former socialist countries and are not members of the European Union. This classification (see, for instance, FAO, 2020a, p. v) is substantially narrower than the FAO ECA Region (53 countries including all of Western Europe and Cyprus; see, for instance, FAO, 2021).

Annexes I and II.

Video recordings of the webinars are available online at the following links:

Webinar 1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QR8oQJ7UJFc

Webinar 2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taQiNGXtJDI

Webinar 3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=388QJcM14eE

This report presents a summary of the discussions held at the webinars. It identifies and documents the key issues regarding the role of women in the region. The presentations and discussions focused on the role of women in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) and South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), but also highlighted cases from the Russian Federation, other Eastern European countries (Belarus, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine), the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and Turkey.

The conclusions given here summarize the findings of the webinars held in March 2021, before the war in Ukraine. As of April 1, 2022, the crisis has affected an estimated 18 million people and forced massive population displacement (FAO, 2022). More than 4 million refugees fled the country most of whom are women (UNHCR, March 31, 2022). The insecurity and supply chain disruptions have an immediate and long-lasting impact on food security and nutrition, migration and remittances flows, and rural livelihoods of all countries in the region. These recent developments indicate risks of exacerbating pre-existing inequalities identified by this report.

This report provides promising examples that improve the socio-economic status of rural women and young people. Despite recent developments affecting food policies, rural development and gender equality in the region, these examples are relevant for inspiring actions for strengthening the capacities of family farms, small-scale food producers and rural small and medium agri-food enterprises in the ECA region. In addition, the summary offers policy recommendations that can be deployed by FAO to assist its Members in moving towards sustainable and inclusive rural economies, accelerate their progress toward the attainment of SDGs and address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The webinar panellists analysed the role of women in agri-food systems, contextualizing women's contribution within a regional overview that examines a number of general topics, including overall agricultural growth in the region, household-level food security and rural poverty, and demographic trends. Discussions also addressed labour migration, a critical phenomenon that has dramatically influenced the composition of the agricultural labour force in several countries of the region, particularly in Central Asia, and gender patterns of demographic changes in rural populations in the Western Balkans, drawing upon the example of Serbia. The socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the ECA region were also considered.

Having outlined the background and the role of women in agri-food systems, this paper summarizes and reflects upon the main topics discussed in the forum's webinars that are considered to have a direct bearing on key concerns regarding gender inequality in the region. The findings are organized into chapters with the following sub-sections:

- The role of women in agri-food systems and rural development in the ECA region:
  - women's employment in agriculture and opportunities;
  - informality of female employment;
  - trends contributing to the feminization of agriculture;
  - the growing role of women in agricultural entrepreneurship and management;
  - prevailing social practices and attitudes towards gender.
- Key gender inequality issues identified by the forum's participants:
  - gender gaps in education and in professional specialization;
  - women's access to finance, land ownership and other productive resources;
  - gender pay gap;
  - socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural women.

- Promising practices for improving the socio-economic opportunities of rural women in the different countries of Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia:
  - addressing discriminatory gender norms;
  - improving access to rural advisory and extension services;
  - addressing gender gaps in education and gender biases in professional specialization.

Given the scope of the original sources (three webinars), this report does not aim to capture, compare and contrast the full range of differences in all of the countries in the ECA region, nor does it present an exhaustive analysis. Its primary aim is to highlight key and emerging trends and issues, identify data gaps, and showcase promising practices as was discussed during the webinars. For these reasons, some analyses in the summary are limited by data availability, especially in relation to sex-disaggregated statistics.

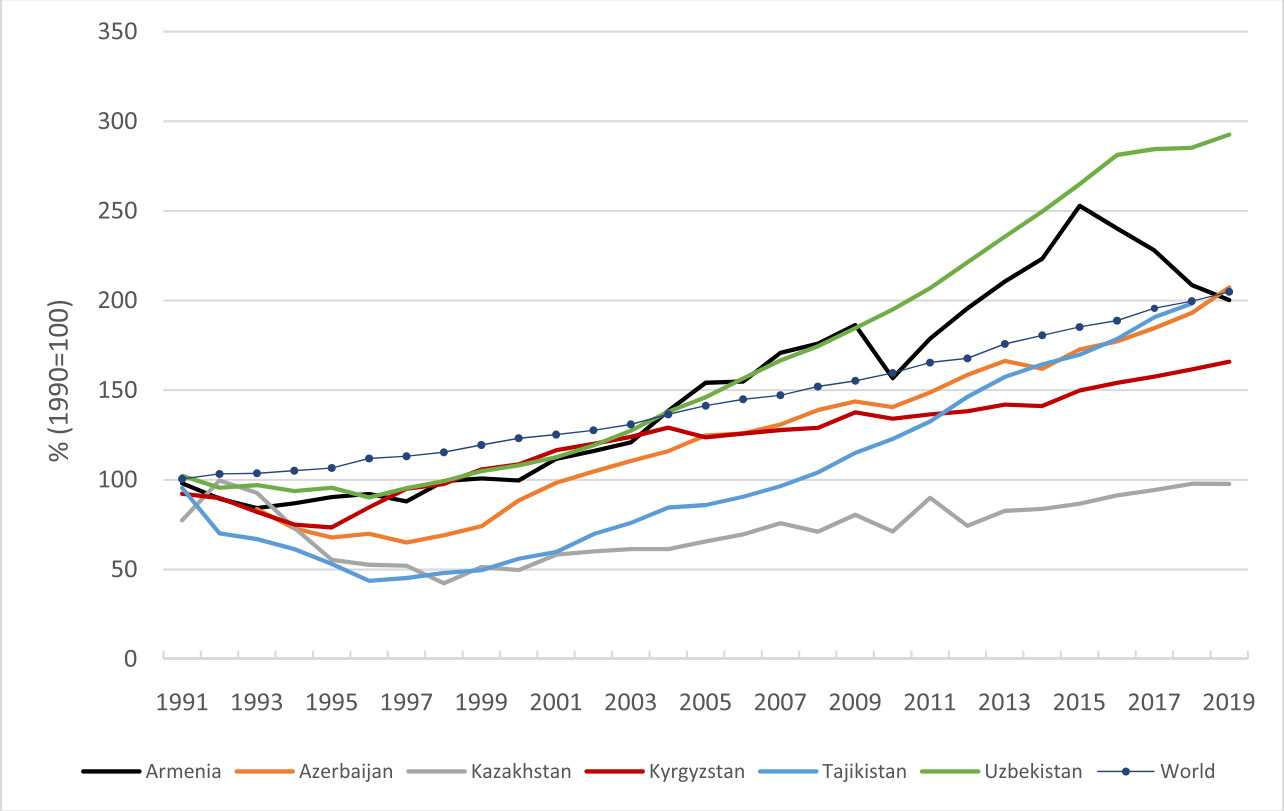
2 | Regional overview

2.1 General agricultural development trends

The agriculture and food sector in Central Asia and South Caucasus, as part of the broader Europe and Central Asia region, has been undergoing a radical transition from a command economy to a market economy since the early 1990s, typically characterized as involving the "individualization" of agriculture. This transition has produced a meaningful shift from production in large corporate farms to smallholder family farms, which are now the dominant category of producers in the region – the "new face" of agriculture (FAO, 2020b).

The transition reforms in agriculture aimed to improve agricultural productivity (which had been persistently low by international standards), food supply and distribution, food security and general nutrition. Among the Central Asia and South Caucasus countries, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have the lowest share of agriculture in gross domestic product (GDP; about 5 percent), as these two countries primarily rely upon oil and gas production. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are

Figure 1. Cumulative growth of agricultural gross value added, in percentage



Source: Presentation by Roman Romashkin, 2021[3]

3 The report contains data and figures from the presentations delivered by keynote speakers at the forum (see Annex II).

the two countries with the highest contribution of agriculture to their GDP, ranging from 20 to 25 percent. Cotton and horticulture are the major contributors to the exports of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Recent agricultural policies in the region emphasize crop diversification, reducing the share of wheat and cotton production for food security reasons. Despite these differences in the share of agriculture in GDP, agriculture remains a primary source of livelihoods and income generation for millions of rural people across the ECA region.

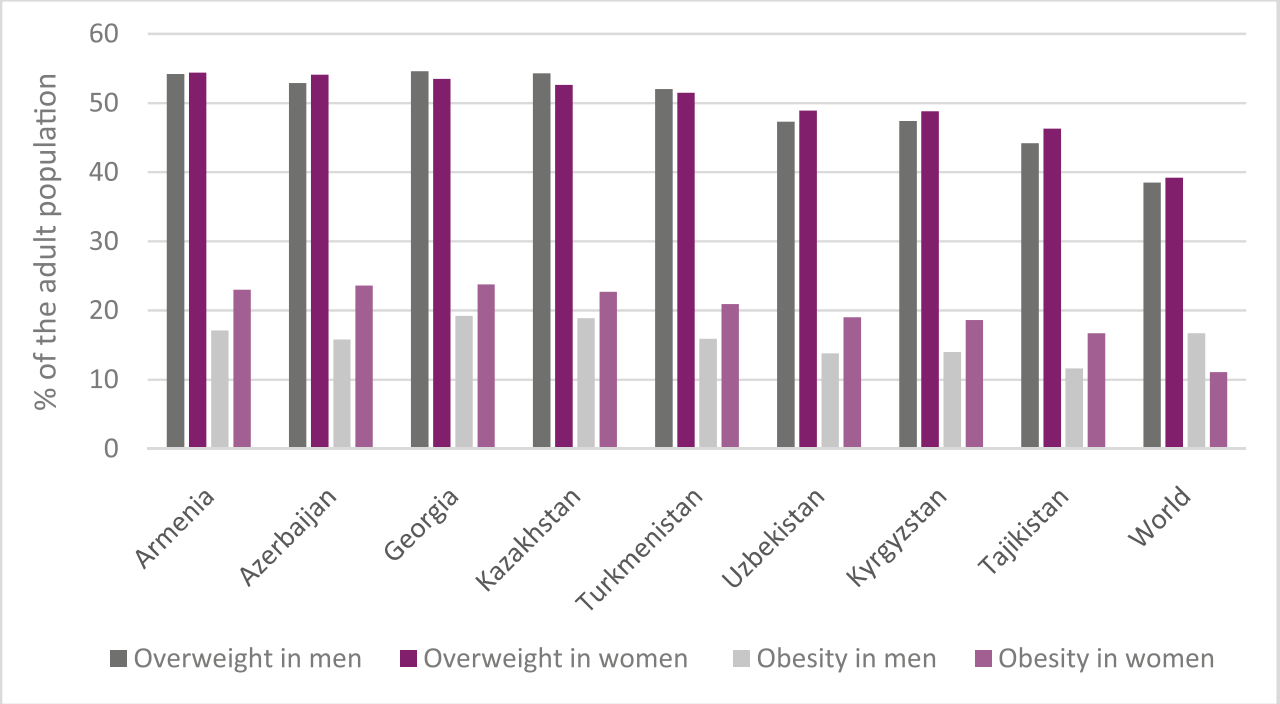
In all of these countries, agriculture initially suffered a decline following the breakdown of the Soviet system in 1990, which eventually changed to recovery. The depth of decline varied by country and their recoveries also started in different years (turning points came as early as 1993 in Armenia and as late as 1998 in Kazakhstan). After these turning points, agricultural gross value added (GVA) generally increased in all of these countries, with the exception of Armenia, where GVA resumed its decline in 2016. After these turning points, agricultural gross value added (GVA) steadily increased in all of these countries, except in Armenia, where GVA fluctuated after 2008. By 2019 only Uzbekistan and Armenia attained a higher cumulative growth of GVA than the world average. Kazakhstan's cumulative growth of GVA lagged far behind as a result of its sluggish performance. Kazakhstan's GVA had not even returned to the pre-transition 1991 level by 2019 largely due to abandoned lands, deficit of irrigation water, soil degradation and erosion, reduced soil fertility and decline in livestock production (Yerseitova et al., 2018). These GVA growth trends are illustrated in Figure 1 (excluding Turkmenistan and Georgia).

