Ensuring that rural advisory services are responsive to women: good practices from FAO in Europe and Central Asia
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### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIS</td>
<td>agricultural innovation systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>EAS</td>
<td>extension and advisory services</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Europe and Central Asia</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>FFS</td>
<td>farmer field school</td>
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<tr>
<td>GRAST</td>
<td>Gender and Rural Advisory Services Assessment Tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICTs</td>
<td>information and communications technologies</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-governmental organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>RAS</td>
<td>rural advisory services</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal</td>
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<tr>
<td>ToT</td>
<td>training of trainers</td>
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<tr>
<td>USD</td>
<td>United States dollar</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

Increasing productivity, developing agricultural value chains and, ultimately, ensuring sustainable agricultural growth and reducing poverty and food insecurity, all depend on those who work across agrifood systems having access to knowledge, information and education in various forms. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recognizes that extension and advisory services are keys to unlocking the potential of agricultural innovation. FAO favours an approach to supporting agricultural innovation systems that moves away from a traditional conception of extension services towards a more expansive model of rural advisory services.

Embedded within the provision of rural advisory services (RAS) is a concept of supporting systems that “consider many characteristics and aspects of extension clientele: age, gender, race, caste, social group, intrahousehold dynamics, and community factors” (Davis, Makhija and Spielman, 2021, p. 7). RAS should, thus, be situated within a community context and, “rather than focusing on single methods, [they] must be flexible and adaptable to the needs of the target audience” (ibid.). This review focuses on one aspect of inclusivity – the provision of services that reflect the needs and priorities of both women and men, and are proactive in ensuring that neither bias nor discrimination prevent women from obtaining much-needed knowledge and information.

In much of the world, including in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region, extension and advisory services have not been equally accessible to women smallholders or agricultural workers because of complex and interrelated gender disparities, including the fact that women’s contributions to agriculture are generally undervalued and often overlooked completely. While advisory services have the potential to address longstanding gender inequalities, too often they are designed and provided in a manner that does not consider the actual, and often differing, experiences of women and men. FAO’s cross-cutting goal of promoting gender equality in agrifood systems1 relies not only on improving women’s access to agricultural extension but also on establishing RAS systems that recognize and respond to women’s specific roles, responsibilities and needs.

At present, the ECA countries are at various stages of upgrading the provision of agricultural extension and developing rural advisory services. Therefore, the region is characterized by considerable variation in modes of operation, funding levels, capacities and experiences with integrating gender-responsive practices. Nevertheless, this publication offers a review of the region as a whole; it documents common shortcomings but also provides space to reflect on differing promising approaches.

This report builds upon FAO’s work promoting gender mainstreaming in extension and advisory services, cataloguing challenges and suggesting strategies for increasing the gender responsiveness of rural advisory services globally. The purpose of this review is to apply FAO’s accumulated knowledge about gender equality in the context of rural advisory services to assess the situation in the ECA region.

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1 Agrifood systems comprise the entire range of actors and their interlinked activities that add value in food and non-food agricultural production and related off-farm activities, such as food storage, aggregation, post-harvest handling, transportation, processing, distribution, marketing, disposal and consumption (FAO, 2023a).
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The report provides a snapshot of the extent to which gender considerations are currently integrated into RAS in the region and highlights good practices that are in line with FAO’s gender equality strategies. The report concludes with recommendations for FAO, partner organizations and stakeholders in the fields of agricultural extension and rural advisory services, on how to further improve such services to extend their reach to rural women and men who have previously had limited or no access. This process requires moving away from gender-neutral service provision, which often results in the exclusion of women, towards transformative extension and rural advisory services that challenge unequal gender relations and address underlying discriminatory norms and practices.

1.1. Concepts and terms

Extension and rural advisory services

Several terms are used both in this publication and generally in the context of improving farmers’ access to information and innovations and assessing the systems for such service delivery. The various terms reflect evolving concepts of the purpose, functions and methods of extension and advisory services.

FAO broadly supports Member Nations to enhance agricultural innovation systems (AIS), a term that refers to a whole network of individuals, organizations and enterprises, along with supporting institutions and policies, that “bring new products, processes and forms of organization into use to achieve food security, economic development and sustainable natural resource management” (FAO, 2023b, no pagination). Agricultural extension and advisory services are parts of AIS.¹

Historically, agricultural extension services referred to the transfer of scientific research, knowledge, advice and technologies to improve agricultural practices through farmer education. Such services were provided by academic institutions – “extending” information and technologies from universities and colleges to farms. Today, the field of extension encompasses a wide range of “communication and learning theories and activities (organized for the benefit of rural people) by professionals from different disciplines” (INGENAES and USAID, 2015, no pagination). Increasingly, extension services have come to mean the development of the capacities of both farmers – men and women – and extension organizations, with information mutually flowing between these groups.

FAO uses the term agricultural extension and advisory services (EAS) to capture the diversity of services provided by a variety of institutions, depending on the country context.

Definition of agricultural extension and advisory services (EAS)

Agricultural EAS refers to “any organization in the public or private sectors (non-governmental organizations, farmer organizations, private firms, etc.) that facilitates farmers’ and other rural actors’ access to knowledge, information and technologies, and their interactions with other actors; and assists them to develop their own technical, organizational and management skills and practices, so as to improve their livelihoods and well-being” (FAO, 2019a, p. 6).

¹ This report focuses on the following fifteen countries in three subregions where FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia currently has programmes: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye (Western Balkans and Türkiye); Armenia; Azerbaijan; Belarus; Georgia; the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (Eastern Europe and the Caucasus); Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Central Asia). Information about Kosovo is also included. References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

² Note that the European Union uses the agricultural knowledge and innovation system (AKIS) model which is very similar to the idea of an Agricultural Innovation System in that it describes the multi-part structure of organizations and individuals that undertake knowledge generation, transmission and dissemination for the betterment of agricultural production. The AKIS may be more relevant for countries that are candidates for European Union membership.
Whereas EAS centres around the delivery of information to improve agricultural production, the conceptualization of **rural advisory services** refers to a broader range of activities that address the demands not only of farmers but also other actors in agrifood systems and rural development (FAO, 2015). This means that RAS may cover a range of technical, organizational, business and management skills and practices. This conceptualization also acknowledges the diversity of those who provide advisory services and broadens the scope to include support to rural communities that “goes beyond conventional technology transfers and dissemination of information” (ibid., p. 12). Rural advisory services can encompass brokering “interactions between farmers, the private sector, research, education, and government,” coaching and empowering rural people, and promoting innovations to mitigate climate change and protect the environment, for example (GFRAS, 2013, p. 4). In this context, RAS agents may be helping women and men working on farms in a broad spectrum of topics, including, “agricultural challenges (climate change, high food prices, and the depletion of natural resources), and also ... market information, health and sanitation training, facilitating access to credit and other productive resources” (FAO, 2015, p. 18).

Because the term “extension services” is commonly associated with a traditional top-down method of technology transfer – one from which women have often been excluded – FAO advocates for changing the focus to RAS, which represents “more inclusive, demand-driven and participatory approaches that focus on facilitating interaction and learning, sharing of knowledge” (ibid., p. 18).

**Gender norms and gender transformation**

The constraints and systemic barriers that women face in agriculture are rooted in gender norms. Gender norms refer to ideas, attitudes and beliefs about how women and men should be and act. They are informal social rules, or put another way, they are standards and expectations within a particular society, culture or community. Gender norms influence many functions, from policymaking and the allocation of resources to the expected roles and responsibilities of men and women in the household. These norms also influence how RAS providers identify and interact with clients, as well as perceptions about when it is considered “acceptable” for women to take part in RAS.

Research indicates that “extension and other related services overwhelmingly continue to benefit men more than women,” and women’s testimonies shed light on some of the barriers that they frequently encounter, including not being invited to learning events, lack of free time to attend events due to household demands, and the potential for “social disapproval” if they interact with male extension agents (Petesch et al., 2017, p. 3). The consequence of extension and advisory services systems that operate without awareness of discriminatory gender norms is that women are systematically left behind.

There are, however, many examples of interventions that do recognize the particular needs of women in agrifood systems and, in parallel, aim to strengthen their knowledge and skills, through extension services that also include capacity building. Such activities have an additional objective of increasing women’s agency or empowerment. **Women’s empowerment** refers to a process “by which women take control over their lives, acquiring the ability to make strategic choices” (United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 2002, para. 4). Women’s empowerment has five components: 1) women’s sense of self-worth; 2) their right to have and to determine choices; 3) their right to have access to opportunities and resources; 4) their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and 5) their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally” (FAO, 2017a, p. 3). When women are not empowered (as seen, for instance, in women’s lack of landownership or limited agency to make decisions regarding family farms) their opportunities to benefit from RAS are greatly constrained. Moreover, well-planned extension and advisory services can be empowering if they recognize and provide women with opportunities to exercise the knowledge and skills they possess.
Increasingly, FAO advocates for RAS that play a role in gender-transformative change – that is, not merely improving women’s access to key services and resources, but also challenging the very norms that perpetuate inequalities (ibid.).

**Gender-transformative approaches** take advantage of the fact that gender norms are not static but are subject to variation over time and in different contexts; they are changeable. Gender-transformative approaches refer to methods that seek to “actively examine, challenge and transform the underlying causes of gender inequality rooted in inequitable social structures and institutions” (FAO, 2022a, no pagination). Such approaches address unequal gendered power relations and discriminatory norms, attitudes, behaviours and practices, as well as gender-blind or discriminatory laws and policies that create and perpetuate gender inequalities (FAO and WFP, 2022). They aim to eradicate systemic forms of gender-based discrimination, and create or strengthen gender equitable attitudes and behaviours and the structures that support gender equality. Gender-transformative interventions do not target women alone but require the engagement of women and men at multiple levels, from the individual and grassroots level, up to the level of legislation and policies.

### Who should be considered potential women clients for RAS?

This review focuses on women who work across agrifood systems, all of whom need specific knowledge and skills, and thus also require access to RAS. They may be women who work in primary agricultural production, including farm owners, wage workers who are recruited to work on farms or agro-holdings, or contributing family workers who undertake farming as part of their unpaid domestic activities. Women who work in off-farm activities within agrifood systems, including entrepreneurs who manage agribusinesses, can also be considered RAS clients.

In fact, RAS encompasses a spectrum of services and activities for rural communities, and thus all women who live in rural areas are potentially part of the client base. However, this review concentrates on ways to improve the gender responsiveness of RAS used to enhance primary agricultural production, and so the key women clients in this context are women farmers, or women smallholders, as well as women working on farms.

Even this smaller group of women is heterogeneous, with distinct needs. Rural advisory services design and implementation should consider the diversity of women’s experiences and interests, with attention to factors such as age, education level, language, socioeconomic status and family situation.

#### The historical context

Reviewing the antecedents to the current EAS and RAS systems in the region, and the challenges that are being addressed through initiatives to strengthen agricultural innovation systems, helps to clarify how the weaknesses in today’s public extension services affect all farmers, but with different impacts on women farmers. Such a review highlights the need to identify entry points for initiatives to develop gender-responsive RAS within work to improve AIS overall.

Despite the diversity of the ECA region, the countries share some common features that have shaped the form that EAS and RAS take today. With the exception of Türkiye, the agricultural systems of the ECA countries operated within planned economies. Farms were either collectives (cooperative farms) or state-owned farms, concentrated in single crops. The former research and extension systems were well-organized networks within these farm structures. Agricultural production was regulated centrally, with instructions given to farmers and farm workers in a centralized and top-down manner with the aim of improving production and increasing workers’ capacities. Thus, extension services
were not advisory as they are understood today to mean facilitating farmers’ access to knowledge, information and technologies, based on their particular needs.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, most of the countries underwent a process of privatization of state and collective farms, individuals received land plots, and a large number of small semi-subsistence farms were created. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, “former kolkhoz and sovkhoz4 specialists became small-scale farm generalists with a huge lack of technical knowledge” (Müller, Guenat and Fromm, 2010, p. 211). Land was also granted to rural residents who did not necessarily have prior farming experience or specialist backgrounds in agriculture, but who now had the opportunity to establish private farms. However, even decades later, only a small proportion of farms would be considered commercially-oriented, and the large majority are family farms, or rural households that undertake agricultural activities mainly as subsistence farming. Concerning the Western Balkans, but characteristic for the ECA countries covered by this review, farming today is “more of a way of living than a method of doing business” (FAO, 2011, p. 7). In practical terms, this means that the methods used by former extensionists of training collective farm workers do not respond to the present context in which several family members are engaged in more varied agricultural production on household farms.

