

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Wednesday 9th October 2024: Committee Room 3, LH200, Leinster House

Topic: Action Plan arising from the National Dialogue on Women in Agriculture

Opening Statement: The Importance of Women in Irish Agriculture

Good evening, everyone,

I am honoured to speak today on a topic that is of paramount importance to the future of Irish agriculture – the essential role of women. For too long, women’s contributions to farming and rural life have been under recognised, but today, we stand at a crossroads, where the need for inclusion, recognition, and support for women in agriculture is undeniable.

Irish agriculture has been the backbone of our economy and culture for centuries, and women have always played a central role in sustaining our farms, families, and rural communities. Traditionally, women's work on farms was often categorised as "helping out", "standing in the gap" or seen as an extension of domestic duties. Yet, in reality, women have been active contributors, decision-makers, and innovators. Today, women represent a small but vibrant portion of farm owners and managers, with many driving advancements in sustainability, diversification, and the adoption of new technologies.

However, despite these contributions, barriers persist. Access to land, finance, and advisor education are often more challenging for women in farming, and many face social and cultural expectations that can limit their opportunities. This underutilisation of talent not only stifles women's potential but also hampers the overall progress of the sector. Irish agriculture cannot afford to leave women behind.

It is well established that empowering women in agriculture generates significant social and economic benefits. Research, including our own EU-funded FLIARA (Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas) project, has shown that when women have greater control over farm resources, they tend to add value to the farm and invest in their families' health, education, and overall well-being. This, in turn, strengthens rural communities and fosters more sustainable development. In particular, women play a crucial role in driving farm diversifications, including Agri-tourism, food production, crafts and rural businesses, on-farm education and workshops and organic farming. These farm diversifications not only boost economic opportunities and add value to many non-viable farms, but also foster more sustainable agricultural practices in Ireland. In truth, greater gender diversity in farming leads to more innovative and resilient agricultural practices, helping to tackle some of the greatest challenges we face today, such as climate change, food security, generational renewal and gender equality.

The Action Plan resulting from the National Dialogue on Women in Agriculture marks a significant milestone for women in Irish agriculture. It provides, for the first time, a clear and substantial commitment to ensuring their inclusion and active participation within the industry. What becomes imperative here, is that all actions are operationalised and in turn evaluated to ensure they are the most effective approaches.

To sustain the momentum generated by the Action Plan, it is crucial to implement targeted supports that fully unlock the potential of women in the sector. This includes improving access to mentorship, financial resources, and educational opportunities. Policies that promote land ownership for women, ensure equal representation in agricultural leadership, and create an inclusive rural environment are vital to achieving long-term, meaningful change.

In conclusion, the future of Irish agriculture is inextricably linked to the full and equal participation of women. Their skills, knowledge, and leadership are vital to ensuring a thriving, sustainable agricultural sector for generations to come. By supporting women in agriculture, we are not just supporting individual farmers, we are investing in the future of our rural communities and the entire nation.

Thank you.

Associate Professor Maura Farrell