2.2 Household welfare, food security and rural poverty

Despite significant agricultural growth, all of the countries reviewed in Central Asia and South Caucasus had a relatively low gross national income per capita, ranging from United States dollar (USD) 1 070 for Tajikistan to USD 8 820 for Kazakhstan, compared with the world average of USD 11 526 in 2019 (World Bank, 2021). Five of the eight countries of Central Asia and South Caucasus fell in their position in the upper-middle income group, with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan classified as lower-middle income and Tajikistan as lower-income (Serajuddin and Hamadeh, 2020). The percentage of population living below the national poverty line was in the single-digit range only for Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. For the other countries, it ranged from 14 percent (in Uzbekistan, another country rich in mineral resources) to 20 percent and higher, revealing the usual inverse relationship between per capita income and the share of agriculture in the economy.

Roman Romashkin, the Deputy Director of the Eurasian Center for Food Security, Lomonosov

Figure 2. Prevalence of overweight and obesity in South Caucasus and Central Asia, by gender (2016)



Source: Presentation by Roman Romashkin, 2021

Moscow State University, observed that the integrated food and nutrition security index (which combines food availability, accessibility, stability and utilization) for the countries of South Caucasus and Central Asia was estimated at 0.7–0.8 as an average (1 signifies complete food security). Regarding nutrition issues, no pronounced gender aspects were observed for the prevalence of overweight, whereas the prevalence of obesity was higher for women in each of the countries studied (see Figure 2). These regional gender gaps are consistent with the world averages, where no gender differences are observed for the prevalence of overweight (39 percent for both sexes, and the prevalence of obesity is higher for women (15 percent compared with 11 percent for men). As seen in Figure 2, both measures were consistently higher than the world averages, and this was the same for both women and men.

Poverty rates are generally higher in rural areas, and in many ECA countries, the populations living in remote and mountainous areas experience more deprivation. These areas often lack basic infrastructure and services, including a reliable supply of drinking water, health services, irrigation and adequate road access. Thus, in Kazakhstan, despite impressive decreases in poverty since 2005, rural poverty remains higher than urban poverty: the corresponding poverty rates in 2010 were 10 percent for rural areas (down from 24 percent in 2005) and under 4 percent for urban areas (down from 14 percent in 2005; ADB, 2011). In Kyrgyzstan, rural poverty was consistently higher than urban poverty during the decade between 2006 and 2015, averaging 39 percent for rural poverty and 27 percent for urban poverty (WDI, 2016). In 2020 rural poverty in Kyrgyzstan was 29 percent compared to 18 percent in urban areas (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2020).

Female-headed rural households[4] experience higher rates of poverty than female-headed urban households or male-headed households in both urban or rural areas. These findings, highlighted by several panellists, are also confirmed by the demographic and health surveys (DHS) conducted in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Turkey.[5]

2.3 Demographic trends in rural areas

The distribution of rural-urban populations is an important factor in determining national development policies. Rural areas generally require substantial per capita investment in infrastructure and services. This need for investment and development of rural areas was emphasized by all panellists. It was noted,

Table 1. Rural population structure, 1990–2015 (countries arranged by 2015 rural population size)

Country	Rural population, thousands			Share of women, %	
	1990	2015	% change 2015/1991	1990	2015
Uzbekistan	12 204	19 682	61.3	50.2	49.9
Kazakhstan	7 165	8 216	14.7	50.3	49.8
Tajikistan	3 611	6 190	71.4	50.1	49.5
Azerbaijan	3 350	4 367	30.4	51.3	49.9
Kyrgyzstan	2 721	3 831	40.8	50.1	49.3
Turkmenistan	2 023	2 781	37.4	50.8	50.6
Georgia	2 433	1 866	-23.3	51.7	50.9
Armenia	1 153	1 092	-5.3	49.9	51.3

Source: ILO, 2020b

4 These are households in which adult males either are not present (owing to divorce, separation, migration, non-marriage, widowhood) or do not contribute to the household income (owing to illness, alcoholism, drug addiction and so forth).

5 Further information on the DHS Program is available at https://dhsprogram.com/countries/country-list.cfm.

however, that the size of rural populations and the demographic dynamics vary considerably across countries in the ECA region. For example, the rural populations in all Central Asian countries, with the exception of Kazakhstan, grew rapidly between 1991 and 2015. Uzbekistan has the largest rural population in the region (see Table 1). Turkmenistan has the smallest rural population, but even Turkmenistan's rural population is larger than the combined rural populations of Armenia and Georgia. In South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is the only country where the size of the rural population is growing, while the rural populations in Armenia and Georgia are shrinking. In all countries of the region, women account for half of the rural population, with minor general changes between 1991 and 2015. Table 1 demonstrates rural population changes by gender.

The panellists emphasized that women play an important role in agriculture and in rural life in general, providing labour, knowledge and leadership for economic and social development in the region. However, their potential remains largely untapped because of gender norms and patriarchal values that prescribe the roles of household caretaker and non-wage worker to women. Indeed, the share of women in total and agricultural employment is substantially less than their share in the rural population (averaging 40 percent compared with 50 percent).

2.4 Migration and remittances

Labour migration is a well-established phenomenon in the region. Given the higher rates of rural poverty, a large share of labour migrants in the ECA region are from rural areas (FAO, 2018). Low salaries and scarcity of jobs are the main drivers of rural-urban outmigration.[6]

Within the whole ECA region, the Russian Federation is the second-largest European destination for migrants, after Germany. In 2019, the Russian Federation hosted more than 11.640 million international migrants (UNDESA, 2019), with around half coming from members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including Central Asia and South Caucasus. Labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2020 accounted for about 80 percent of all first-time entrants to the Russian Federation (calculated from Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Table 2 shows that the largest groups of Central Asian migrants in the Russian Federation are from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan: their numbers reach eight to ten percent of their respective populations in these countries. According to Roman Romashkin's presentation, migrants from Central Asia to the Russian Federation frequently obtain long-term residency permits or gradually acquire Russian citizenship, which significantly affects the populations of working age people in their countries of origin.

Although the majority of labour migrants in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are men (up to 90 percent in Tajikistan), the share of women

Table 2. Estimated number of labour migrants from Central Asia in the Russian Federation (as of mid-2017)

Country	Population (thousands)	Number of migrants (thousands)	% of country's population
Tajikistan	8 700	900	10.3
Kyrgyzstan	6 000	500	8.3
Uzbekistan	31 800	2 500	7.9
Kazakhstan	17 800	500	2.8
Turkmenistan	5 500	10	0.2

Source: FAO, 2018

6 According to the presentation by Nozilakhon Mukhamedova, monthly salaries in Tajikistan were in the range of USD 40 in 2019. Over 800 000 people, mostly men, migrated out of the country in search of employment, predominantly to the Russian Federation. The male migration rate in Tajikistan (around 2015) was 36 percent, reaching 39 percent in Khatlon Province (Carneiro and Bakanova, 2014).

Table 3. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on remittances from the Russian Federation to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan

	COVID-19 pandemic		
	January–July 2019	January–July 2020	Change Jan–Jul 2020/2019, %
Remittances (billion RUB)	267	220	-18.0
Uzbekistan	133	123	-7.0
Tajikistan	73	47	-35.0
Kyrgyzstan	61	49	-19.0
Remittances (million USD)	4 087	3 166	-23.0
Uzbekistan	2 039	1 771	-13.0
Tajikistan	1 112	681	-39.0
Kyrgyzstan	936	714	-24.0
RUB depreciation, %*	64.6	72.3	12.0

Source: Presentation by Roman Romashkin, 2021
Note: *For the COVID-19 pandemic shock, RUB depreciation was calculated based on the information for the second quarters of 2020 and 2019.

migrating independently as labour migrants, rather than as family dependents, is growing (for example, it increased from 10 to 15 percent in Tajikistan, and is up to 40 percent in Kyrgyzstan). Whilst migrant men mostly work in trade and construction, migrant women tend to work in eateries mainly as waitresses and cleaners, semi-formal produce and clothing bazaars as stall owners and vendors, and in formal retail and grocery stores as sales clerks and cleaners (Gorina, Agadjanian, and Zotova, 2018). With the aging of the host countries' workforce, migrant women are likely to work as doctors, nurses, and care-givers (UNDP, 2015). These female labour migrants send remittances and support their families from abroad, in similar ways to men. The forum panellists stated that the region is witnessing a process of gradual feminization of migration.

Migrants remit their earnings to families back home, contributing to household income and to the country's GDP. Remittance money largely serves as a wage supplement for consumption and household expenses in the absence of the male wage earner, but evidence on the ground shows that remittances are also used for investment in construction, land acquisition and farm improvement.[7] Since migrants are mostly men, the forum's panellists observed an increase in the number of de-facto female-headed households as remittance recipients. This in turn has led to a substantial increase in women's responsibilities for managing household tasks, leading towards a trend of feminization of agriculture.