One of the strengths of the ECA region, however, is the large number of “research institutions and a huge complement of research staff” (Kazbekov and Sarwar Qureshi, 2011, p. 10), inherited from the past. Today, however, each country faces challenges to maintain this legacy in the face of reduced public funding and diminished interest among the new generations in pursuing higher education in agricultural specialties or in taking up farming as an occupation. The current agricultural extension structures are relatively new, having been developed in the last decades with considerable support from international donors. In the Western Balkans region, extension services have been assessed as “patchy in both scope and quality,” to the extent that they are not meeting market demand or farmers’ needs (OECD, 2021, p. 522). FAO characterizes public extension services as having been “neglected over the last two decades” (FAO, 2022c, p. 7), and this lack of investment has resulted in diminished outreach to, and relevance for, farmers in general. Indeed, in the ECA region, farmers commonly have little familiarity or experience with extension services. For instance, in Georgia, of rural men and women who took part in a survey, only 15.4 percent had information about extension services, and 1.4 percent had used them (UN Women, Swiss Cooperation Office and Austrian Development Cooperation, 2018). Likewise in Kosovo,5 a similar survey revealed that only 5 percent of rural women and 16 percent of rural men knew about agricultural advisory services offered locally, and 2 percent of women and 10 percent of men had participated in agricultural meetings. Even among people engaged in agricultural activities who were familiar with agricultural extension services, 28 percent of men, and 44 percent of women, had never used them (FAO, forthcoming [a]).

These limitations mean that the state-supported EAS of today are, on the one hand, less effective than they were in the past in conveying agricultural knowledge to farmers. On the other hand, farmers’ needs have changed and farming itself has become more diverse, and so approaches to EAS need overhauling if they are to support agrifood systems. It is also essential that efforts to reform and improve AIS, especially in terms of outreach and relevance to today’s clients, recognize from the outset that different approaches are needed in order not to replicate systems that previously bypassed women.

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4 Under the Soviet agricultural system, a kolkhoz was a collective farm and a sovkhoz was a wholly state-owned farm.

5 References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).
2. Why are gender-responsive rural advisory services necessary?

Promoting gender equality and empowering rural women are central to FAO’s mandate. The world over, agriculture and rural development are held back by persisting inequalities between women and men. Overcoming gender-based disparities is a crucial prerequisite for creating “sustainable and inclusive food systems and resilient and peaceful societies” (FAO, 2020a, p. 1). Enhancing women’s access to agricultural inputs, such as support services, technologies, innovations and practices, means ensuring that women and men have equal access to rural advisory services as well.

2.1. Gender equality commitments

Commitments outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) require recognizing the unique situation of rural women and taking special measures to protect their rights. Because rural women play key roles in agriculture and rural economies, including household economies, they have the equal right to obtain all types of training and education, including community-based and agricultural extension services (Article 14, CEDAW).

CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No. 34, para. 45

States parties should improve the design and delivery of high-quality agricultural extension and rural advisory services, recognizing women as farmers and clients. Such services should ensure that male and female extension and rural advisory service staff have expertise in gender-responsive program design and delivery and are regularly trained on women’s rights, gender equality, gender analysis and gender-responsive programming. States parties should adopt, implement and regularly monitor and evaluate gender-responsive agricultural extension and rural advisory policies and programs.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recalls that rural women, most notably farmers, should benefit on an equal basis with men from community and extension services and that these services must be tailored to address rural women’s priorities and needs, while increasing their access to technical knowledge (CEDAW Committee, 2016, para. 44).

FAO’s commitment to integrate gender equality in its work has evolved and deepened, from promoting gender-sensitive approaches, to requiring gender-responsive interventions, policies and support services, to now recognizing the necessity of gender-transformative approaches that address the root causes of inequality.

Two organization-wide objectives of the FAO Policy on Gender Equality for 2020–2030 directly address RAS: Objective 3 on the equal right to access services, markets and decent work (which implies ensuring equal access to the prerequisite agricultural support services, including advisory, financial and business development); and Objective 4 on enhancing women’s access to technologies, practices and infrastructure in order to reduce their work burden (which requires rural institutions to provide
the required gender-responsive support services, such as extension and advisory services; FAQ, 2020a). These objectives are reiterated for Europe and Central Asia in the regional gender strategy for the next three years. Within the regional strategy's specific output on increasing women's access to markets, knowledge and innovation, improving gender-responsive RAS is a priority (FAO, 2023c).

2.2. Leaving no one behind

Because transforming agrifood systems supports the 2030 Agenda, ensuring equal access to extension and rural advisory services directly contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Foremost, targets for SDG 5, on gender equality, address disparities in women's access to economic resources and to information and technologies that would empower them. In fact, goals on gender equality are embedded across the 2030 Agenda. Gender-responsive RAS is one way to advance progress towards several goals on reducing poverty and hunger, while ensuring that development is inclusive. Thus, developing gender-responsive RAS can be a means to reach specific targets that are associated with the SDGs on issues such as equitable quality education, decent work and the impacts of climate change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected SDGs</th>
<th>Targets</th>
<th>Links to gender-responsive RAS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal 1</td>
<td><strong>1 NO POVERTY</strong>&lt;br&gt;Ensure that all men and women have equal rights to economic resources and basic services, including new technology.</td>
<td>RAS, including extension services, are a means of introducing women farmers and farm workers to new information, technologies and innovations that can be used to lessen labour and time inputs, thus improving productivity and income.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 2</td>
<td><strong>2 ZERO HUNGER</strong>&lt;br&gt;Increase investment in rural infrastructure, including agricultural research and extension services, to enhance agricultural production.</td>
<td>Enhancing the productivity levels of women farmers, through RAS and extension services, will lead to improvements in household nutrition and also contribute to overall food supply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 4</td>
<td><strong>4 QUALITY EDUCATION</strong>&lt;br&gt;Ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical education; increase relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.</td>
<td>RAS is a form of technical education that can provide women in rural areas with new skills, not only in farming but also in other areas, such as entrepreneurship. Education and lifelong learning opportunities should be inclusive of all farmers and farm workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 5</td>
<td><strong>5 GENDER EQUALITY</strong>&lt;br&gt;Ensure equal rights to economic resources; ensure access to enabling technology to empower women.</td>
<td>For women farmers and workers, RAS is a key resource and a means to increase access to technology, both of which can lead to economic empowerment and reductions in poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 8</td>
<td><strong>8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH</strong>&lt;br&gt;Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation.</td>
<td>Introducing new technologies and innovations through RAS is a means to enable women farmers to enhance their productivity and to support rural women in decent work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 13</td>
<td><strong>13 CLIMATE ACTION</strong>&lt;br&gt;Improve education, awareness raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.</td>
<td>Through RAS, information about climate-smart agriculture and adaptation can be transferred to rural women and men. As RAS can promote innovative and integrated practices to smallholders, it can increase sustainable agriculture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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FAO’s strategic vision for Europe and Central Asia

FAO’s Strategic Framework 2022–2031 supports the 2030 Agenda through a transformation to agrifood systems that are “effective, inclusive, resilient and sustainable” (FAO, 2021a, p. 2). The centrality of gender-responsive RAS to the Strategic Framework is seen in the fact that two of the strategy’s cross-sectional “accelerators” are technology and innovation, and one of its cross-cutting themes is gender equality. FAO commits to reducing inequalities between women and men, and to promoting women’s equal rights and access to and control over resources, services, information, education and technologies, as a programmatic priority area.

FAO priorities for Europe and Central Asia under the Strategic Framework include addressing the following needs:

- improving the “social sustainability and inclusivity of agrifood systems” through gender-balanced approaches to empower women as agents of change in order to ensure sustainable rural development and equitable agrifood livelihoods (FAO, 2022b, p. 7); and
- building nutrition-sensitive value chain capacities among agricultural extension and other advisory services to transform agrifood systems and fill gaps in understanding and in practical techniques (FAO, 2022b).

Thus, the support that FAO provides for the transformation of agrifood systems in the ECA region requires particular attention not only to promoting technologies and innovations through EAS and RAS but, at the same time, mainstreaming gender in these efforts to ensure that gender gaps in knowledge and information do not persist or even widen further.

The FAO Science and Innovation Strategy is guided by five overarching principles, including “gender equal”. This means that in its work to address gaps between science, innovation and technologies and their uptake at the local level, FAO not only responds to the heterogeneous roles and needs of women and men, but promotes “women’s inclusion and [provides] equal decision-making power to shape relevant legal frameworks, policies, programmes and initiatives” (FAO, 2022c, p. 7). The guiding principles of “equity-based” and “needs-driven” further reinforce approaches that are based on meaningfully engaging with and responding to the needs of underrepresented actors in agrifood systems, of which women farmers and agricultural workers is one group.

Nowhere are agricultural extension and rural advisory services a more critical resource than for smallholder farmers. The Global Action Plan for 2019–2028, for the United Nations Decade of Family Farming, foresees a number of activities related specifically to enhanced advisory and extension services, as reflected in five of the plan’s seven pillars. Importantly, the framework also reiterates the need to empower women smallholder farmers, recalling that gender gaps continue to prevent women from reaching their full potential, “thus undermining the achievement of the multidimensional and inclusive rural development envisaged by the 2030 Development Agenda” (FAO and IFAD, 2019, p. 36).

Pillar three of the Global Action Plan aims to achieve gender equity in family farming and enhance rural women’s leadership role, through improving access to productive resources and enhancing their skills and capacities by such means as “gender-sensitive rural advisory and extension services” (see Pillar 3.3 generally and 3.3.2 specifically, ibid., p. 40). In this way, gender equality objectives and the promotion of inclusive RAS intersect at many points in the context of FAO’s support to smallholders.
2.4. Gender gaps in agrifood systems

FAO has compiled sound evidence that gender-responsive RAS is an effective strategy to redress “the inequalities between women and men in access to information, knowledge, and technologies” (FAO, 2015, p. 6). Ensuring women’s access to RAS can lead to an increase in their productivity, resulting in more stable access to income and to food, and in due course may also contribute to closing other gender gaps. In contrast, gender-blind RAS risks maintaining existing gender inequalities or even increasing gender gaps, preventing women from reaching their full potential and resulting in lower yields, unstable incomes and increased risks of poverty and food insecurity.

When speaking of the “gender gaps” that RAS can address, what do we mean? Women face a number of interrelated constraints in the agriculture sector that influence whether they are able to access and benefit from a whole range of inputs, resources and services, one of which is RAS. Taking part in advisory and extension services is usually based on having access to other resources. Research conducted in Türkiye, which is also relevant for the region as a whole, found that “[t]raditionally most ... extension services and training activities are planned for male farmers who have access to farm credit, use more inputs, follow technology and innovations, make investments, and own more land” (Rad et al., 2016, p. 12).

Women, however, represent a minority of land and farm owners, despite their prominent role in farming. Women’s lack of formal ownership of farm land also translates to the common perception that “farmers” are men, while women fulfil auxiliary or supporting roles. When extension services and RAS are oriented towards farm owners, farm managers or even the heads of farming households, women are omitted from the pool of potential clients. Likewise, a large share of women’s agricultural labour is unpaid work on family farms or other smallholdings. RAS that targets farm workers as formal employees often excludes women and does not consider how they, too, would benefit from learning new practices.

Women have less access than men to other resources, including credit and agricultural subsidies, that are usually prerequisites for adopting new technologies. Women’s representation in farmers’ associations, water users’ associations and other rural institutions is also limited, in part because their contributions to agriculture tend to be unrecognized, and also since landownership is frequently a requirement for membership in such groups. This means that women are seldom part of the organizations that provide support through skill-building and consulting services, and, additionally, they are outside of the networks that serve as communication channels promoting opportunities for EAS and RAS.