In the countries surveyed (excluding Turkmenistan, where no data are available), the average share of remittances in GDP is 14 percent (data for 2019; TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2019). The three countries in the region with the highest share of remittances in GDP are Tajikistan (29 percent), Kyrgyzstan (29 percent) and Uzbekistan (16 percent). They are followed Georgia (13 percent), Armenia (11 percent), with Azerbaijan (3 percent) and Kazakhstan (0.3 percent) at the bottom of the ranking. There is a substantial gap in the share of remittances in GDP between Central Asia and South Caucasus (14 percent on average) and Eastern Europe. For the European Union members in Eastern Europe, the average share

7 Examples of government programmes in Tajikistan and Moldova that help to channel remittances towards investment in agriculture and rural development can be found in FAO (2018).

of remittances in GDP is 2.7 percent, while the non-European Union members in Eastern Europe (such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia) average 4.6 percent. The economic role of labour migrants is thus much higher in Central Asia and South Caucasus (with the possible exception of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan) than in Eastern Europe.

Central Asian migrants in the Russian Federation are the main source of remittances for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The remittances to these countries are therefore highly vulnerable to economic and financial crises in the Russian Federation. During the 2015 financial crisis in the Russian Federation, the volume of USD remittances to these countries dropped by 42 percent, although the Russian rouble (RUB) remittances decreased by 7 percent only.

As Roman Romashkin explained, the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the remittances from the Russian Federation to Central Asia in both rouble and dollar terms between the seven months from January to July in 2019 and 2020 (see Table 3). The remittances to Uzbekistan were, on the whole, less vulnerable (a decrease of 7 percent in RUB remittances) than those to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (a decrease of 19 percent and 35 percent respectively). The USD remittances were also negatively affected by the 12 percent devaluation of the RUB in the second quarter of 2019.

Along with the easing of pandemic quarantine restrictions, the remittances from the Russian Federation to the CIS countries started to grow and exceeded the 2019 level by nearly 20 percent in USD terms, rising from USD 527 million in June 2019 to USD 631 million in June 2020.

3 The role of women in agri-food systems and rural development

The role of women has dramatically changed since the emergence of the predominantly smallholder farming structure in the region from 1992 onward: formerly employees of collective and state farms with part-time agricultural work on small "subsidiary" household plots, women have transformed into fully-fledged, though often unpaid, workers on family farms. Today, rural women most commonly work on family farms, often with the help of their children. In addition, they remain solely responsible for housekeeping and childcare, which leaves little or no opportunity to pursue remunerative activities beyond their households, as well as limists opportunity to gain an education, and have leisure time. And yet, as stated by many panellists, women have to work or study outside the home and are open to new opportunities in agricultural entrepreneurship and management, especially in organic farming, agroecology and agritourism. According to Ramona Duminicioiu, women in Romania, for example, play an important role as producers, consumers and wage-earners, engaging in processing, trade and small businesses. However, as Susan Kaaria noted, the burden of household and care work is overwhelmingly placed on women's shoulders and unpaid labour dramatically constrains their capacity for economic activities.

In most countries of the region, it is women who determine what food is bought and what their families eat. As highlighted by Eugenia Serova in the opening speech, an understanding of this function is central to any discussion of women's role in agri-food systems. The importance of women's role in agri-food systems extends across the traditional areas of growing food for own consumption to producing it for selling outside their households.

Moreover, as Nozilakhon Mukhamedova explained, in rural Tajikistan, the role of women in the household includes a formidable list of tasks:

- responsibility for domestic work and care for children, senior and ill family and household members;
- securing food for the family – growing potatoes, vegetables and fruit on the household plot, and taking care of domestic animals (cows, goats, poultry) for family consumption;
  - securing water for household drinking and for subsistence farm irrigation (fetching water, storing water);
- preparing food for winter (food processing, drying, pickling, storing);
  - collection of cotton stems as firewood for cooking and heating;

Yet the role of rural women in the ECA region is not limited to unpaid care work and subsistence farming. They often play a crucial role in farming systems as producers of commercial crops and livestock products. Beyond agriculture, women engage in cottage arts and traditional crafts for sale and promote local cooking initiatives, thus preserving indigenous culture and promoting agritourism.

3.1 Women's employment in agriculture and opportunities

According to ILO methodology, "agricultural employment" includes employment on farms that deliver products for sale. If the farm produces mainly for self-consumption, then persons are considered as being in own-production work and not in employment. Persons in own-production work are considered part of the labour force if they are available and actively looking for work, otherwise -- they are considered

outside the labour force. Despite relatively high level of education and high rate of economic activity, the proportion of employed rural women remains generally lower than that of working men in the majority of the countries in the region.

Regionally, the average share of women in labour force is 45,3 percent (World Bank, 2019), while the share of women employed in agriculture is 13 percent of women's total employmen.[8] There are significant variations between the countries however. Women, employed in agriculture, tend to concentrate in manual labour as informal, seasonal or unpaid family workers; they are rarely registered as the owners of the land or a business and rarely identify themselves as manager or co-manager of the agricultural land and farms.

Targetted programmes to support rural women's economic empowerment through development of entrepreneurship are underway in vaious countries of the region. Forum participants noted with appreciation that FAO's experiences in providing technical assistance and support to such programmes in Albania, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan are generating promising results.

It was concluded during the discussions however that rural women's access to decent jobs remains constrained, and comprehensive approaches need to expand economic opportunities for them. Gender-sensitive value-chain approach, which goes beyond primary production where rural women tend to be present, should be employed more proactively by policy-makers and practitioners to open up opportunities for rural women's employment prospects.

3.2 Informality of employment in agriculture

The feminization of agriculture follows a pattern of informal arrangements. Women frequently engage in informal daily work rather than in permanent positions. This pattern may have been imposed by limited opportunities for permanent jobs: for example, outside employers are reluctant to hire women because of their household work and childcare obligations. Furthermore, Nozilakhon Mukhamedova noted a rising number of women in conventionally male-dominated positions in Tajikistan (day labourers – *mardikors*, water masters – *mirobs*, and irrigation fee collectors), although these are among the lowest paid jobs even for men. These male-dominated positions might have been temporarily feminized, since it remains unclear whether male migrants will reclaim their previous low-paid jobs if and when they return.

Box 1. Gender dimensions of unpaid labour

- Women work overall 30 percent more hours than men: 9.6 hours daily of paid and unpaid work combined for women and 7.4 hours for men.
- Unpaid domestic and care work takes up a major share of total work hours for women: 6.8 hours daily for women and a mere 0.8 hours for men. This represents more than 70 percent of the total daily hours worked by women and just 10 percent for men. Paid work thus accounts for 2.4 hours daily for women and 6.6 hours for men.
- Food preparation and childcare represent the main components of women's unpaid housework; these tasks take up four and a half hours daily, or two-thirds of total time devoted to unpaid housework.

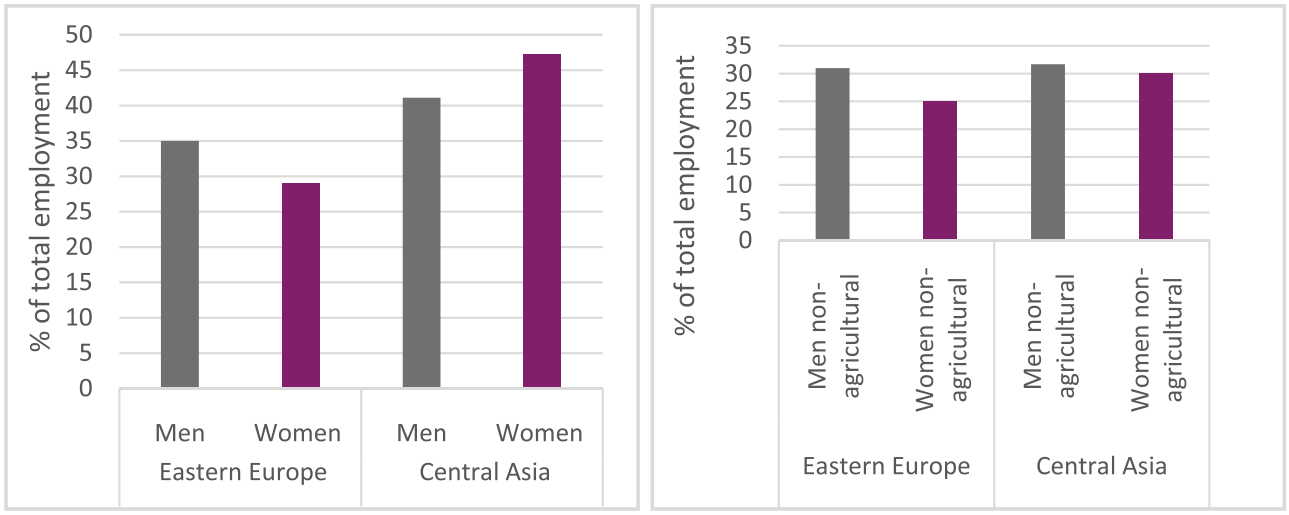
Source: ADB, 2020

Labour force surveys (International Labour Organization) and time use surveys (United Nations) – the main sources of labour and occupation data in the region – try to capture as fully as possible all self-employed activities, including for example food preparation and unpaid work on family farms. Nevertheless, female employment numbers in agriculture may be biased downward because many women declare their work status as inactive despite their dominant role in production on the family farm, food preparation for the family, and all other household chores. It is argued by some decision-makers in the region that women staying at home undertake an important service for society, which otherwise would have fallen on the state budget.

Many rural women statistically classified as inactive may in fact be working as farmers on their own account or as unpaid family or seasonal wage workers. Because of the burden of housework, women generally settle into short-term daily or seasonal work. Such employment is informal by its very nature, and women are less likely to declare themselves formally employed in the agricultural sector. As Nozilakhon Mukhamedova pointed out, studies indicate that some 70 percent of economically active women in Northern and Southern Tajikistan are employed informally in agriculture.

8 World Bank, 2019, Europe and Central Asia excluding high income

Figure 3. Informal employment (as a percentage of total employment) by gender: Eastern Europe and Central Asia



Source: ILO, 2018

Note: Left panel – all sectors, including agriculture; right panel – excluding agriculture.