No less important, rural women have much greater burdens on their time, compared with rural men or women in urban areas, because of their domestic and care responsibilities combined with farm work and lack of support infrastructure (such as child care facilities and public transportation). Because they lack the commodity of time, RAS may be simply inaccessible to them, even when offered. Social norms also dictate whether it is acceptable for women to attend mixed-sex meetings, to travel to training taught by men, or whether the professional role of an extension agent is open to women, for example. The many areas in which women face distinct disadvantages also have an impact on whether they can access RAS on an equal basis with men.
Developing gender-responsive RAS first requires identifying the relevant gender gaps in a specific context, in order to comprehend how such factors reinforce each other and prevent women from benefiting from RAS. Then, these constraints can be addressed through policy, institutional practices and tailored interventions. However, it should be kept in mind that providing accessible RAS is itself not sufficient. In parallel, “the underlying causes of inequality have to be tackled,” and this requires directly addressing the very “socio-cultural structures [that] can impede the work of extension workers” (SIDA and Farnworth, 2010, p. 42). The gender-transformative function of RAS is discussed in greater detail in Section 4.1 of this publication, as the context for a review of effective strategies.
Ensuring that rural advisory services are responsive to women: good practices from FAO in Europe and Central Asia
Gender-responsive rural advisory services in Europe and Central Asia: assessment and promising practices

In this section, the analytical framework suggested by the Gender and Rural Advisory Services Assessment Tool (GRAST), a methodology developed by FAO, is used to assess the extent to which existing EAS or RAS take gender into consideration in the ECA region and to pinpoint current challenges to designing and delivering gender-responsive rural advisory services. Along the way, good practices are highlighted to inspire further thought about how they may be replicated or adapted to other country contexts.

How can we assess the gender sensitivity of EAS or RAS systems?

GRAST was developed to identify the elements of effective design and delivery of gender-sensitive RAS and to determine where organizations and RAS programmes can be improved to increase the gender sensitivity of their services (FAO, 2018a). An important component of the GRAST is its use of participatory methods to include the experiences of RAS clients (women and men farmers) and to validate information from other sources about the availability and impacts of RAS. FAO has used the information from GRAST assessments to inform its technical support and in the design of specific programmes.

FAO has also developed guidance for the systematic assessment of national EAS systems that addresses gender as a cross-cutting consideration. An operational guide\(^6\) for conducting assessments includes tips for gender-sensitive information and data collection. A framework of core and complementary indicators\(^7\) for measuring the performance and outcomes of national EAS systems can incorporate gender-sensitive measures of elements such as inclusivity (women accessing EAS, for example) and human resources (sex-disaggregated data on extension personnel, for instance).

These tools are complementary and could be used in conjunction with GRAST, providing essential mapping, baseline data and qualitative information, as well as an indicator framework, for standardizing the measurement of changes in EAS systems over time.

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\(^6\) For more information, see FAO’s Comprehensive assessment of national extension and advisory service systems. An operational guide (2022) which is available at https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en?details=cb911en.

\(^7\) FAO’s Indicator framework for national extension and advisory service systems. Metrics for performance and outcome measurement (2022) is available at https://www.fao.org/documents/card/fr/c/cb8409en/.
The term “good practice” used throughout the text refers to practices that have been proven to work well and deliver good results in a particular context, and are therefore recommended as models. They are successful experiences, which have been tested, validated and deserve to be shared so that others can adopt them. Continuous improvement and iteration are also an inherent part of good practices (FAO, 2013).

For this publication, the full GRAST methodology has been adapted to provide a regional overview, rather than an organizational-level or programmatic perspective. Challenges that hinder women from accessing RAS are categorized as those related to: (1) the enabling environment (the policy level); (2) the providers of RAS (the organizational challenges of reaching and providing services to women); and (3) the users of RAS and the challenges they encounter (such as those that individual rural women face in accessing and benefiting from such services; see generally FAO, 2018a and FAO, 2015).

3.1. The policy environment

A national legislative and policy base that recognizes women’s contributions to agriculture and also includes objectives and targets on equal access to and control over productive resources and services, is the foundation for gender-responsive RAS. Laws and policies on agricultural production, rural development, food security and nutrition, and poverty reduction, for example, should be informed by gender analysis that identifies relevant gender gaps. An equally necessary prerequisite is the capacity of national entities, such as ministries of agriculture, to address women’s interests and needs, through dedicated units and staff. Likewise, the systematic collection of sex-disaggregated data about beneficiaries is needed to periodically evaluate the provision of RAS and to further improve such services.

National policy frameworks

The countries of the ECA region have solid legislative and policy frameworks, taking the form of laws, strategies and often action plans on gender equality that establish equal rights and opportunities for women and men. While there are examples of national gender equality policies that highlight rural women as a particular group, the agriculture sector is very seldom mentioned explicitly nor included in situational analyses. Nevertheless, national gender equality goals are quite visible, and there is good awareness and understanding among authorities of their importance to the achievement of the SDGs and for national development overall. Most national development strategies in the region have at least some elements of gender mainstreaming.

However, gender mainstreaming often remains aspirational, and the realization of high-level goals is incomplete. For example, it is not uncommon for national strategies on agriculture or rural development to reiterate gender equality commitments in quite generic terms, without articulating measurable objectives or targets, assigning responsible agencies or allocating dedicated budgets. At the same time, references to the specific support that women engaged in agriculture or agribusinesses need are not commonly included, even in gender-sensitive policies on poverty reduction, economic empowerment or access to education, for instance.

There are very few examples in the ECA region of gender being mainstreamed into strategic documents concerning EAS or RAS. However, the situation is improving, and several countries have adopted policies on rural development or agricultural extension that include a gender perspective.
Good practices: gender-sensitive national policies

**Bosnia and Herzegovina:** At the entity level, Republika Srpska has incorporated gender equality goals within rural development policy. Two action plans on improving the situation of rural women (one from 2009 to 20158 and another for 2019 to 2020) explicitly refer to the provision of rural advisory services. The first action plan assigned responsibility to the Republika Srpska Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management for the creation of a professional advisory programme responsive to the needs of rural women, the introduction of gender-responsible policy for the planning of advisory programmes and the establishment of sex-disaggregated record-keeping on clients. The plan frames RAS as a service that is broader than agricultural knowledge and therefore requires the contributions of other institutions: the ministries of education and culture, and of family, youth and sport, as well as the entity Gender Center – Center for Gender Equity and Equality. The subsequent action plan addressed gaps in the implementation of the first; it called on the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management to take additional actions, such as improving the identification of clients’ needs and involving diverse stakeholders (for example, farmers’ associations, women’s associations and women’s business associations) in planning, implementing and evaluating EAS and RAS. The current Strategy of Agricultural and Rural Development of the Republika Srpska for 2021–2027 frames gender equality and improving the lives of rural women as cross-cutting priorities, while recalling the need to improve women’s access to public services, among other resources.

**Key resources:**

**Georgia:** FAO provided support to the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia to mainstream gender into its national Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy for 2021–2027. The document, now finalized, includes sector-specific gender analysis and pays particular attention to the socioeconomic status of rural women. Additionally, the National Strategy on Agricultural Extension for 2023–2027, which is pending approval by the ministry at the time of writing this review, incorporates gender-sensitive approaches, including the fact that the work of the Agriculture and Rural Development Agency (the public provider of extension services) will be guided by a gender action and training plan, its activities will include gender-specific methods and materials, and its monitoring and evaluation processes will include a gender component (for example, sex-disaggregated record-keeping).

**Key resources:**
- Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia. Draft National Strategy on Agricultural Extension in Georgia for 2022–2027.9

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8 This action plan was a temporary special measure within the Strategic Plan for Rural Development of the Republic of Srpska 2009–2015.

9 This strategy was developed within the FAO project funded by the European Union (European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPARD)).
Türkiye: The National Agricultural Extension Strategy (2019) includes a chapter dedicated to “Gender-sensitive agricultural extension” that both outlines the barriers that limit women’s participation and lists a number of actions for improving extension services for female farmers. The National E-Agriculture Strategy for 2021–2025 also envisions enhancing the efficiency of women in agriculture through education and information and communications technology (ICT) interventions.

Key resources:

Institutional mechanisms to support gender-responsive rural advisory services

In addition to national institutions with mandates on gender equality, increasingly, ministries of agriculture have established internal gender units, committees or advisor positions to support gender mainstreaming. Among other duties, gender departments and gender focal points could have responsibilities for ensuring that publicly-funded extension and advisory services are gender-responsive, and may even play a role in overseeing the planning and monitoring of RAS with a gender perspective. It has been observed in the ECA region, however, that when gender specialists within agricultural ministries are appointed, they are often part of human resources departments, or they serve a general informational and coordination role. Consequently, they have limited inputs into strategic planning, advocacy or programming overall, and especially not in the area of public advisory services. The position of gender advisor tends to be an additional responsibility to other work, without terms of reference, funding or time allocated for this function (Economic Commission for Europe, 2019).

It has not yet become standard practice in the region to establish a gender unit, or committee, within ministries of agriculture, that would have the capacity to be more deeply involved in gender mainstreaming of RAS. Furthermore, even when such groups have been created, they have not always been sustainable. There are examples of such units being restructured after changes of government and ministerial reorganization. Important lessons were learned from the experience in Türkiye. The former Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock of Türkiye had a dedicated Rural Women Services Unit located in the Department of Training, Extension and Publications that provided rural women with information on agricultural production methods, home economics and handicrafts, and also implemented in-service training for all ministerial staff (FAO, 2019b). Following restructuring of the ministry in 2018, however, the unit was disbanded, and the functions were not transferred. After a number of years, there are currently plans to create similar units at the provincial level. This step may help to address the issue of ineffective communication channels between RAS providers and farmers (ibid.).

Under the FAO–Türkiye Partnership Programme (FTPP), the regional project “Leaving no one behind: greater involvement and empowerment of rural women in Türkiye and Central Asia” (2022–2024) has a component to enhance the capacities of ministerial staff to form gender units in three pilot areas of Türkiye: Burdur, Kahramanmaraş and Ordu.
3.2. The organizational environment: providers of rural advisory services

Rural advisory services may be provided by a variety of institutions, in the public and private sectors, by state bodies or by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The extent to which RAS are gender-responsive depends on the capacities of the providers, their knowledge and available resources. The organizational environment encompasses not only the enabling culture within specific organizations but also the capacities of individual providers to deliver RAS effectively to women and to meet their specific demands. Shortcomings on the part of providers result in poorly designed and delivered RAS in the sense that they are gender-blind or gender-neutral. In turn, when providers are ineffective, this creates serious structural barriers to women farmers as clients and beneficiaries.

The organizational culture

In Europe and Central Asia, EAS and RAS are provided primarily through public systems, by ministries of agriculture and state agrarian research institutions or university departments. Historically, the state institutions have been male-dominated. This is the case for ministries of agriculture as well as those that have mandates covering rural development, environmental protection and food policy. As described in Section 3.1 of this publication, the institutional practice of integrating a gender perspective into their sectoral policies and programmes is relatively novel and unusual for agricultural ministries in the ECA region. The organizational culture is one in which agriculture and farming are treated as gender-neutral topics in policy discourse. Yet, behind this approach is the common assumption that farming is in fact a “man’s profession”. This, in turn, results in a “perception bias” that then leads to practices that ignore the significant contributions that women make to agriculture and do not consider the different roles that women and men play. FAO notes that when this assumption is the basis for the development of RAS, the result is “biased decision-making, targeting, employment of staff, service delivery models and content of the services” (FAO, 2015, p. 24). While there have been improvements in the integration of gender considerations into some agricultural strategies, the mechanisms to translate policy to gender-responsive RAS delivery remain weak.

The public institutions that provide extension services and RAS also tend to overlook the needs of women as farmers, as contributing family workers or as agricultural workers. Apart from a few FAO-supported initiatives that are discussed below, EAS and RAS providers do not have regular internal capacity building or professional training for staff on how to adopt gender-responsive approaches. Furthermore, such organizations seldom have internal strategies or policies on diversity, or gender-balanced recruitment and promotion, for example.

In contrast to state institutions, NGOs, especially those with a focus on women’s empowerment or gender equality broadly, usually have greater sensitivity to the needs of women farmers. Such organizations are often membership-based and unite local women’s groups or individual women. In this way, they are able to gather input from their members and also appear to have greater success in delivering training and capacity building that respond to identified needs than is seen in male-dominated structures. While women’s NGOs in the region have strengths in many areas, including in empowerment and promoting leadership and entrepreneurship skills for example, they generally lack the technical knowledge and expertise in agrifood systems that is an important component of RAS. In several countries, international donor organizations work with well-established women’s NGOs or NGO networks to provide education to women farmers, or rural women as potential farmers, as a particular target group. However, such initiatives are usually separate activities from the regular EAS and RAS provided by state institutions, and collaboration between the two types of providers is rare (see Section 4.4 for a further discussion of partnerships and strategies for cooperation).
Good practice: state-supported organizations that represent rural women’s interests

**North Macedonia:** The National Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (2018–2022) calls for improving the position and role of rural women and promoting gender equality. It includes a measure on supporting women in agricultural households. This national policy is the basis for creating working groups on gender equality and women’s empowerment within the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management. The working groups include the ministerial gender focal point and key personnel. Although working groups are project-specific, and have not become permanent structures, they have proven to be valuable in facilitating stakeholder meetings and creating a space for technical discussions of how to support rural women. One outcome has been the adoption of gender-responsive measures, such as a grant programme for women to start new agricultural activities and regulations on “doorstep” sales that allow rural women to legally sell their products from farming. FAO has also supported this model by providing training to one working group on gender mainstreaming in the context of integrated community development.

**Key resources:**

Human resources and staffing

The issue of who provides RAS, the profile of the extensionists and other staff, can be a determining factor in whether women have access to such services. Most RAS advisors, extensionists and agronomists in the ECA region are men. **Why is this significant for women as clients?** In several countries in the region, or in regions within a country, it is not socially acceptable for women to interact with male extension agents or agronomists. This is the case for certain populations of Georgia, for example, as well as in regions of Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Experts in Georgia note that it would generally be much easier for women specialists to work with women farmers; women extensionists would have better engagement and find it easier to approach women. In Azerbaijan, the lack of female advisors has similarly been identified as a key barrier that effects “women’s participation in information sessions and seminars in rural areas” (FAO, 2019c, p. 16). Even outside of these particular cases, women may simply prefer to interact with other women in the context of RAS, which can include not only technical knowledge-sharing but also partnership-based methods, such as coaching and mentoring.

An additional and significant constraint that results from men’s dominance among extension agents and agronomists is the inherent bias in how such services are delivered. The gender disbalance that exists among staff of RAS-providing agencies perpetuates systems in which mainly men work as specialists, providing services through their own networks to a target audience that is predominantly male farmers. As was noted in a study conducted in Greece, “designers, educators, and extensionists are mainly men and consequently the modus operandi of extension/education services is masculine,” resulting in women farmers being systematically overlooked (Charatsari, Istenič and Lioutas, 2013, p. 519).
When FAO conducted a 97-country survey more than three decades ago, only 15 percent of extension personnel worldwide were women (FAO, 1993). It is notable that the countries included in the survey were those that maintained sex-disaggregated human resources data. In Europe, women’s engagement was slightly higher at 17 percent of extension staff. More recently, Yara International, a global crop nutrition company, conducted a survey of its more than 800 agronomists, finding that only 14 percent are women (Yara International ASA, 2021). While it is difficult to determine the precise share of female extensionists in the ECA region due to the absence of data, women make up the minority of RAS and extension providers. FAO confirms that there have been few improvements in addressing the fact that women are still “severely underserved by extension and advisory services” (FAO, 2023a, p. 91). As was noted about Tajikistan, for instance, there are “not enough women among specialists in agricultural consultancy” (FAO, 2020b, p. 15).

Available data indicate that women account for between a quarter and a third of extension agents in the ECA region. Although this is a positive indicator when compared with the global average, the dynamic is not entirely clear and there is also variation by country and institution. In some cases, the proportion of women extension experts has hardly improved, while in others, Azerbaijan for instance, there has been an observed increase in the number of women among extension staff in particular institutions (FAO, 2022d). Even this trend is attributed to the loss of male employees due to outmigration, rather than changes in hiring practices or other incentives to recruit women.

### What is the share of women extension experts in Europe and Central Asia?

**Albania:** Women currently represent 32 percent of field extension agents— a percentage that has not changed since 2015.

**Azerbaijan:** Around 30 percent of extension service providers and agronomists combined are women.

**Georgia:** Women are estimated to represent between 9 percent and 25 percent of all RAS employees in the regions. However, after the Rural Development Agency of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture began to implement a gender equality strategy and action plan in 2020, women made up more than half of newly-hired extension workers in 2023.

**Kosovo:** In 2022, of the 38 licensed agricultural advisors working in the public sector, 18 percent were women; while of the 407 licensed advisors in the private sector, 33 percent were women.

**Türkiye:** A quarter (25.2 percent) of extensionists are women.

### Key resources:


FAO. (forthcoming [b]). Gender profile of agriculture and rural livelihoods – Georgia, p. 38.

FAO. (forthcoming [a]). Kosovo gender profile of agriculture and rural livelihoods.


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11 Eight countries from Europe were part of the 1989 survey. At the time, the independent countries that are today the focus of this review were represented by Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, neither of which was included in survey.

12 In Azerbaijan, women currently represent between 20 percent and 25 percent of extension staff within the NGO Agro Information Center of Azerbaijan, up from 17 percent in 2009.

13 In Albania, Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies employ 224 extension staff, of which 178 are field extensionists (121 men and 57 women).
Information is very limited about women as managers in the fields of EAS and RAS, but research in Kazakhstan indicates that women manage just over one-third of extension centres under the National Agrarian Scientific and Educational Center, but with considerable variation by region (FAO, 2020c). Also significant is that women are better represented as lecturers in extension centres in Kazakhstan than they are as national experts, and there are also gendered patterns to the specializations of extension agents (for example, there are more women specialized in dairy production and artificial insemination than in agricultural engineering and precision farming; ibid.). In a similar percentage to Kazakhstan, in Georgia, three of the nine Regional Extension Centers are women-managed (UN Women, 2020).

In contrast to their limited employment as extension agents, a particular characteristic of the ECA region is women’s significant engagement in scientific and research fields related to agriculture, compared with both other regions of the world and also to women’s formal employment across entire agrifood systems. For instance, in Azerbaijan, women represent up to 70 percent of employees of agrarian research institutions, as scientists, researchers and lab workers, but not as heads of departments or managers (FAO, 2022d). In Belarus, Georgia and Serbia, women represent more than half of researchers in agricultural sciences or agriculture and veterinary sciences combined: 62.0 percent in Belarus (in 2022; National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2023); 58.0 percent in Georgia (in 2021; National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2022); and 51.5 percent in Serbia (in 2018; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020). This finding raises several questions about improving gender-responsive RAS through the lens of human resources, including how to recruit women with research specializations and support them to build careers in extension or rural advisory services, as extensionists and managers.

The first question is why women, who are well-represented in agri-research, are not undertaking extension work in the same proportion. The organizational culture and work requirements are factors that dissuade women from taking jobs as extensionists. For many women, field work and frequent travel are incompatible with both their domestic responsibilities and social norms – barriers that male extensionists do not encounter. Furthermore, as noted above, when the organizational culture is not gender-sensitive, it perpetuates bias in hiring and limits diversity.

A second question concerns what the trends in academic enrolment suggest for a new generation of young women who could become extension agents. Information about the educational backgrounds of extension agents in the ECA region is not entirely clear or uniform, but very often extension staff are graduates of agricultural educational facilities. Across the region, the dominant trend is declining enrolment in post-secondary education in agricultural specialities. Yet, in a number of countries, even among the small study body, young women are a minority that study agriculture-related subjects in vocational and higher education facilities. For example, in Georgia, in the 2020 academic year, women represented 38 percent and 42 percent of graduates in agricultural sciences, from vocational institutions and from doctoral programmes, respectively (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2021). In Türkiye, in the 2021/2022 academic year, women were only 34.5 percent of students enrolled in higher education in the fields of agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary medicine combined (TUIK, 2022a). While there appears to be greater gender balance among students in higher education in agricultural sciences in other countries, there is not a clear link between field of academic study and employment in public extension services. Increasing the number of women among RAS staff should start not at the recruitment stage but actually much earlier, by identifying and removing barriers for young women to pursue higher education in agriculture.

The third and related question is whether women’s engagement in agricultural sciences, mainly in academic and research settings, has the potential to increase the gender sensitivity of RAS and EAS systems. The answer depends greatly on links between scientific research institutions and ministries of agriculture that oversee public extension services, as well as whether EAS- and RAS-providing organizations can attract women to their staff. This, in turn, relies on measures such as proactive recruitment policies, setting targets or quotas, and creating working environments that foster gender equality and diversity.
**Individual capacities of rural advisory services providers**

The role of extension and RAS agents has changed over time. While their primary activity was once “communicating and disseminating information to farmers on new and better agricultural practices and technologies generated by research,” this one-way approach to technology transfer is now seen as outdated and of limited effectiveness (FAO, 2015, pp. 17–18). Individual RAS providers are today called on to share and facilitate information exchanges and to enhance networking and collaboration, while addressing a broad range of topics. RAS is a mutual learning process that is participatory and demand-driven. Among the skills that extension agents need, in communication, negotiation and training methods, for example, they also require competencies in gender analysis and gender mainstreaming.

The capacities of state institutions that provide EAS and RAS have been assessed to be low across the ECA region. As was noted about Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, both the public and private extension service systems are weak, and “many of the specialists working in extension services are former school teachers or technicians who have no agriculture background or experience providing advice to adults” (FAO, 2018b, no pagination). When RAS providers have limited capacities, potential clients of both genders are affected, but because women farmers are already often overlooked or excluded by mainstream services, the impacts on them are particularly detrimental.

Unfortunately, when addressing the larger task of improving the overall provision of services to farmers and the rural population, the needs of women as a specific client group are not prioritized. As was noted about Albania, although gender inequalities have been identified as priorities for the government and the (former) Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration, they are “not considered important by many farmers or by many extension services professionals” (FAO, 2016a, p. 127). The job description of agricultural advisors in Albania does not require basic knowledge of gender issues or skills in gender-sensitive methodologies; field advisors, likewise, do not receive the guidance on gender analysis that they would need in order to tailor their training to women clients (FAO and UN Women, forthcoming). Research to identify gaps in RAS in Georgia found that most extension agents have no knowledge of how to conduct gender analysis and are not aware of any specific issues that women farmers face.

The public institutions that provide extension or RAS tend to be gender-blind in their approach, not having internal strategies or policies on diversity or gender-balanced recruitment and promotion, for example. There have been very few initiatives to provide internal capacity building or professional training on how to incorporate gender-responsive approaches, and when these activities do take place (described below), they have not then been incorporated into regular staff development. Inadequate training for extension staff has been recognized as a significant weak point in the gender mainstreaming process. Specifically, training on gender can often be superficial, lacking “in-depth exploration of gender issues in agriculture ... relevant case studies and robust data. There is weak circulation of good practice and lessons learnt. Training sessions provide an overview of gender concepts and theories without explaining how to link theory with practice” (SIDA and Farnworth, 2010, p. 32). Frequent staff turnover means that gender-thematic training should be offered regularly, but this is seldom the case.

Practice has shown that the starting point for any capacity building is a detailed assessment of the internal capacities of RAS providers, combined with analysis of the needs of women clients and the barriers that they currently encounter to participating in advisory activities. Training programmes should be built around identified shortcomings specific to the context, rather than general discussions of gender inequalities in agriculture. In addition, FAO’s work in Georgia to train extensionists in gender mainstreaming indicates that improving the gender sensitivity of individual extension agents does not bring about sustainable results, in terms of them adopting new approaches, if the system itself has not made improving outreach to women a priority. This is one reason why FAO has also supported the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia to mainstream gender into national extension policy.
### Good practices: Capacity building for EAS and RAS providers

**Tajikistan:** In recognizing the substantial role that women play in agricultural work, FAO supported an assessment to identify gender issues relevant to Tajikistan's rural advisory system. This analysis indicated that even extension providers themselves have a relatively low level of understanding of gender norms and their effect on agriculture, regardless of whether the agents are women or men. Following the assessment, specific approaches were devised, such as working with entire households to address gender inequalities across generations. Additionally, a special session on gender perspectives in Tajikistan’s extension services was incorporated into a four-day capacity-building training of trainers (ToT) for male and female extension workers. The gender session aimed to help extensionists identify the root causes of gender inequalities in the provision of extension services, using tools of gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, practical exercises and group simulations to help the trainees to visualize prominent gender gaps.