A broader regional analysis by ILO (2018b) suggests that the share of informally employed people in Central Asia (43.4 percent of total employment) and in Eastern Europe (31.5 percent) is substantially higher than the regional average for ECA (25.1 percent). Informal employment in Central Asia represents a greater source of employment for women (47.3 percent) than men (41.1 percent). The situation reverses when agriculture is excluded (31.7 percent informal employment for men in non-agricultural occupations and 30.1 percent for women), which implies that female informal employment in agriculture is higher than the average share of 47.3 percent shown above. Figure 4 summarizes the ILO

Table 4. Rural unemployment rates by sex and age group, 2019 (percentage)

Country	Youth (age 15–24)		Adult population (age 25+)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Armenia	20.1	27.9	10.0	9.9
Georgia	18.9	25.2	5.0	3.4
Azerbaijan	7.7	11.4	1.9	3.0
Kazakhstan	1.9	2.1	3.0	3.8
Kyrgyzstan	11.1	20.7	3.5	6.0
Tajikistan	9.0	6.8	3.9	2.1
Turkmenistan	6.3	3.3	2.6	0.8
Uzbekistan	7.5	8.4	3.1	2.9
Average (unweighted)	10.3	13.2	4.1	4.0

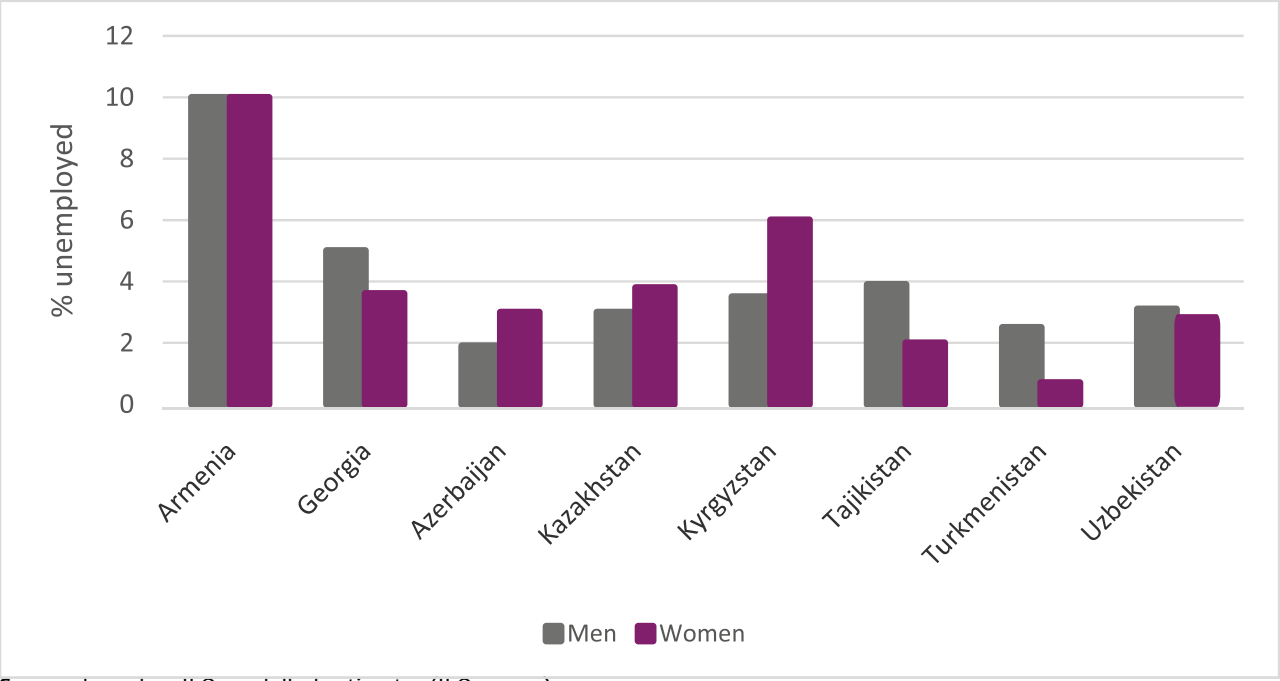
Source: based on ILO modelled estimates* (ILO, 2020a)

Notes:

i) *Modelled estimates are subject to high uncertainty. More research is needed to understand the prevalence of unemployment among rural women and men of different age groups.

ii) "Unemployment rate" is the ratio of those in employment over those in the labour force (ILO, 2019).

Figure 4. Rural adult unemployment rate, by sex and country, 2019 (percentage)

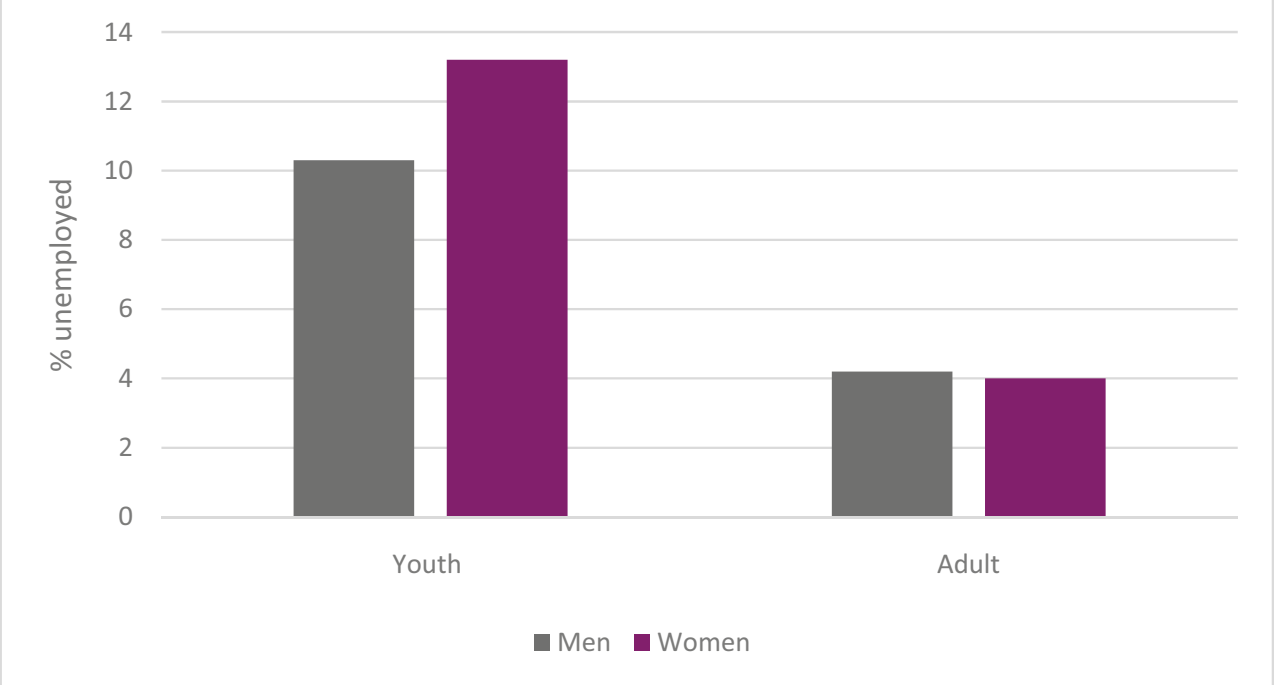


Source: based on ILO modelled estimates (ILO, 2020a)

findings on informal employment in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Although informally employed women receive a compensation in cash or in kind (as farm products or services), which adds to household income, the very nature of informal employment is insecure and uncertain, and deprives women of all of the social benefits that are associated with formal jobs, such as health insurance and pension accrual. Moreover, as Nozilakhon Mukhamedova highlighted, the working conditions of the informally employed in agriculture are usually harsh, including: exposure to extreme heat during the summer season; longer hours of daily field work; and low standards of sanitary and hygiene facilities. This explains why transition to formality, especially in agriculture, should be a central goal in national employment policies (ILO, 2014).

Figure 5. Rural youth unemployment rate, by gender, regional averages for 2019 (percentage)



Source: based on ILO modelled estimates (ILO, 2020a)

There is no clear gender pattern in rural adult unemployment in the region (see Table 6). In South Caucasus, rural unemployment is evenly balanced between men and women in Armenia, and shows a predominance of men in Georgia and a predominance of women in Azerbaijan. Among the Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have higher numbers of unemployed men, while the share of unemployed women is higher in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (see Figure 5).

Averaged over the region, the rural youth unemployment rate is higher for women than for men (13 percent compared with 10 percent, respectively; see Table 6). In fact, girls and women (age 15–24) are the largest group among the unemployed youth in all of South Caucasus, and in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia. The observed employment discrimination of young women may reflect restricted access to education and professional training opportunities, as well as gendered social norms and expectations social expectations for young women to prioritize getting married, having children and focus on household chores.

3.3 Trends contributing to the feminization of agriculture in the region

Women are key actors in agriculture and rural development and make a fundamental contribution to food security, both in their families and in wider society. The centrality of women's role is especially true in the context of family farming. The share of agriculturally employed women in South Caucasus and Central Asia is in the range of 40 to 50 percent. Drawing upon the findings from presentations made by the panellists, it can be concluded that women now represent an upwards tendency in the distribution of the agricultural labour force across the region, especially on family farms. One of the main drivers contributing to the feminization of agriculture in South Caucasus and Central Asia is associated with the extensive outmigration of men from rural areas in search of jobs and income sources.[9]

Forum participants noted that in countries with significant male outmigration (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), the burden of agricultural work on the family farm and the household plot is assigned to women, contributing to what has been termed the "feminization of agriculture". Women also play a major part in selling the output from the family farm at the market because their time is regarded as less valuable than the men's, who can then be freed to take part in what is perceived to be higher paying activity. These female roles – in agricultural production and trade – dramatically gain in importance as more men migrate due to economic reasons.