**Key resource:**


**Türkiye and Azerbaijan:** FAO, partnering with the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock of Türkiye and the Ministry of Agriculture of Azerbaijan, has worked to increase the capacity of extension staff to design and deliver gender-responsive rural advisory services. A project implemented under the FAO–Türkiye Partnership Programme ([FTPP] 2014–2016) has combined several modalities, including capacity needs assessment, development of a ToT manual, gap analysis, pilot training of trainers, pilot training of rural women, a field visit and a study tour. Some of the most useful approaches were participatory needs assessments and ToTs. Because advisory staff participated in focus groups and conducted gender analysis, they gained a greater understanding of women farmers’ experiences. Additionally, advisory staff were present at the training for rural women and so they became known as “resource people” on gender-sensitive training methods and relevant topics.

ToTs for extension staff were piloted in Türkiye (2014) and in Azerbaijan (2016) to raise awareness of the relevance of gender equality to extension work and to give agents tools to make changes in their work practices. The next step was to develop a manual to enable those who plan or facilitate capacity development for rural advisory agents to conduct workshops independently. A key message of the project was the importance of using new tools for measuring learning outcomes, rather than simply recording the number of women and men who attend training events. The project introduced the methods of the knowledge, attitudes and practices survey (KAP) and individual action planning to better monitor the impact of RAS activities on individuals' knowledge, behaviours and practices.

**Key resources:**


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14 The ToT was conducted within the FAO project “Strengthening the Capacity of Agricultural Extension Services in Central Asia on Sustainable Intensification of Crop Production”.

15 The work was initiated under the FAO project “Capacity Development Support to Rural Women on the Socio-economic and Gender Aspects of Sustainable Rural Development,” which was implemented in Türkiye and Azerbaijan, between 2014 and 2016. Similar activities have continued under other FAO projects.
Methods of delivery and content

In order to be considered gender-responsive, the methods that RAS providers employ to deliver information should themselves be inclusive so that they effectively reach women farmers and farm workers. As noted in this publication, participatory approaches are now seen as a central part of RAS, delivered in a bottom-up manner (FAO, 2015). It is important to note that participatory approaches are not by themselves gender-sensitive; specific consideration of gender norms must also be incorporated into the design and delivery of RAS using participatory methods.

Globally, extension agents are still largely “unaccustomed to using participatory methodologies aimed at facilitating farmers’ own learning” (SIDA and Gallina, 2010, p. 9). In the ECA region, though, many EAS and RAS providers are in the process of transitioning from previous top-down systems of delivering information, and many extension agents have adopted group approaches which they use alongside other methods to reach individuals. In the Western Balkans region, extension advisors use group extension (such as public lectures, seminars, workshops, demonstration sites, field days and other events) and individual outreach (for example, farm visits, contacts in extension offices and telephone calls). Information is also disseminated through different media, including the internet, leaflets, brochures, posters, radio and television (Jankovic et al., 2015). In Central Asia, advisory service providers similarly combine group and individual methods. In Tajikistan, where there is a wide range of RAS and EAS service providers from the public, private and NGO sectors, most agents disseminate agricultural information through training, demonstration sites, farmer field schools (FFS), visiting and surveying farmers’ fields, exchange visits between farmers, and through traditional media and ICTs (FAO, 2020b). The National Agrarian Scientific and Educational Center in Kazakhstan conducts training and provides both direct and remote counselling for individuals (FAO, 2020c).

While the introduction of group approaches to RAS is a positive development, it alone is not sufficient to ensure that RAS delivery is also gender-responsive and participatory – meaning not only that women are included but also that their participation is meaningful. In the ECA region there are two linked challenges in the area of participatory approaches. First, the groups taking part in RAS are often imbalanced in terms of women’s representation. Women are simply not present to participate, and little consideration is given to the factors that limit their engagement (such as “women’s age and marital status, time constraints related to pregnancy and number of children, religion and culture, and land ownership patterns” [FAO, 2015, p. 19]). In the Western Balkans, it was noted that extension agents retain a strong focus on production techniques and give a relative preference to large commercial farms, with lesser attention to small producers (Jankovic et al., 2015). Yet it is precisely small-scale farming in which women farmers are typically engaged. In a similar way, when RAS providers work with single heads of farms (or heads of farming households) as opposed to entire households, women as contributing family workers are left out, even from service delivery that is oriented towards groups rather than individuals.

Second, the use of participatory modalities for RAS is still novel. Many providers do not have the capacity, nor has there been significant investment to transition fully to decentralized, farmer-led and market-driven systems. What is needed is “a radical transformation of the strategy, approach and structure” (SIDA and Gallina, 2010, p. 9). Participatory methodologies will not necessarily be gender-responsive on their own, but when gender is mainstreamed, they offer greater opportunities to overcome the barriers that women face in accessing RAS.

A consideration when designing gender-responsive delivery methods is whether to use single-sex groups (women-only groups) or mixed-sex groups. There is a diversity of opinions about the benefits of either method because the effectiveness depends on the particular context. For instance, in Türkiye, experts advocate for separate women-only RAS training as a way to equalize women’s opportunities to meaningfully participate and increase their voice. Single-sex groups can mitigate cultural barriers that are present in mixed groups, and which can have an intimidating effect on women. In the context of community-based platforms for RAS, experts from Azerbaijan suggest that the use of both women-only and mixed-sex groups provides an opportunity to study differences in outcomes and that there are benefits when women and men work together to solve common issues. Experts
in Albania point out that “women and men working together offer a good opportunity for men to redefine their preconceptions of women and to see them as colleagues and bearers of knowledge, as well as to strengthen cooperation and coordination between women and men” (FAO, 2016a, p. 137).

The use of ICTs to deliver RAS is an especially promising tool to overcome gender-based barriers and better disseminate information to women (FAO, 2015). In the ECA region, RAS and EAS providers generally use ICTs but to varying degrees. The National Agrarian Scientific and Educational Center in Kazakhstan operates a web portal that contains written materials as well as video classes. In contrast, in Albania, RAS are mainly disseminated through “traditional” media, but pilot projects using social media and electronic platforms proved to be successful, especially among young farmers. While it is understood that ICTs can enhance the delivery of advisory services overall, budget constraints have limited investment in this area. For the most part, the development of ICT-based agricultural services has not been undertaken as a means to increase gender responsiveness, but that may well be a secondary effect.

There have been limited studies of how digital divides experienced by rural populations in terms of digital infrastructure and digital literacy intersect with both gender and age in the ECA region. Limited data on ICT use suggest that rural women use mobile phones at the same rate as rural men and are competent in using social media. However, research in Kosovo suggests that rural men more often use social media for work than rural women, a reflection of the fact that men have better-developed networks and are more often engaged in income-generating activities, with which they can engage online (FAO, forthcoming [a]). Observations from FAO projects also indicate that while rural women own smartphones, they rarely use them to access the internet due to high costs. Because financial status is a determinant of whether households own technologies, such as mobile phones and computers, or can pay for broadband services, female-headed households in rural areas usually having more limited access. The question of who within households has control over such resources has also not been explored in sufficient detail to inform the design of e-services in agriculture.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the issue of digital extension services to the fore. FAO noted the indispensable role of agricultural extension and advisory services during the health crisis, while acknowledging a need to innovate and increase the use of digital tools and technologies (FAO, 2020d). When in-person extension support was largely suspended, the move to digital services did not necessarily mean that women benefited equally in countries in which the gender digital divide is significant. Azerbaijan offers a useful case study of some of the impacts on women. When in-person training for rural women was not possible during quarantine restrictions to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, it was found that using an online format allowed the sessions to be recorded. Ultimately, the audience for the training increased because women who were unable to attend live sessions due to issues such as poor internet coverage, interruptions to electricity supply, not having a mobile phone or being busy with field work or other activities, were able to access the training at a later time (FAO, 2022d). This experience suggests that digitally-based delivery methods can be effective in mitigating some of the barriers to RAS that women face. On the other hand, while it is attractive to invest in digital extension services and online RAS, there is a risk that this approach merely accommodates gender norms. It will maintain the status quo – for example, women will continue to bear the burden of domestic work and only access online extension services – but will not be an effective method for gender transformation.
Good practices: participatory and gender-responsive methods for delivering RAS

**Azerbaijan:** Under a project to improve the delivery of advisory services to owners/managers of small- and medium-sized farms, FAO is supporting commodity-based advisory platforms that are based around the main crops being cultivated (for example, sunflower, cherry, tomato and sorghum). Each platform has a facilitator who guides the farmers in a process to diagnose problems with the particular crop, and to discuss and find solutions both within the group and through networking with private and public sector advisors and researchers. A specific feature of this project is that the facilitator is not an extension agent nor necessarily an agronomist, but a trusted advisor who can help connect farmers to public and private extension providers. In the first phase of the project, it was observed that most of the commodity-based platforms formed as men-only groups, and so steps were taken to both mobilize women farmers and to work with the platform members and other stakeholders to integrate women. After these changes, the majority of female group members now participate in the meetings and discussions. Facilitators are also required to report on women's engagement as part of their regular work. While it is acknowledged that time is needed for the women to become more active, the approach to organize around specific crops is one in which the roles that women play in farming were easily understood by the group, and so there was no real resistance to women being included. Furthermore, the nature of the facilitated platforms encourages discussion and group resolution of issues, and this approach also seems to facilitate women's active participation, more so than traditional top-down delivery of information.

**Key resource:**

**Georgia:** FAO has long used the methodology of farmer field schools (FFS) that function as a “school without walls” in which farmers engage in participatory and hands-on learning to test new innovations over a production cycle. In recognizing that women in Georgia face distinct barriers in accessing mainstream extension and advisory services, FAO began to use demonstration plots and farmer field schools as a way not only of providing direct support to women farmers but also of supporting them to be leaders and resource persons in their communities.

However, because societal norms make it difficult for women to take part in training and traditional extension activities, FAO first focused on dairy production, including cheese-making, because women have a prominent role in this value chain and so their participation in FFS is seen as socially “appropriate”. FAO is expanding this approach to other value chains in Georgia in which women have key roles, such as fruit and vegetable production (including the making of jams, dried fruits and sauces) and beekeeping. As FAO notes, the aim behind the women-focused FFS is to train more women farmers, who will then take the lead in training others. The FFS are hosted by a lead farmer for between 15 to 20 women who meet every two weeks to cover technical processes. The women-focused FFS are also used as the basis for other activities with a women’s empowerment objective on topics such as gender roles, reproductive health and domestic violence. The FFS offer an acceptable and “safe space” to discuss a variety of women’s rights issues and to reach out to women in rural areas about very sensitive topics. An evaluation of the FFS provided in dairy production found not only that women who applied new skills saw economic benefits (better animal health, milk yields...
and more produce for sale, for instance), but also that women themselves reported higher levels of self-esteem and confidence to realize their economic independence. The fact that women have been very actively involved in the FFS has also confirmed that affirmative steps and designing activities that target women are critical in projects that aim to reduce gender inequalities and reach disadvantaged women.

Finally, because these projects include a component on awareness raising on gender equality issues in agriculture, for example through the dissemination of articles in the media and meetings with representatives of local government, a wider discussion of topics such as the negative impacts of women’s unpaid labour has begun.

Key resources:


FAO. 2022. Mid-term evaluation of the Swiss-funded project “Fostering economic empowerment of women farmers by supporting homemade dairy production through the Farmer Field Schools (FFS) approach”. Internal document.

In addition to the way that RAS is delivered, services should respond to the specific realities of how women and men are engaged in agriculture. In the ECA region, women farm on smaller plots of land, on average, are less likely to use high-quality seeds, or machinery and equipment, and have more limited access to inputs such as irrigation. Women are also more often engaged in small-scale and subsistence farming and are less likely to manage or own large commercial farms. All of these factors mean that women have different farming practices and outputs than men, but the context-specific information, skills and technologies are not well reflected in the scope of current extension services. For instance, FAO assessments conducted in Belarus have shown that there is a lack of advisory and extension services that are oriented towards small family farms and small enterprises – both areas in which women’s involvement is considerable (FAO internal analysis).