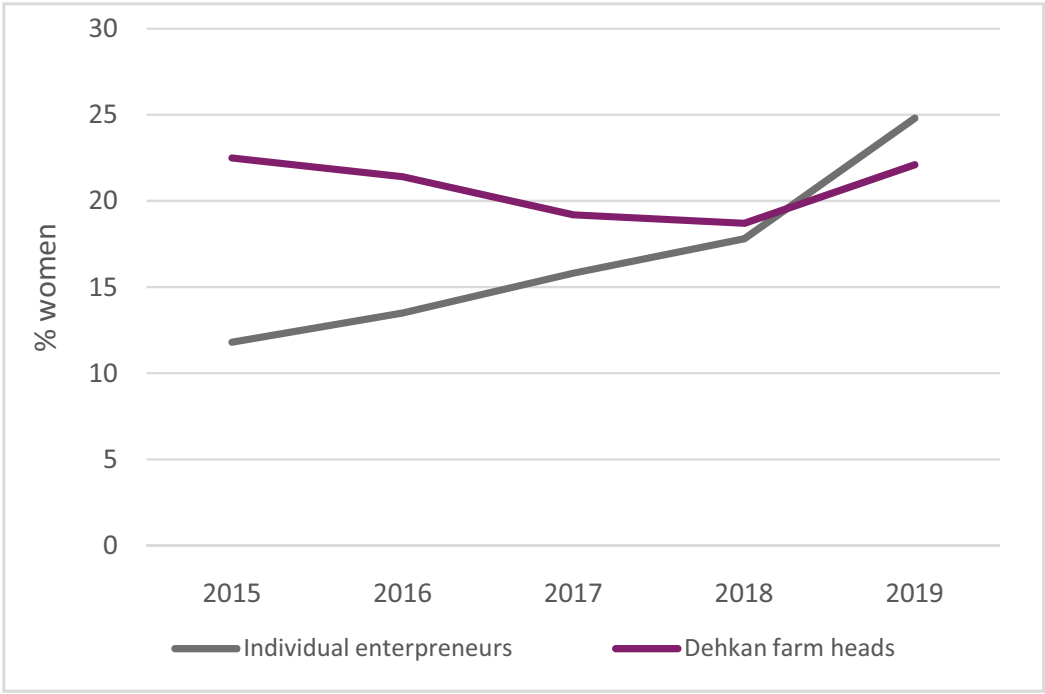
The productivity of female-headed farms measured by yields and per hectare sales is generally lower than the productivity of male-headed farms (see, for example, Gebre *et al.*, 2021). No research specific to this issue in Central Asia and South Caucasus has come to our attention. However, more careful econometric analysis outside the region shows that female-headed farms achieve lower productivity not because of an intrinsic male-female gap in abilities, experience or intensity of involvement, but because of restricted access to inputs, credit and other resources (see, for example, Doss, 2018). It is possible to surmise that female-headed farms would be as productive as male-headed farms if they had equal access to resources such as tool, credits, services and knowledge. Given the observed feminization of agriculture, government policies should aim to ensure equal access to market services for all women-headed households.

In Southeastern and Eastern Europe, where outmigrants are mainly younger people – men and women leaving agricultural areas for other opportunities – the rural population is ageing rapidly and the share of rural women both as workers on the farms but also as household and caretakers is incerasing. The effects of outmigration on the ageing of the population are reinforced by demographic factors such as low fertility rates and the longer life expectancy of women (78.6 years for females and 73.4 for males[10]). According to Eurostat (2021b), women aged 65 years and older represented 13 percent of the rural population in Serbia compared with 10 percent for men; in Turkey, men above 65 years represented 5 percent of the rural population compared with 7 percent of women; and in Albania , 7.5 percent of the rural population are women over 65 years of age compared with 7 percent of men.

9 However, this does not signify a consistent trend of an increasing share of women employed in agriculture over time. Not all of the countries reported lower female employment shares in 1991 than in 2019.

10 Unweighted averages for Eastern and Southeastern Europe countries based on Eurostat (2021a). Data available for Albania, Belarus, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Figure 6. Share of women entrepreneurs in agriculture in Tajikistan (2015–2019)



Source: Agency of Statistics under President of the Republic of Tajikistan, no date

3.4 The growing role of women in agricultural entrepreneurship and management

As observed by Mavzuna Karimova, the share of women entrepreneurs in the private sector in Tajikistan almost tripled from 12 percent in 2010 to 35 percent in 2019 (these numbers include small and medium-sized enterprises in addition to individual entrepreneurs), but women are still a minority among farmers who lead and own the agricultural value chains. A strong presence of women entrepreneurs is traditionally observed in the trade sector (46 percent of enterprises are headed by women), the services sector (26 percent) and agriculture (19 percent of 133 016 dehkan farms). In Tajikistan, rural women are increasingly becoming entrepreneurs in new sectors such as construction, transport and logistics, information technologies, medicine, tourism, finance and manufacturing (UNECE, 2020). Moreover, the number of women registered as owners of individual enterprises[11] has increased substantially in recent years: from about 14 000 in 2015 to nearly 35 000 in 2019. Women's share among individual entrepreneurs rose from 12 percent in 2015 to 25 percent in 2019 (Figure 7), although the share of women managing farms remained steady at about 20 percent from 2015 to 2019.

As reported by Lyubov Ovchintseva, in the Russian Federation the share of women in key administrative positions in agriculture and rural development is high at all levels: about 60 percent at the federal level and 80 percent at the regional and municipal levels (see Table 7). There have been no notable changes in the share of women managers between 1999 and 2019 at all government levels. Notwithstanding, only around 10 percent of the 300 leading researchers in agricultural sciences in the Russian Federation are women. For instance, in 2013, there were only 5 women scientists in the Russian Academy of Agricultural Sciences before it joined the Russian Academy of Sciences where currently, only 44 out of 801 academics are women. According to Uktam Umurzakov, in Uzbekistan official statistics also report the increased number of parliamentarians (32 percent as of 2020 - the highest in Central Asia) and the number of women in some government positions. However, no data on the vertical distribution of women in the respective hierarchies are systematically collected and monitored, and most women appear to be limited to the lower levels of administrative positions.

11 Individual entrepreneurs in Tajikistan are classified into two tax structures: patent holders (75 percent) and certificate holders (25 percent). Patent holders pay a fixed annual tax ("the patent price") independently of their income, whereas certificate holders submit an annual tax return. See Resolution of the Government of Tajikistan, No. 361 (3 August 2013).

Table 5. Percentage of women employment in government positions in the Russian Federation

Government level	1999	2009	2019
Federal	55.0	58.6	59.1
MinAg	–	–	67.2
Regional	75.3	72.0	74.7
Municipal	75.9	75.6	77.1

Source: Presentation by Lyubov Ovchintseva, 2021, based on data from Rosstat, 2019

3.5 Gender analysis of rural employment in the region

While women's involvement in agriculture is traditionally high, both in household-plot production and in work for hire on outside farms, other common women's occupations in rural areas are teaching, healthcare, and somewhat paradoxically, accounting. For example, the majority of the primary school teachers are women. Women have been in accounting positions since the Soviet era, and more recently they have acquired skills in the basics of computers and information technology for work in the modern accounting environment.

Regarding women in healthcare, panellists pointed to an absence of sex-disaggregated data. However, the data available for three countries – Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan[12] – show that more than half of the doctors in these countries are women (lower than around 70 percent women representation in the former Soviet Union (Riska, 2001)) whereas in nursing the prevalence of women reaches 94 percent (data for Kyrgyzstan only). The high share of female doctors is an average figure over many medical professions, and it should not be interpreted as a definite sign of women's equal access to all professions. It is argued (without statistical evidence and based on everyday observations) that women doctors work mainly in "lower" specializations, such as paediatrics and general practice, whereas men dominate the more prestigious and higher paying positions as surgeons, neurologists or orthopaedic specialists. This is consistent with the horizontal and vertical gender-based segregation observed throughout the region and discussed in more detail below.

12 See "Women and Men" statistical yearbooks for these countries (various years) available at https://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/c.php?g=177700&p=1170853.

4 Gender inequality issues identified by forum participants

This chapter provides a more systematic review of the key issues identified and discussed at the forum's webinars. These include gender gaps in education and in professional specialization, women's restricted access to advisory and extension services, constraints on land ownership and resource control, and gender pay gaps.

4.1 Gender gaps in education

In the former Soviet Union republics, universal access to education has been guaranteed since the early 1920s. This is evident from the high literacy rates, which exceed 95 percent for both girls and boys in the region, and from the generally balanced enrolment rates for girls and boys in elementary and secondary education. An FAO report (2016) using UNESCO data found minimal gender gaps in secondary education, with the exception of Tajikistan and Armenia. In Tajikistan, boys are more likely to attend secondary school than girls (gender parity index 0.89 in 2011–2012). The gender gap in Armenia is larger but in favour of girls (gender parity index of 1.14 in 2008–2009), and girls are more likely to attend secondary school.

The average figures may hide local imbalances, especially in remote rural areas, where poverty prevents parents from sending their children to school; when choices have to be made, the preference focuses on boys rather than girls in prioritizing education opportunities. The same FAO report (2016) shows that the share of rural girls dropping out of secondary school education is indeed higher in several countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and dramatically so in Tajikistan), but in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the situation is reversed: a higher percentage of rural boys than girls are out of secondary school. To put these findings in perspective, it is important to note that the share of out-of-school children of both sexes is well below 5 percent in all countries, except in Tajikistan, where the out-of-school rates are exceptionally high for girls: 12 percent for rural girls and almost 15 percent for urban girls (compared with just 7 percent for both rural and urban boys). Prevailing gender norms rationalize boys' education as a better investment for the family because upon completion of schooling, boys will stay in the household and help on the farm, whereas girls will marry and leave.

The considerations that prioritize boys over girls in general education are even more acute in higher education, which is more expensive than basic education because it involves, at a minimum, the added expense of living outside the family home and travelling to school. Nevertheless, average country data, when available, do not show any significant barriers to women accessing higher education. Table 6 summarizes the gender gap in higher education in selected countries, based on the data available through the databases of the national statistical agencies. Using averages, higher education appears to be male dominated only in Uzbekistan. In all other countries, there are no indications of barriers to women's access to higher (and vocational) education. This finding could be the outcome of urban bias, i.e. that more urban than rural girls continue with higher education. For example, there are hardly any data on gender gaps in education by rural/urban classification. However, the data for Azerbaijan casts uncertainty on the urban bias suggestion: the percentage of rural girls is higher in vocational, secondary specialized, and higher education than the overall percentage of women in these institutions. Consequently, deeper refinement of the statistical data is required to elucidate the gender gaps in education by rural/urban categorization. Additional evidence which situates the gender education gap in a more favourable light is provided by UNESCO data (in FAO, 2016). These

Table 6. Gender gaps in higher education in South Caucasus and Central Asia

Country	Predominance of female students	Equal share of male and female students	Predominance of male students	Notes
Armenia	+			Both graduate and undergraduate
Azerbaijan		+		Same pattern for rural women
Georgia	+			
Kazakhstan	+			Both by share of students and share of 18–22 age group
Kyrgyzstan	+			Also for middle vocational education
Tajikistan		+		Gender neutrality after the share of female students jumped from 30 percent to 46 percent in 2013
Uzbekistan			+	Male dominance decreasing since 2016

Note: No data available for Turkmenistan.

data estimate that the proportion of female tertiary graduates is over 50 percent in most countries, with the exception of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan where it is below 40 percent.