The content of RAS should also address topics that are relevant to women farmers and women who work in agriculture. If the content does not reflect the activities in which women actually engage, they are likely to be excluded as beneficiaries. Therefore, it is essential that “RAS advisers are familiar with the different ways men and women participate in agricultural value chains, and benefit from them” (Blum, Cofini and Sulaiman, 2020, p. 162).

Women are also concentrated in some agricultural subsectors to a greater extent than others. For example, women are well represented in berry farming due to the lower thresholds for establishing such farms (see, for example, FAO and UN Women, 2021 and FAO, 2022e). Women have greater representation in the cultivation of some fruits and greenhouse vegetables and in dairy production. In contrast, women are underrepresented in the growing of high-value and industrial crops. Beekeeping is also recognized as a subsector that presents many barriers for women’s involvement, but there is growing interest in supporting women to become more engaged in apiculture in Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.

Rural advisory services, however, are often slow to respond to emerging areas of interest and tend not to be oriented to the sectors where women farmers are actually working. For instance, farmers in Uzbekistan have noted that extension services tend to focus on cotton and wheat cropping, but due to changes in farming practices, women have increasingly become involved in fruit and vegetable
production and thus need improved extension services in these fields (Najjar, Devkota and Feldman, 2022). As was described in Greece, but characteristic for the larger region, women are perceived to have a secondary role in livestock production, and they are “often ignored” when agricultural extension and education programmes are designed (Charatsari, Istenič and Lioutas, 2013, p. 519). Similarly, women in mountainous areas of Türkiye play a major role in small ruminant production, yet one survey found that most extension programmes target men and, as a result, only 3 percent had been able to participate in educational programmes offered by extension or veterinary services (Budak, Kulumän-Darcan and Davran, 2005).

Training that targets rural women, in fact, often focuses on non-agricultural subjects such as “home economics, including child nutrition and education,” excluding women from technical topics, and at the same time reinforcing gender stereotypes about women’s roles and capacities (FAO, 2015, p. 22). This was the case in Türkiye where the (former) Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs provided extension services to rural women for decades, but focusing on home economics (Özcatalbas and Akcaoz, 2010).

Throughout the ECA region, women mainly perform manual labour as needed on family farms, and because they seldom have decision-making roles in plant production or livestock breeding, their contributions are overlooked. Women’s activities along value chains and the gendered division of labour are usually not factored into the design of RAS. As observed in Georgia, for example, enrolment in capacity-building training is highly dependent on how gender roles in agriculture are distributed. Men mainly attend training on pesticide use because the dominant perception is that this is men’s work. However, the assumption “ignores the fact that women have close contact with pesticides and their roles in storing and handling pesticides at home” (FAO, 2018c, p. 39). A comparison of the number of women who attended several agricultural training events in Uzbekistan showed that women were the only participants of sessions on household processing (food safety and hygiene practices), but they were virtually absent from training on the topics of crop rotation technologies, winter preparation of irrigation and drainage systems, winter grape best practices, and intensive orchard practices and pruning (FAO, 2019d).

Along agricultural value chains of the ECA region, women usually occupy the lower value-added ends and mainly perform “upstream” activities concerned with production and processing. Men also undertake such work, but the difference is their concentration in “downstream” activities such as marketing and sales. At the same time, women play an important role in household food production, and it is typical in the region for women to produce some cash crops, or to sell excess products (for instance fruits, vegetables, eggs or dairy products) informally from their houses or in local markets. When RAS has focused on a narrow conception of what is “agriculture” and who is a “farmer”, it has ignored activities such as post-harvest processing, farming for home consumption and small-scale sales and marketing, for which women are usually responsible (FAO, 2015).

Designing RAS programmes that are based on presumptions about the types of assets that farmers own tend also not to take into account common gender inequalities. For example, RAS oriented towards introducing new technologies that is premised on an assumption that farmers have access to new machinery or processes, can afford to invest in them or have access to finance to support such investments, ignores the situation of women farmers. Women farmers are less likely to meet these preconditions and so advisory services will then not meet their needs.
Good practice: empowering women small-scale farmers and food producers through agroecology

Western Balkans and Eastern Europe: FAO and Schola Campesina, an international agroecology school, are supporting several networks (the Albanian Network for Rural Development and Gradina Moldovei in the Republic of Moldova, for example) to transfer knowledge and share their innovative and inclusive practices for food production. Agroecology is a holistic approach that applies ecological and social principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. The field of agroecology looks at entire food systems, the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment, from a bottom-up perspective that is in tune with local contexts and ecosystems. Agroecology values equity and well-being, and favours co-creation and sharing of knowledge to respond to the challenges of rural populations in a holistic way. It is also an approach that cannot be separated from feminist principles, and thus can create spaces for women to address the gender inequalities that persist in conventional farming, such as access to local seed varieties. It makes women’s contributions visible by supporting small-scale farming and the dissemination of traditional know-how, promotes women’s leadership, and facilitates mutual learning and dialogue between women and men (not only farmer-to-farmer exchanges, but also communication among different community members, sectors and generations).

Webinars organized by Schola Campesina on women in agroecology highlighted their critical role as seed-savers and in maintaining local agrobiodiversity. On the one hand, the events assisted in identifying precise interventions, such as the need for sex-disaggregated data and political support. On the other hand, they showcased the value of women’s knowledge, participation and leadership, which in turn is empowering. As a member of Gradina Moldovei noted, the events also had very practical effects by creating networks. These networks not only facilitate women’s access to information but also to much-needed resources, such as local seeds.

Key resources:

Experiences of individual users of rural advisory services

Some of the barriers that women farmers and women working on farms face in accessing RAS are linked to their experiences as service users or clients. These structural barriers, which include “intra-household arrangements dictated by traditional gender roles, discrimination from legal institutions, and socio-cultural norms” (FAO, 2015, p. 9), underpin the gender gaps that hold women back from achieving their potential in agriculture or in other rural livelihoods. As described in Section 2.4, above, gender disparities intersect, and they influence whether women are able to benefit from RAS in a meaningful way.

There has been limited study of women farmers or farm workers as specific client groups in the ECA region. Thus, little is known about those who make use of RAS, as well as EAS, in terms of the size and types of their farms, their farming practices, other income-generating activities in which they
What is the share of women RAS clients in Europe and Central Asia?

**Albania:** The share of women among those who received information through Regional Agricultural Extension Agencies increased from 5 percent in 2011, to 10 percent in 2015, and then to 11 percent in 2019.

**Azerbaijan:** A survey of agricultural advisory service providers, supported by FAO, found that 6.1 percent serve women farmers as clients. In contrast, records of the Ganja Agribusiness Association, an NGO, indicate that women are around 10 percent of the users of the extension services provided by the association.

**Georgia:** According to official data, 23 percent of recipients of state agricultural extension services are women.

**Greece:** According to one estimate, 39 percent of women farmers and 43 percent of men farmers have participated in programmes of agricultural extension/education. Other research found that less than 20 percent of the participants in training programmes on animal breeding, horticulture and agricultural machinery were women.

**Kazakhstan:** There are no consolidated sex-disaggregated data about participants in extension programmes, but experts estimate that women are on average between 12 percent and 32 percent of those who attend training.

**Republic of Moldova:** The 2011 General Census of Agriculture indicated that for all farm holders, both those with and without legal status, women were 32 percent of those who had attended any type of training course related to agriculture.

**Slovenia:** Agriculture census data for 2010 showed that 21 percent of men and 7 percent of women had received basic agricultural training through extension services.

**Key resources:**

engage, their ages and educational levels, their socioeconomic backgrounds or their particular areas of interest. Unfortunately, data are lacking that would even establish how well current RAS and other extension services are reaching rural women. Because sex-disaggregated record-keeping is not a standard practice in the RAS systems of the region, whether public, private or NGO-based, we do
not have a clear picture of how many women use RAS or EAS. Still, the following estimations suggest that mainstream EAS, meaning those services that do not have specific targets for engagement with women, reach very few women farmers.

The following sections examine some of the most significant barriers that rural women, as potential RAS users, encounter.

**Recognizing women farmers as legitimate clients**

One of the core impediments to delivering gender-responsive RAS in Europe and Central Asia relates to “how users of the services are defined, as well as the providers’ perception of who should receive services, and whether they consider women as legitimate clients” (FAO, 2015, p. 9). Due to the organizational culture within RAS-providing agencies, which itself reflects gender norms and presumptions about who is a “typical farmer”, RAS agents tend to target male farmers much more often than female farmers.

In the ECA region, national data indicating women’s representation among farmers are not comparable due to differences in how records are maintained. Reviews of such data do, however, suggest that women are no more than around one-third of the heads of agricultural holdings, for the most part referring to smallholdings17 (FAO, 2022f). Women’s engagement in farming does vary, for instance, 6.5 percent of farm managers in Albania are women, compared with 36.6 percent of holdings in the Republic of Moldova being considered “female-headed” (ibid.). The fact that women are a minority of farmers, in the way the term is most often defined in the national context, means that they tend to be overlooked as potential RAS clients. Even aside from the issue of who is the legally registered head of a holding, RAS agents may fail to recognize women as a distinct group who are de facto farmers – that is, they perform many types of agricultural work. This issue is particularly acute in Tajikistan where, due to high levels of male labour outmigration, the number of women in rural areas who have become “new farmers” is increasing, and yet they are often excluded in when it comes to RAS delivery (FAO, 2020b, p. 20). When RAS services aim for a client base conceived of as “farmers”, in a neutral sense, without consideration of the gendered aspects of who undertakes farming, providers can inadvertently reinforce gender biases that prevent women from benefiting from RAS on an equal basis with men.

A related issue is the fact that women’s role on household farms is considered of lesser importance, or subordinate, than that of men who are presumed to be both the head of the household and the head of the holding. Women’s role on household farms, much of which is unpaid work, is viewed as auxiliary to men’s work and not associated with profit-making activities. In Ukraine, for example, the “default perception” of who is a farmer, on a private farm belonging to a married couple, is the male head of the household. The farm would only be considered to be led by a woman in the absence of a man; otherwise, she is considered the wife of the farmer (FAO, 2021b).

RAS delivery is often predicated on an assumption that agricultural knowledge, acquired by men, will “trickle across” to other members of the household, without consideration of the different roles that each member plays on family farms. In fact, under this model, knowledge is frequently not transferred to women effectively (Özekici, Tekinel and Kiymaz, 2004, p. 129). In Azerbaijan, for instance, because men are viewed as the decision-makers, they are the targets for the dissemination of information about new technologies and practices. It is expected that, if needed, they will share the knowledge and skills they gain through advisory services with family members and farm employees (FAO, 2022d). This arrangement means that, in practice, only the few women who are heads of farms have direct access to advisory services. Likewise, in Albania, it is assumed that extension services are provided to entire households, to the benefit of all members, but, in fact, the targets of EAS are men who are considered the family representatives (FAO, 2016a). A study conducted in one rural area

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17 This figure is comparable to that of the European Union, in which 29 percent of farms are headed by women on average, but ranging from as many as 45 percent in Latvia and Lithuania to as low as 5 percent in the Netherlands (European Commission, 2021).
of Türkiye found that while men were expected to share the information and knowledge that they gained from training with their wives, in actuality only 40 percent of them did this (Rad et al., 2016).

In some countries, landownership is a criterion for receiving EAS. Because women are less likely to inherit and own land, this requirement becomes a distinctly gendered barrier. As is the case with statistics on women as RAS users, data about women's ownership of agricultural land in the ECA region is incomplete. Available sex-disaggregated cadastral records indicate that women are only around 30 percent of registered owners or co-owners of land in general (FAO, 2022f). Despite their limited formal ownership, many women provide labour on household holdings, use small plots around their houses for farming or, as is the case in the Republic of Moldova, have usufruct rights (the right to possess property but not the right to dispose of it through sale, lending, bequest or mortgage; FAO, 2022e). When land title is a prerequisite for RAS, a disproportionate number of women are likely to be excluded.