Training which leads to qualification has always provided an alternative to higher education for women. Professional courses helped many women to become accountants in the Soviet era, and today they help to produce women computer specialists and IT experts. From the forum discussions, it became evident that in order to address the gender gaps in access to education and employment over the life course, universities in the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan and other countries in the ECA region need to implement as a minimum gender-responsive programmes aimed at the professional advancement of women.

4.2 Gender biases in professional specialization

The overall picture in relation to average data for gender gaps in education (see Table 6) conceals certain patterns of segregation in the professional specialization choices of women and men in higher education. Some data on this subject are available for Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In all of these countries, more women are engaged in education, healthcare, arts and the social sciences (including journalism). Reflecting prevalent gender norms, men, on the other hand, predominantly study the "hard" sciences, such as engineering, communication technology and technical sciences. There appears to be an equal balance between the sexes in business, economics and management. Despite the fact that many farming tasks are regarded as women's tasks, the majority of students in agricultural and veterinary science departments are men. Fields of study are highly segregated by gender, resulting in many women preparing for careers in the lower-paid fields of education, health and social services (ADB, 2019, pp. xi–xii).

4.3 Restricted access to rural advisory and extension services

Hajnalka Petrics' presentation demonstrated the critical role of rural advisory services (RAS) in agricultural and rural development. RAS connect producers, producer organizations and other rural actors to the information, knowledge, technologies and services that they need to increase agricultural productivity. They also support farmers' effective linkages to markets. RAS are central to unlocking the potential of agricultural innovation and achieving FAO's mandate to end hunger and malnutrition and eradicate poverty.

Although women are major actors in agriculture and are key to ensuring food security, they generally have less access to RAS compared with men. Globally, only 5 percent of RAS' clients are women (FAO, 2015). In the ECA region, estimates from the regional country gender assessments suggest that around 10 percent of

RAS clients are women. Common barriers for women's access to RAS include their limited mobility and the heavy work burden arising from their multiple roles within households and communities.

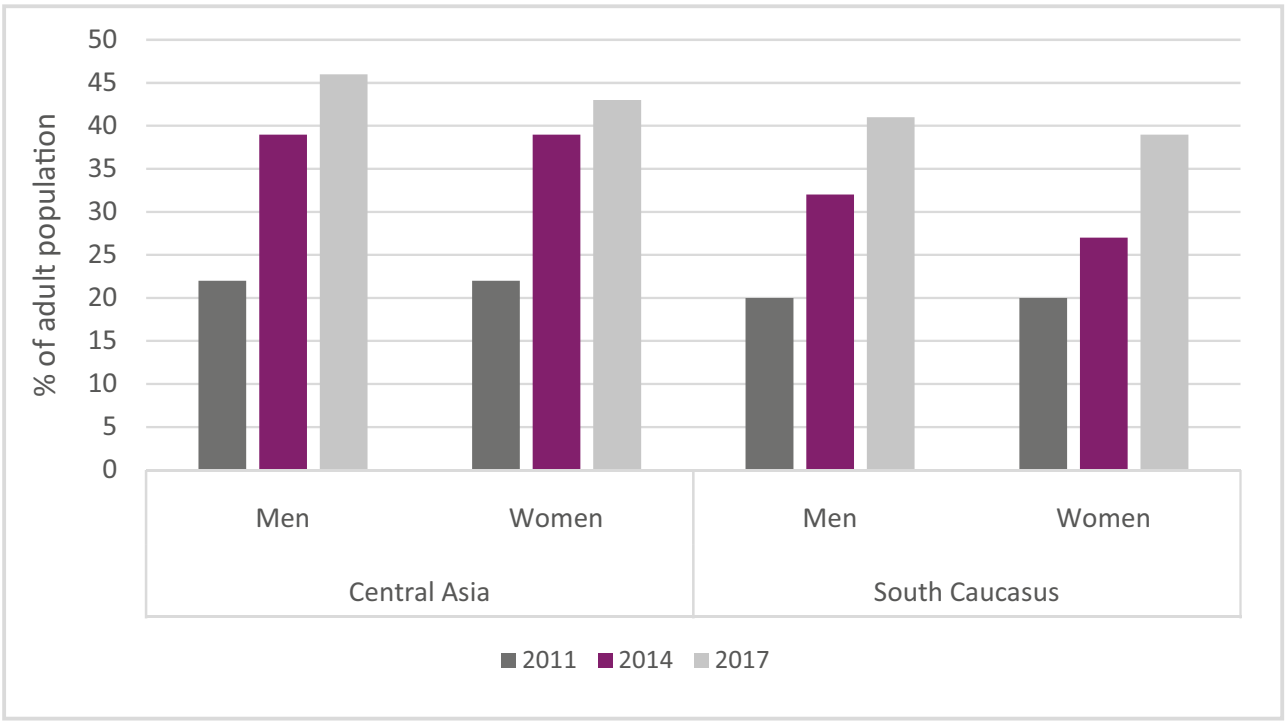
Even when women can access RAS, these services may not necessarily respond to their needs because they have been designed with the perception that the women's role is strictly related to growing food crops and to household nutrition and care. RAS, as well as access to broader information technologies and digitalization, traditionally tend to be tailored to the needs of men as the primary farmers and entrepreneurs. Women's contributions to family farms are considered to be less important and thus their needs are not even assessed.[13] Extension services as institutions tend to be shaped by rigid gender norms. When women receive extension support, it is often oriented toward their traditional care responsibilities.

The failure of RAS to effectively address the needs of women producers and ensure their unhindered access to knowledge and skills contributes significantly to the "gender gap" in agriculture, whereby women producers underperform in family farming due to their restricted access to resources and services. It is therefore crucial to make the information technologies, practices, and knowledge more pertinent and more responsive to the needs of both female and male farmers.

4.4 Restricted access to financial services

Forum participants agreed that women face substantial barriers in access to commercial banks and financial services. However, certain nuances should be considered in relation to account ownership and access to credit and borrowing. Bank account ownership in Central Asia and South Caucasus increased from 2011 to 2017 for both men and women (see Figure 8). By 2017, 43 percent of adult women and 46 percent of adult men living in Central Asia owned a bank account. The corresponding ownership rates in South Caucasus were 39 percent for women and 41 percent for men. Recently, the gender gap in account ownership has been decreasing compared with the pattern that persisted in the period 2011 to 2017 (World Bank, 2019). However, these average figures may hide substantial differences in account ownership rates between poor and non-poor, and between rural and urban populations. Thus, the account ownership gender gaps in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in 2017

Figure 7. Account ownership and gender gaps in the Central Asia and South Caucasus sub-regions (2011–2017)



Source: World Bank, 2019

13 The lack of systematic assessment of women's needs in RAS has recently led FAO to develop "GAST" – The Gender and Rural Advisory Services Assessment Tool – which provides information on gender-sensitive RAS design (FAO, 2018).

were approximately 10 percent, but the female ownership rates in these countries have been rising, reaching 42 percent for women in Tajikistan and 36 percent in Turkmenistan (ibid.). In contrast, in Turkey the gender ownership gap is 30 percent, and the account ownership rate is 54 percent for women and 83 percent for men.

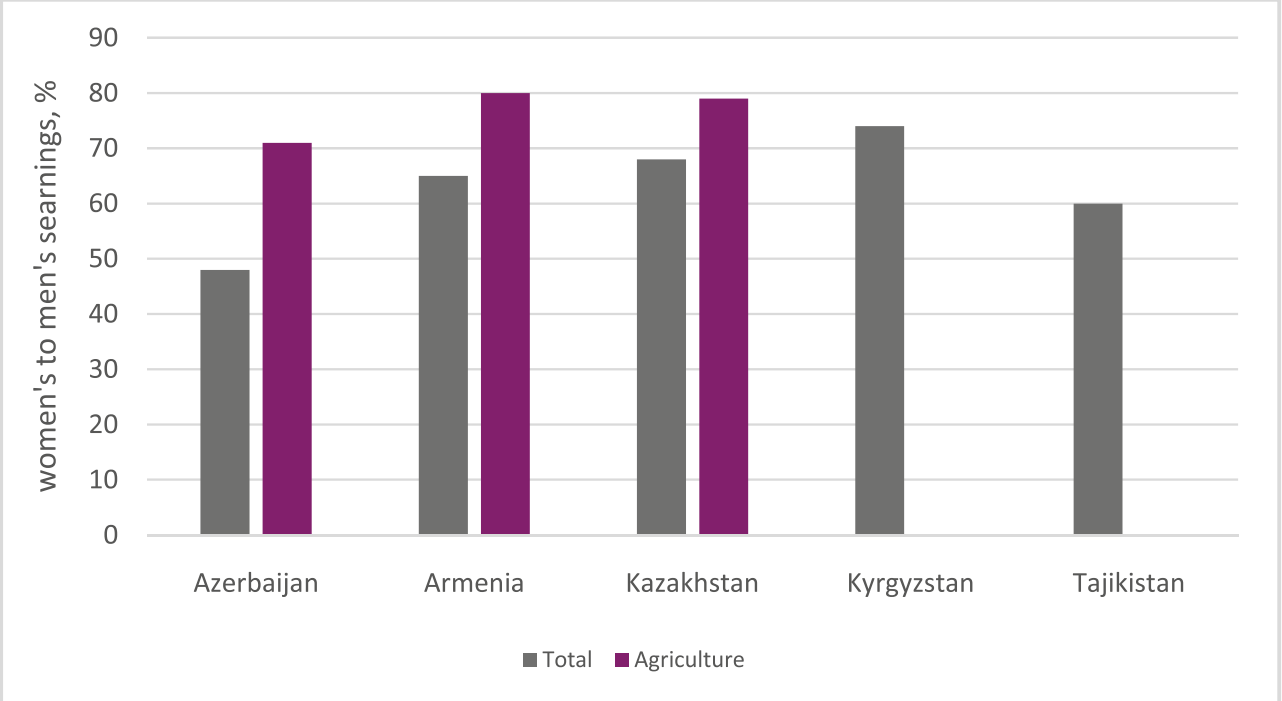
The forum participants pointed to the lack of gender disaggregated data on access to credit and borrowing. National statistics for Uzbekistan indicate that 67 percent of men and 65 percent of women have access to credit (UzStat, 2020). Even where women are unable to borrow formally from commercial banks, they have access to microcredit organizations. Thus, in Tajikistan, 35 percent of microcredit borrowers were women (average for 2009–2019; Agency of Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, no date) and in Kyrgyzstan, the percentage of women microcredit borrowers reached 57 (average for 2015–2019; National Committee of Statistics, 2020). Special financial support measures tailored to women are available in some countries, such as grants and loans for women offered as part of the "Damu" fund for female entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan (Damu, 2020; Atameken, 2018) or the new mortgage lending facility designed specifically for Kazakh women (Khabar 24, 2021). Yet even these earmarked funds show certain signs of female discrimination: while 58 percent of the loans approved by "Damu" were channelled to women, the amount of these loans represented only 12 percent of all lending to both women and men.