Finally, social norms and expectations also contribute to women's invisibility as RAS clients. Very often, a woman's participation in extension activities depends on her husband's or other family members' (especially in-laws') agreement or permission. Research conducted in Türkiye illustrates this phenomenon. One study of the attitudes towards women attending courses on agriculture showed that women and men hold different opinions of whether RAS is “acceptable” for women. Whereas 40.4 percent of surveyed men disagreed that women should participate in such courses (45.6 thought that women should), 69.0 percent of women agreed they should be able to attend courses, with only 19.9 percent disagreeing (Kızılaslan and Yamanoğlu, 2010). In a second study in rural Türkiye, the majority of women (79.8 percent) were supported by their husbands to attend training programmes (of any kind, not necessarily on agriculture), but of those who did not show support, most gave reasons related to women having too much housework and needing to care for young children (Rad et al., 2016). If those who are responsible for developing and conducting RAS hold similar views about extension services being “inappropriate” for women, a consequence is the regular exclusion of women farmers.

**Education and literacy limitations**

When RAS are designed with a “one size fits all” approach, they are not accommodating of the specific learning abilities of either women or men. In much of the world, girls in rural areas have less access to formal education due to structural inequalities and social norms and, as a result, rural women have lower literacy levels on average than rural men. It is therefore more likely that educational barriers would be a greater deterrent for rural women taking part in RAS than they would be for rural men.

The ECA region shows some of these tendencies as well. Although literacy is nearly universal in the region, and gender disparities in literacy rates and in completion of compulsory education are negligible, there are important differences between countries and between female and male populations within countries. For instance, in Türkiye, most of the population is literate, but of the population considered illiterate, 87 percent are women and girls. Historically, illiteracy rates have been highest among rural women, a reflection of their fewer years of schooling (FAO, 2016b). The situation is analogous in Serbia, in which rural women are the population group most likely to be illiterate (just under twice the rate for rural men and almost five times the rate for urban women), and to have no education or incomplete primary school education (FAO, 2021c). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, illiteracy rates are highest among rural women, especially women over the age of 60 years. At the same time, Roma women are the most likely to have incomplete primary and secondary education, and as a consequence, the literacy rate for Roma women is 69 percent, compared with 90 percent for Roma men and 99 percent for non-Roma women (FAO and UN Women, 2021). Research in Azerbaijan indicates that while literacy is universal for the rural population, women

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18 Data refer to five countries of the Western Balkans and Kosovo.
19 Data for 2021 for the population aged 15 years and over (TUIK, 2022b).
20 Data are for the 15–24 years age group.
often lack financial literacy, which holds them back from developing their farms or small businesses. In some cases, women’s lack of specialized education translates into a lack of confidence to attend training or educational seminars (FAO, 2021d).

In order to meet the needs of women clients, RAS must be provided in a comprehensible manner and using methods that can overcome literacy constraints (FAO, 2015). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where lack of advisory services has been identified as a serious constraint to women developing farms or agribusinesses, disparities in levels of education mean that some women “need a different type of training, especially in the initial stages, as well as different methods of delivery (considering the levels of difficulty, electronic or paper-based)” (FAO and UN Women, 2021, p. 44). There are examples from many regions of ICTs being used to overcome literacy and education constraints, such as radio extension services or farmer field schools creating videos to share innovations.

**Good practice: adapting to clients’ levels of education and literacy**

**Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Under a project to support rural women’s economic empowerment, the Association of Roma Women “Bolja budućnost” (Better Future), an NGO, conducted several activities to support women in agricultural production and agribusinesses (producing jams and vinegar, for example). Education and training were important components of the project, and written guides were produced on topics such as greenhouse gardening. During implementation, however, it was learned that a high percentage of the project’s participants, Roma women, were only semi-literate, and so new methods had to be developed for knowledge transfer (specifically, workshops using illustrated booklets and involving members of the Association of Roma Women to provide support and mentoring). Lessons learned included the importance of assessing the needs and obstacles of the target group, but also that despite the fact that they were not literate, the women had many skills that could be enhanced through the adapted training methods. A number of the women trainees went on to develop sustainable small businesses.

**Note:**
Information provided as part of the Country Gender Assessment process for Bosnia and Herzegovina (February 2020).

**Time and mobility constraints**

Women living in rural areas, especially those in farming households, face constraints on their time and mobility that reflect their engagement in unpaid domestic and care work, such as housework, caring for children and other family members, work on family farms and community-oriented work, often also in addition to having paid employment locally. The gendered division of labour means that women have the primary responsibility for household chores, which in rural areas can include fetching water and gathering fuelwood, tending kitchen gardens, daily care of livestock, seasonal work weeding or harvesting crops, processing and preserving agricultural products, and engaging in informal income-generating activities (such as selling eggs, honey, fruits or vegetables, home-made products, handicrafts or forest products that they have collected).

In the ECA region, the “triple burden” on rural women’s time – for productive, reproductive and community services – is considerably greater than it is for either rural men or women living in urban areas. For instance, in the Republic of Moldova, rural women do 5.8 hours per day of unpaid work, in comparison with 3.9 hours for rural men and 4.4 hours for urban women. During the peak agricultural season, men in the household work around an hour more per day in agricultural activities than women, yet 29 percent of women spend from 4 to 6 hours per day on such work – an indication that there are seasons when women have very little time to devote to additional activities such as
training events (FAO, 2022e). In Tajikistan, women in rural areas undertake 10 times more unpaid domestic and care work than men, the equivalent of almost 7 hours and 40 minutes a day. Most paid work is performed by men, on average 5 hours and 30 minutes a day, in contrast to 1 hour and 40 minutes for women per day (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

The lack of flexible time, as well as the absence of services that would free up women's time (such as preschool facilities or labour-saving devices in the home), have a direct impact on their abilities to take part in RAS or other educational and training activities, unless these activities have been specifically adjusted to the schedules of women farmers, agricultural workers or women entrepreneurs. In Kazakhstan, for instance, experts note that the extension system is not flexible enough to accommodate women's schedules, including the time of year and length of training events. Women are more able to take part in such activities in the summer when their older children are at home and can take over some household chores, but women in Kazakhstan generally cannot be away from home for seminars that last more than two days (FAO, 2020c). In such contexts, short-term solutions can be considered, such as using mobile service-providing units or offering extension services through online and distance learning formats.

Women in rural areas also do not have the ability to travel to attend extension activities to the same degree as men. Some of the constraints that women face are spatial, and others are based on gender norms. In general, rural women are more likely to depend on public transportation than men and less often own or drive cars. In Armenia, for example, it is difficult to travel from the regions to Yerevan, the capital, but also within each marz (region), due to insufficient public transportation and the poor quality of intercommunity roads. While creating problems for all rural residents, women in particular note that these conditions make it difficult for them to access advisory services provided by the Agricultural Support Republican Center and by the Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Development National Center (FAO, 2017b). Most surveyed women in a mountainous area of Türkiye expressed an interest in attending training and demonstrations on small ruminant production, but almost all (94 percent) stated that they could only participate in such events if they were conducted in their villages (Budak, Koluman-Darcan and Davran, 2005).

The locations where RAS are offered can also deter women from attending. In Azerbaijan, for example, there are limited meeting spaces in villages, and so agricultural advisors held a meeting for a community group in an open public area where men gather socially to drink tea. When it was found that no women group members attended the meeting in this location, an alternative and appropriate space had to be found. A similar situation exists in both Greece and Türkiye, where information about RAS is usually posted in public places that rural women infrequently visit (such as local cafes and coffee houses; Charatsari, Istenič and Lioutas, 2013). It then follows that women are often unaware of local opportunities to attend training to access advisory services. Experts advise that meeting women in their homes, schools or kindergartens is usually more effective in ensuring their ability to participate in RAS. Likewise, gender-responsive RAS considers a range of communication channels, formal and informal, social networks and the different ways and locations that women and men access information to ensure proper outreach to women (Blum, Cofini and Sulaiman, 2020).

**Women's voice and representation**

One of the consequences of women's less visible role as farmers, and the fact that they are the minority of registered farm owners and managers, is their underrepresentation in the kind of organizations through which they could advocate for their needs as RAS users. Such organizations, which include farmers’ associations, producers’ unions and water users’ associations, may provide extension and training opportunities themselves, and they also represent networks through which information about EAS and RAS is disseminated.

The lack of publicly available information in Europe and Central Asia about association membership complicates an assessment of rural women's leadership in agriculture. But as a general rule, women’s engagement in farmers’ and producers’ organizations is low. An assessment of the membership of the Federation of Agricultural Associations (FAA), an Armenian umbrella organization that
represents the interests of farmers and provides support to its members through technical, legal and managerial services, found that out of 640 members, 98 (or 15 percent) were women in 2007. At the time, there was only one woman in the managerial structure of the FAA (Harutyunyan, 2007). The Georgian Farmers’ Association, reports that in 2022, 31 percent of its individual farmer members were women, but at the same time, women were a larger share of participants in the organization’s training courses and seminars (47 percent; Georgian Farmers’ Association, 2022). In the Republic of Moldova, where the National Federation of Agricultural Producers from Moldova (AGROinform) began to actively recruit more women, their membership rate increased from 17 percent in 2008 to 38 percent in 2017, including not only women smallholders but also owners of large farms and businesses (FAO, 2022e). This experience suggests that the barriers to women’s involvement stem from internal organizational practices that perpetuate male-dominated membership and are not related to women’s lack of interest or capabilities. These are important lessons learned that can also be applied to the development of gender-responsive RAS more generally.

In contrast to agricultural organizations and associations, rural women tend to be more active in cooperatives, self-help groups and civil society organizations. In a number of countries, rural women have established NGOs to represent their interests, such as the Union of Rural Women of Ukraine. Many of these organizations carry out advocacy, awareness raising and networking, and while they may provide information and training to their members, they seldom collaborate with EAS or RAS providers. Because women are better represented in such organizations than in mainstream farmers’ or producers’ associations, these can be effective entry points for reaching rural women to identify their demands for RAS, the content and delivery methods that suit their needs, and as partners in providing RAS to women.

**Good practices: women-led organizations**

**Azerbaijan:** The Association of Rural Women of Azerbaijan (ARWA) is an NGO that works to transform rural women’s lives through entrepreneurship and leadership in their communities. The association unites a network of 48 Women Development and Enterprise Groups covering 750 rural women farmers and entrepreneurs in 22 regions; the groups collectively own and manage 130 small businesses. While not fitting the profile of a traditional extension agency, ARWA nevertheless works at the community level to provide technical support to its members and facilitate mentoring. Examples of training topics include tillage, storage and drying, as well as on-site business development services.

*Key resource:*


**North Macedonia:** The Rural Coalition is an NGO, a coalition of 40 local organizations, that aims to improve the conditions in rural areas to support smallholder farms. The Rural Coalition approaches gender equality as a cross-cutting topic. The coalition’s Strategic Plan for 2021–2025 outlines the areas in which rural women face discrimination and includes a strategic priority to support women farmers. Among the types of support envisioned, the Rural Coalition organizes training and educational activities for rural women, with the aim of increasing their knowledge and skills in social entrepreneurship and business planning. The Rural Coalition also includes a Rural Women’s Lobby, consisting of active women farmers that undertake advocacy work.

*Key resource:

It is important to keep in mind that many rural women simply do not belong to organizations through which they could exercise leadership. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, women in rural areas have “very few (if any) opportunities for social interaction in non-work or outside-of-the-home environments” (FAO and UN Women, 2021, p. 44). The social isolation and time constraints the women experience mean that they have fewer opportunities to take part in RAS and are also generally not within informal farmers’ networks where information and advice is shared.

**Women's empowerment and self-confidence**

Additional and related factors that inhibit women from participating in RAS include their lack of empowerment and confidence in their own capacities. Women tend to undervalue their own contributions to agrifood systems and so do not articulate their own demands for EAS or RAS. Disempowerment is linked to the fact that women are not recognized as farmers in their own right, feelings of discomfort when gender-blind delivery methods are used, and lack of confidence that stems from gender norms around it being acceptable for women to attend sessions independently and voice their opinions. In Albania, but typical for other countries, one of the reasons for women's reluctance to take part in extension training is “their lack of confidence in their abilities to understand the content of the training” (FAO, 2016a, p. 18). In Azerbaijan, it is said that women in farming households have internalized the idea that their role is one of assisting their husbands in farming, and this then contributes to lower self-esteem about their own abilities, including as potential participants in RAS (FAO, 2021d). Related factors are women's fears of failure or of being unwelcome (Černič and Charatsari, 2017).