4.5 Constraints to land ownership and ability to control resources

Land ownership legislation throughout the region is gender neutral. In law, women have the same rights as men. In practice, however, the situation is different. Common socially acceptable inheritance practices favouring male children and patrilocal marriage practices pose barriers to women's land ownership, even when the legislation permits equal ownership. In Central Asia and South Caucasus, due to gendered social and cultural norms farm land is predominantly controlled by the eldest male family member, regardless of formal titling and registration. Even if a single woman legally owns a land plot, it passes to the family's collective ownership when she marries. Property laws specify joint ownership for married couples, effectively depriving women of any land that they may have owned before marriage.

The cultural nature of the barriers to women's land ownership is not amenable to quick fixes through legislation. The barriers may eventually disappear as women's empowerment grows and equality of women's rights becomes an accepted fact.

Figure 8. Gender pay gap in selected countries, 2019 (percentage



Source: Respective national statistical databases

4.6 Gender pay gap

Statistics show that women are paid less than men for performing equivalent work. Women-to-men earnings ratios are generally less than 70 percent (see Figure 9). The gap is somewhat smaller when earnings in equivalent occupations (for example, agriculture) are considered: here, the ratio is close to 80 percent for equivalent work. Azerbaijan has the largest gender pay gap, with women earning on average only 48 percent of men's wages (71 percent in agriculture).

The gender pay gap may be the result of women gravitating toward lower-paid fields of work, such as education and healthcare. However, they may also be attributable to the intrinsic discrimination of women in the workplace. Legislation in the region guarantees gender equality in the workplace, but in practice the gender pay gap persist.

5 Socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on rural women

The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the total amount of remittances from the Russian Federation to Central Asia in both RUB and USD terms between January and July in 2020 in comparison to the same period in 2019. It is only since June 2020, as the pandemic was brought under better control, that a robust recovery started to be observed in the remittances from the Russian Federation to the CIS countries. As Roman Romashkin confirmed, the changes in remittances are the result of COVID-19 and this has had a significant impact on rural livelihoods and on the ability of women to manage the household economy.

Participants also affirmed that women have been traditionally viewed as unpaid labour, tasked full time with house and family care. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures forced women to work from home even more, and the burden of care work increased substantially because of school closures and the reduction of mobility. The isolation of women in the home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated common social norms which prescribe women as having the main responsibilities for unpaid household labour and the care of relatives.

In Eastern Europe, the loss of earnings due to quarantine and business closures significantly affected the poor rural population, with rural women one of the most vulnerable social groups. At the same time, policy responses were often inadequate in addressing the needs of the rural poor. Examples of these inadequacies and their negative effects were provided by Marija Babović for Serbia and Ramona Dumimicioiu for Romania, where COVID-19 targeted support was distributed primarily to urban areas and large businesses, leaving behind rural families and smallholders, in particular women.

6 Promising practices in the ECA region to improve socio-economic opportunities for rural women

Forum panellists presented numerous examples of promising activities practised by rural women in their farms and communities.

These activities are wide-ranging in their scope, with the most common highlighted below:

- contribution to the development of community-level cooperative activities;
- launching of private businesses in collaboration with other rural women;
- introduction of high-value-added agri-food products, such as honey, spices, mushrooms, and medicinal and wild plants on farms and household plots;
- development of sustainable and organic agriculture on family farms;
- conservation of heirloom seed and plant varieties;
- distribution of seeds and seedlings by liaising between suppliers and small producers and consumers;
- promoting farm-to-table home delivery initiatives for food products;
- Organization of food banks for the poor and elderly.

Ramona Duminicioiu's presentation demonstrated that in Romania, women are engaged in developing sustainable agriculture and securing biodiversity. The Eco Ruralis Association of Romania, which is led by women, is distributing vegetable seeds to farmers for free. This activity is supported by some 30 small-scale seed producers, specializes in local plant varieties and serves mostly small peasant farms. From a total of 3 035 requests for seeds, 79 percent came from farmers who own or lease up to one hectare of agricultural land, and 62 percent of requests were made by women. In total, 38 species of seeds and 106 varieties of vegetables and aromatic plants were distributed via this channel in 2020.[14]

In many countries in the ECA region, women contribute to the preservation of traditional farming systems and indigenous gastronomy. As Anna Kanshieva reported, the Slow Food global grassroots organization, which aims to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and historical agricultural practices, has highlighted numerous cases of women's leadership in supporting and developing traditional farming and promoting local food products in the region. In Ukraine, Tatyana Sitnik organized a national network of "seed preservers", who meet on a quarterly basis at specialist fairs and agricultural shows to exchange rare seeds from different parts of the country, sometimes from unique small regions and even villages. In Uzbekistan, a cooperative established by women in the district of Bostanliq works to retain local almond cultivars. Almonds are native to the area. Cooperative members share knowledge, experience and the costs of promoting and marketing of the local almond varieties. Another important function of

14 Data supplied in the presentation by Ramona Dumimicioiu.

this women's cooperative is to protect almond trees from logging for firewood. In Azerbaijan, in the family of Halima Khanym, women across the generations have conserved a very special tomato cultivar. The local terroir guarantees its high yield and quality, but due to its short post-harvest life and transportation difficulties, farmers had switched to other cultivars that are more profitable and less sweet and juicy. Farmers have now been able to reintroduce the cultivar. In the Russian Federation, Julia Fominykh travels throughout the Altai mountains making an inventory of indigenous breeds of agricultural plants and traditional types of food. She shares these findings through posting videos on the internet and promotes them as a practising chef.

It is evident that women have become a driving force for launching agribusinesses and cooperatives. As Raushan Sarsenbaeva explained, the Association of Businesswomen of Kazakhstan has launched a programme known as "The Economy of Simple Things", which is aimed at the development of women's entrepreneurship in rural areas. This programme has established a databank of professions available to rural women for self-employment (including the conservation and processing of agricultural products, and the production of arts and handicrafts). An inaugural conference has already been held in the only region of Kazakhstan that is headed by a woman, and funding is now being sought for start-up capital for participants.

Elena Polyakova, a representative from Corteva Agriscience, observed that in the Russian Federation women launch new small and medium agribusinesses more often than men; and Lyubov Ovchintseva's presentation focused on The Movement of Rural Women of Russia, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) established in 1996 and based on the Association of Farm Households and Agricultural Cooperatives of Russia (ACCOR). This NGO aims to promote rural development through the provision of support to small and medium-sized businesses and aid to rural families who are in need. It also aims to facilitate women's involvement in social and political life, and decision-making, especially in relation to women's working and living conditions, protecting the rights of motherhood and childhood, and combatting drug addiction and alcoholism. The Movement has established branches in 50 out of 85 entities of the Russian Federation as noted by Ovchintseva.

Insufficiently developed professional education, especially in terms of women's access and engagement, and a lack of access to extension services, were cited by the panellists as two of the main obstacles to gender equality in agriculture and rural societies in the ECA region. Therefore, successful examples of solutions to these challenges are of particular importance.

The gender gaps in professional education can be partially reduced by training that aims to increase professional qualifications. In vocational schools in Georgia, Tamar Sanikidze demonstrated that women students represent only 43 percent of the total number. Recognizing the gender gaps in access to education, the private and educational sectors are currently actively involved in the development of vocational education through the implementation of gender-sensitive programmes dedicated to the professional advancement of women.

The private sector and agribusiness companies can make an important contribution to women-oriented training and inclusive extension services, as Corteva Agriscience in the Russian Federation and Coca Cola in Kazakhstan already do. Raushan Sarsenbaeva reported on the Coca Cola "Belesteri" programme, which aims to support training for rural women living in Kazakhstan. This educational programme consists of three stages of training. Participants also enter a business plan competition and the winners are awarded a grant worth USD 5 000. Women are trained in the basics of household farming, including growing mushrooms, microgreens and greenhouse lemons, beekeeping and aquaculture, for example. By 2020, 35 000 women had taken part in training, 81 participants had received grants, and 200 jobs had been created in rural areas.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

In most of the countries in the ECA region, women experience inequalities in the labour market, and in access to financial institutions, social services and education. Women's asset ownership rights are constrained by negative societal practices that limit their access to supply and product markets. Our review of the most recently available information and data presented by the international forum participants leads us to the following conclusions concerning the gender gaps in rural areas and in the agricultural sector.

The clearest manifestation of labour market discrimination is the persistence of gender pay gaps: women are paid less than men for equivalent work. These earnings gaps may be the result of women gravitating, toward lower-paid fields of work, such as education and healthcare. They may, however, also be attributable to the intrinsic discrimination of women in the workplace. Legislation in the countries of the region guarantees gender equality in the workplace, and all governments have joined the 2030 Agenda and are committed to the achievement of SDG 5, but in practice, discrimination continues to persist.

Another manifestation of labour market discrimination is the widespread informality of women's work in agriculture, in which a significant share of women are engaged. Women in agriculture work in short-term, temporary positions that do not entitle them to sickness or parental leave, rest time, health insurance or paid vacations. The transition to formality in labour relations should be one of the key policy goals for governments of the region.

Women's total employment in the region increased by 30 percent between 1991 and 2019, while women's employment in agriculture decreased by about 14 percent. This indicates women's movement into non-agricultural occupations. The share of women in total employment remained at 43 percent, demonstrating that women's employment has grown over time at the same rate as men's.

The data on gender gaps in access to financial institutions are limited. Nevertheless, they seem to indicate that women mainly borrow from microcredit institutions and also have access to support funds earmarked for women entrepreneurs. However, women, and especially rural women, are less experienced in their contact with formal financial institutions and are often unable to meet the formal loan requirements, and cope with the paperwork required to pursue a loan application. It is evident that women would benefit from access to dedicated, gender-sensitive training programmes developed by financial and business institutions and that bureaucratic procedures should be made more gender-responsive.

The rural advisory services systems in the countries that were studied do not recognize women as legitimate farmers with specific needs and priorities. RAS advice is typically assessed and presented for the household as an entity, without distinguishing between the different needs and aspirations of women and men. Forum participants emphasized that this gender-neutrality has to change. Advisory services should design their provision based on the specific and separate goals of women and men. Moreover, integrating a gender-responsive approach in extension services provision and specifically targeting women service users is an important step toward ensuring that female farmers and household members achieve their full productive potential and do not lag behind men.

Rural women often lack the relevant skills for managing a business, be it a farm or a micro dairy. These types of skills are acquired through formal education or professional training. All former Soviet countries have exceptionally high levels of literacy and participation in basic education for both boys and girls. Enrolment in vocational and higher education is also high, and there are no gender gaps in the graduation rates. However, access to education for many rural

young people is hampered by the remoteness of vocational schools, colleges and universities. Furthermore, there are notable differences in the fields of study and areas of specialization between young women and men. More women are represented in low-paid professions, such as teaching and low-wage healthcare occupations, while men specialize in engineering, sciences, management and high-earning medical professions. These professional choices are influenced by social norms, which in turn limit women's career options.

Women's professional profile and earning potential can be raised by training young women in information technologies, computers and digitalization. These new directions require proper financial support and specially-designed training programmes geared toward rural women and men that are tailored to their age and skills. One recommended approach is to apply gender equality mainstreaming principles for ensuring women's enrolment and developing financial support guidelines in targeted fields of study.

As concluded by forum participants, there is a growing recognition among decision-makers in the ECA region of the urgency in addressing constraints and ensuring equal access to and control over productive resources for all. In order to close the gender gaps in agriculture and rural development, women's socio-economic opportunities should be expanded and more balanced power relations instituted. It is necessary to prioritize women's access to education and capacity building in agriculture and rural development, while alleviating the heavy work burden that arises from their multiple roles within households and communities. A gender trans formative approach in policy and programmatic work is therefore crucial to address the root causes of gender inequalities. These measures will increase women's decision-making powers in the family and community. Greater economic empowerment of women will lead to higher investments, economic growth and better outcomes in household nutrition and children's welfare, and importantly contribute to agri-food systems transformation.

Annex 1: Programme for the international forum "Food policy, rural development and gender equality in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia: current trends and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic"

10 March 2021 – Webinar 1: "Gender-responsive agricultural and food systems policies: status and prospects in Europe and Central Asia region"

Vladimir Rakhmanin. Introductory statement.

Susan Kaaria. Gender and food security issues: cases from global practices.

To register for this side event:
inagres.hse.ru/en/polls/442058795.html

The webinar will be livestreamed on the HSE website:
inagres.hse.ru/en/faogenderwebinars

Website: International Forum "Food Policy, Rural Development and Gender Equality in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia: current trends and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic"
inagres.hse.ru/en/faogenderwebinars

Languages:
English/Russian. Simultaneous translation will be available.

Roman Romashkin. Agri-food policies and agricultural development in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: gender issues, achievements and prospects.

Marija Babović. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on accessibility of rural women to employment and assets.

Mavzuna Karimova. The problems of development of women's entrepreneurship in rural areas of Tajikistan.

Lyubov Ovchintseva. Russian agri-food policy and rural development in focus of women's gender interests.

Anna Kanshieva. The potential of grassroots women's groups to support the transition to sustainable food systems.

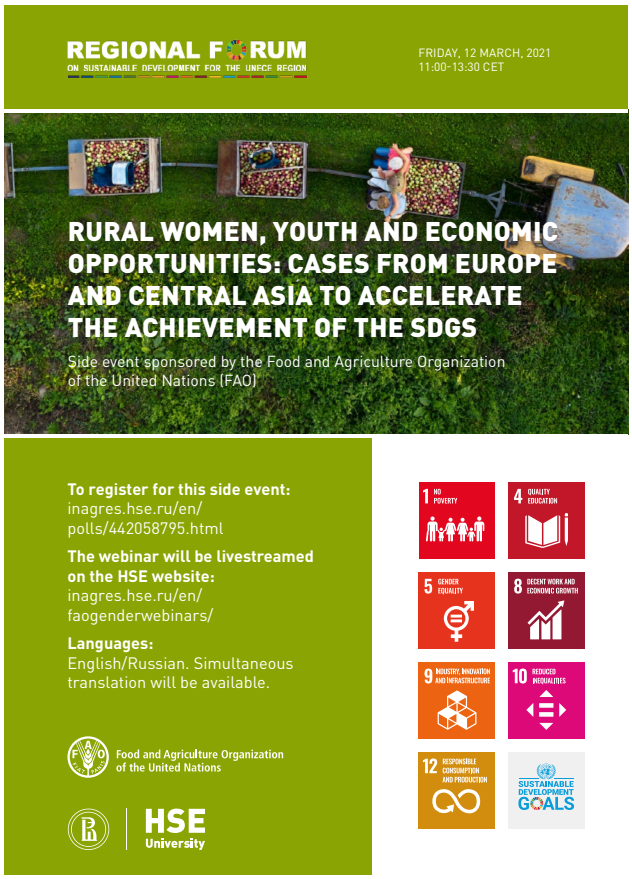
12 March 2021 – Webinar 2: "Rural women, youth and economic opportunities: cases from Europe and Central Asia to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs"

Raimund Jehle. Introductory statement.

Leonid Grigoryev. Sustainable Development Goals: theory and reality.

Raushan Sarsenbaeva. Rural women doing business in Kazakhstan.

Ilkay Unay Gailhard. Becoming a young farmer: farming as a career option?



17 March 2021 – Webinar 3: "Leaving no one behind: gender inclusion in education and professional training for a rural economy of knowledge"

Irina Donnik. Introductory statement.

Hajnalka Petrics. Leaving no one behind: gender inclusion in education and professional training for a rural economy of knowledge: Keynotes from FAO Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Programme.

Elena Polyakova. Social initiatives of Corteva Agriscience in Russia.

Uktam Umurzakov. Agriculture 4.0 – creation of the future agriculture and food industry in Uzbekistan through education, science and innovation.

Tamar Sanikidze. Access to education for women and capacity-building in Georgia's agriculture.

Margit Batthyany-Schmidt. Innovative and proactive solutions by a Hungarian women-related NGO, the Union of Hungarian Women (UHW), to the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic.

Natalia Derkanosova, Svetlana Maltseva, Evgeny Rudoy, Elena Boyko, Bahromdzhon R. Ahmadov. Reports from university officials in the Russian Federation and Tajikistan.

Nozilakhon Mukhamedova. A study of women's role in irrigated agriculture: Southern Tajikistan.

Elena Myakotnikova. Experience of the Agency of Strategic Initiatives (Russia) in promotion and development of potential of women and youth.

Ramona Duminicioiu. Challenges that hold off the progress of rural women's economic empowerment – in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Solutions and initiatives from the ground.

To register for this side event:
inagres.hse.ru/en/polls/442058795.html

The webinar will be livestreamed on the HSE website:
inagres.hse.ru/en/faogenderwebinars

Languages:
English/Russian. Simultaneous translation will be available.

Annex 2: Speakers, moderators and steering committee of the international forum "Food policy, rural development and gender equality in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia: current trends and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic"

Keynote speakers and moderators

Bahromdzhon R. Ahmadov. Vice-Rector for Science and Innovation, Shirinsho Shotemur Tajik Agrarian University, Tajikistan.

Marija Babović. Professor, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade and SeCons Development Initiative Group, Serbia.

Margit Batthyany-Schmidt. President, Union of Hungarian Women, Hungary.

Elena Boyko. Rector, State Agrarian University of the Northern Trans-Urals, Russian Federation.

Irina Donnik. Vice-President of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russian Federation.

Natalia Derkanosova. Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, Peter the Great Voronezh Agrarian University, Russian Federation.

Ramona Duminicioiu. Delegate of the European Coordination Via Campesina, Member of the Coordination Committee of the Civil Society Mechanism for relations to the UN Committee on World Food Security, Romania.

Leonid Grigoryev. Professor, Academic Supervisor, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Raimund Jehle. Regional Programme Leader for Europe and Central Asia, FAO.

Susan Kaaria. Senior Gender Officer, Inclusive Rural Transformation and Gender Equity, FAO.

Anna Kanshieva. Programme Manager for Asia and Europe, Slow Food International.

Mavzuna Karimova. Head of the Department of Economic Theory and Foreign Economic Relations, Institute of Economics and Demography, Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, Tajikistan.

Svetlana Maltseva. Research Professor, Tikhonov Moscow Institute of Electronics and Mathematics, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Nozilakhon Mukhamedova. Professor, Department of Agricultural Policy and Market Research, Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany.

Elena Myakotnikova. Corporate Director, Agency for Strategic Initiatives, Russian Federation.

Alexey Naumov. Head of Department for Rural Development Studies, Institute for Agrarian Studies, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Lyubov Ovchintseva. Leading Research Fellow, Center for Agrarian Studies, Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Russian Federation.

Nadezhda Orlova. Head of Department for Economics of Innovation in Agriculture, Institute for Agrarian Studies, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Hajnalka Petrics. Programme Officer (Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment), FAO; Global Coordinator, EU-funded United Nations Rome-based Agencies (RBAs) Joint Programme on Gender Transformative Approaches for Food Security and Nutrition.

Elena Polyakova. Government and Industry Affairs Lead, Central and Eastern Europe, Corteva Agriscience, Russian Federation.

Vladimir Rakhmanin. Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, FAO.

Roman Romashkin. Deputy Director of the Eurasian Center for Food Security, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russian Federation.

Evgeny Rudoy. Rector, Novosibirsk State Agrarian University, Russian Federation.

Tamar Sanikidze. Agriculture and Farming Specialist, United Nations Development Programme in Georgia.

Raushan Sarsenbaeva. President of the Association of Businesswomen of Kazakhstan, Member of the National Commission for Women and Family-Demographic Policy under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Evgenia Serova. Director for Agricultural Policy, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Uktam Umurzakov. Rector of the Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers, Chairman of the Republican Council for Higher Education of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan.

Ilkay Unay Gailhard. Researcher, Department of the Structural Development of Farms and Rural Areas, Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies, Germany.

Steering committee

Sadaf Abdolova. Expert, Institute for Agrarian Studies, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Dono Abdurazakova. Senior Gender and Social Protection Adviser, Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, FAO.

Valeria Arefieva. Manager, Institute for Agrarian Studies, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Ekaterina Galaktionova. Expert, Institute for Agrarian Studies, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Anna Jenderedjian. Gender and Social Protection Specialist, Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, FAO.

Zvi Lerman. Sir Henry d'Avigdor Goldsmid Professor Emeritus of Agricultural Economics, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

Alexey Naumov. Head of Department for Rural Development Studies, Institute for Agrarian Studies, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Yulia Nikulina. Research Fellow, Institute for Agrarian Studies, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

Evgenia Serova. Director for Agricultural Policy, Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation.

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