Women's empowerment encompasses more than self-confidence and also covers participation in decision-making, control over income and ownership of assets. An assessment, conducted in Tajikistan, of women's empowerment in agriculture found a low level of empowerment, as indicated by their lack of inputs into productive activities in agriculture and in group membership, as well as limited ownership of assets, access to and decisions about credit, and control over income (Slavchevska et al., 2021). Such negative indicators combine to undermine women’s feelings that they can take part in RAS but can also make demands about the kinds of services they need as clients. In turn, women's exclusion from RAS, disempowers them further.

A key element of gender-responsive RAS is to include opportunities to strengthen women's agency, in parallel with providing information, knowledge and skills. Rural advisory services with a gender-transformative approach would combine technical skills and knowledge transfer with soft skills, such as communication, collaboration and networking, negotiations with buyers or other actors in value chains, engagement in policy dialogue and advocacy.

**Good practices: empowering women through RAS**

**Albania:** The objective of the Gender Rural Equality and Tourism project (GREAT)\(^{21}\) is to strengthen the capacity of rural women to develop their own businesses. The project focuses on three value chains (vegetables; mushrooms and dried fruits; and winter foods [zahire], jams and pickles) that were assessed to be effective entry points because women already have a key role in production and they offer the potential for processing, marketing and sales. Although women are involved at the input and production end of these value chains (growing mushrooms, for example), due to patriarchal norms in remote rural areas, they have very little say in the management of the process. The project provides equipment and space for production activities and supports two agribusiness incubators that themselves facilitate knowledge-exchange between women of different generations. The women involved not

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\(^{21}\) Implemented by FAO and UN Women.
only receive technological know-how, but the cooperative environment also enhances their networking and leadership skills. One expert noted that the project goes beyond the value chains themselves; by supporting women's employment and decision-making about production, the process increases the voice and agency of rural women. The incubators can become models for other value chains. Another component of the project is improving the enabling environment by increasing the capacity of rural advisory services at the local level to provide gender-responsive services.

Key resources:


Kyrgyzstan: The Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (JP RWEE) supported women to increase their income and improve food security by enhancing their agricultural productivity. The programme responded to complex challenges that negatively affect agricultural yields, namely women's limited access to land, irrigation, agricultural extension services, new technologies and innovations. In parallel, the programme included components to build women's leadership skills. Through self-help groups, rural women received high-quality seeds, fertilizers, drip irrigation and inputs for greenhouse farming and also managed group savings. The self-help groups were both a means to provide training, skill-building and information about the choice of seeds, fertilizer use, agricultural technology and business planning, as well as a tool for social mobilization. The outcomes of the programme included the establishment of five women's producer organizations (three cooperatives and two public associations) that improve access to inputs, provide extension support and joint marketing to their members (around 1,716 rural women).

The producer organizations helped rural women to access revolving funds for joint economic initiatives (165 such initiatives were established by the end of the programme). The producer organizations also supported the coordination and monitoring of seasonal agricultural activities that allowed for the diversification and expansion of agricultural production. Through collaboration with the Union of Cooperatives of Kyrgyzstan, the producer organizations have increased their access to the business community, including to investors, funding and marketing opportunities.

Key resources:


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22 Implemented by FAO, UN Women, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) from 2012 to 2020.
4. Strategies to ensure that rural advisory services are responsive to the needs of women

The following section presents several overarching strategies for integrating a gender perspective into RAS. These strategies should inform the design and delivery of RAS in Europe and Central Asia so that, ultimately, such services are more responsive to the actual needs and demands of women farmers and agricultural workers.

4.1. Understanding women farmers and their needs

The preconditions for gender-responsive RAS are sensitivity to the contexts in which the services are provided and a sound understanding of the gender-specific barriers that prevent farmers from accessing and benefiting from such services. A critical starting point is robust analysis in order to identify the particular challenges that women face, and at the same time to improve understanding of how gender intersects with other characteristics (for instance, young men may be excluded from extension services, based on the same presumptions that limit women’s participation, namely that such services only target the “head of household/farm”. Young women farmers are likely to have far less free time than older women in rural areas). Analysis is as relevant for the development of supportive national policy as it is for designing and implementing RAS, but the scope and depth of such assessments will vary.

National policies and strategies should be grounded in evidence of where gender gaps are widest and how these gaps impact on women and men farmers in distinct ways. At the national level, ministries of agriculture play an important role in coordinating public EAS and can, therefore, also support regular monitoring of the effectiveness of their services in reaching both women and men.

Providers of EAS need to be aware of factors such as: the socio-demographic landscape linked to gender (this requires gathering information on issues such as farmers’ literacy rates, inheritance rights, and membership rules for producer organizations for women and men separately); the gendered division of labour in agricultural value chains and in households; the time use patterns of women and men; and access or barriers to technology adoption (FAO, 2021e). FAO recommends that assessments, as well as provision of RAS, “look at [the] individual rather than household level and consider gender relations and decision-making power within the household” (ibid., p. 2).

Gender-sensitive research methodologies that include a focus on women are also instrumental in dispelling assumptions about women as legitimate RAS clients. For this reason, participatory assessments – meaning not only that they include women’s voices but that RAS providers are also engaged from the outset in the research process – have been especially effective. The GRAST is FAO’s
tool that is used to identify aspects of RAS provision that are working well, and could be scaled up, and also areas in which improvements are needed from a gender perspective.

In the Europe and Central Asia region, GRAST has been used to assess the situation in Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan and Türkiye before the development of projects that included activities to increase women’s access to RAS. Experts who were involved in the assessments pointed out that the process itself served an important awareness-raising function, among extensionists but also for policymakers concerned with agrifood systems and rural development.

### Good practice: state-supported needs assessment to inform strategic planning

**United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland:** In 2016, the Scottish Government, through its Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services Division, commissioned research on “Women in Farming and the Agriculture Sector”. The purpose of the research was to establish baseline information about how women are represented in the agriculture sector and in farming, which was then used to inform policies and a number of initiatives to enhance women’s role. The research methodology was participatory, and the final report synthesizes barriers that women farmers face and makes a number of concrete recommendations, including how to increase the relevance and accessibility of training programmes. In response to the research, Scotland’s First Minister established the Women in Agriculture Taskforce to further develop practical solutions to the recommendations contained in the report; this is the first example of such a government-established body to address gender issues in agriculture.

The taskforce is co-chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and a successful Scottish woman farmer, and members include representatives of agricultural organizations, academics, and men and women farmers. Later work of the taskforce led to the creation of the state-funded Women in Agriculture Development Programme that is oriented to training and mentoring to enhance women’s agricultural business skills and leadership abilities. From 2021, the government has also provided financial support for women’s training under funds for practical training of farmers (with courses on certification in tractor and trailer driving, sheepdog training and education in the use of antibiotics in livestock, for example) and for development of the rural economy for women who are not involved in agriculture (on topics such as aquaculture, forestry, horticulture and wildlife management). Women who would otherwise not be able to access training, can apply for funding (if eligible, 100 percent of the training costs are covered, up to GBP 500 per course) and select from a wide range of courses that have been certified within the fund (there are currently approximately 650 training courses in the fund’s database).

**Key resources:**


### Collecting sex-disaggregated data

Along with qualitative assessments, gender-sensitive systems for tracking, monitoring and evaluating the differential impacts of agricultural policies, strategies and programmes require the regular collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data. Throughout the ECA region, ministries of agriculture collect only very limited sex-disaggregated data for public EAS and RAS systems. They tend to cover a few indicators (typically, data for heads of holdings and employees on household farms). Ministries may collect some data and keep records on EAS and RAS clients, but the data is
seldom disaggregated by sex and even less often available publicly. Lack of data for other indicators, such as sex-disaggregated records of applicants for agricultural subsidies or data about the harvests and yields of female farmers, make it difficult to draw conclusions about the benefits of projects that have made efforts to include women in RAS.

Individual organizations, such as farmers’ associations that provide advisory services to their members, or NGOs that implement programmes with training components may keep records about beneficiaries, but often they are not kept for women and men separately, and are also not complete enough to be useful for evaluation or policy-setting at the national level. Private sector extension providers may collect sex-disaggregated data about their clients if they have internal gender policies, but this information is unlikely to be representative of most farmers or to be integrated with data from the public EAS and RAS systems.

### Good practices: sex-disaggregated data

**Albania:** Since 2013, the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration has collected sex-disaggregated data for two indicators, one of which refers to its programme on extension services (the total number of women who benefit from EAS). The availability of sex-disaggregated data has allowed for an analysis of gender-responsive budgeting for this programme. In 2021, 320 rural women participated in ten training days, with total expenditures of 1.7 million Albanian lek (approximately USD 15,000). Experts point out a key weakness is that the collected data are used for statistical reporting, but are not regularly analysed or used to identify the kinds of services that primarily women are requesting.

**Key resource:**


**Georgia:** In 2020, the Rural Development Agency of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, signed a partnership memorandum with UN Women and, subsequently, adopted a Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan for 2022–2024. One of the priority areas was the introduction of a system for regular sex-disaggregated data collection within the agency’s programmes in order to strengthen the provision of extension services to women in the regions.

**Key resource:**


**Republic of Moldova:** The most recent General Agricultural Census (conducted in 2011) included questions about whether the manager/head of a holding had participated in a training course in the field of agriculture, with the responses disaggregated by sex. While the census did not specify the type of training or ask specifically about extension services, the data nevertheless served as an important baseline to establish that women farmers had significantly less access to training opportunities than men.

**Key resource:**

Moving from gender-neutral to gender-transformative approaches

The kinds of gender constraints described in this review are structural, meaning that they stem from inequalities in society at large, in other words, discriminatory gender norms. They reflect particular power relations and gender biases. For the most part, efforts to provide equal access to RAS have targeted women’s specific practical needs under dedicated and time-bound projects. The result has been “practical benefits for women in that period,” yet a lack of sustainable results “when it comes to up-scaling/mainstreaming the concept of gender equality” to the larger system of RAS provision (GFRAS, 2013, p. 5). Insufficient attention has been paid to changing entire extension systems and to understanding how RAS fits within the larger context – organizational and cultural. This is a key reason that previous attempts “have failed to effectively address the specific needs of women farmers, and why women continue to be underserved by RAS” (FAO, 2018a, p. 7).

While well-designed RAS can overcome barriers related to organizational aspects (such as the time or location when such services are offered), with greater planning, RAS can also bring about long-term change by reforming the structures and practices that perpetuate gender inequalities. Another way to think about practical and strategic interventions is to consider a continuum of approaches, from gender-unaware to those that are gender-transformative and, therefore, more likely to be sustainable.

At one end of the continuum, gender-unaware approaches to the provision of RAS (also termed “gender-blind”) are those that ignore gender discrimination and gender inequalities. They are premised on the assumption that women and men have the same access to such services and the same needs. Gender-blind approaches do not challenge disparities and, therefore, have no meaningful impact on advancing gender equality.

At the far opposite end of the continuum, however, gender-transformative approaches to the development and provision of RAS directly address the causes of gender-based inequalities, work to transform the discriminatory gender norms that stand in the way of women’s advancement and aim to empower women. A gender-transformative approach is one that views the provision of gender-responsive RAS not as the final objective itself but as a means to promote gender equality.

Between these two poles are approaches that acknowledge gender inequalities and differences and may accommodate them to a certain degree; they are gender-sensitive or responsive – but nevertheless do not attempt to redress harmful gender norms. Gender-responsive approaches are those that both acknowledge and consider the specific needs of women and men, and the gender-based barriers that may prevent them from accessing RAS, and develop specific interventions to overcome inequalities.

Considering the landscape of the ECA region as a whole, progress has been made in dispelling the misconception that RAS is a gender-neutral subject, and greater attention is being paid to the needs of women farmers and women in rural areas. Promising approaches in RAS are agricultural services that also include, for example, “efforts to strengthen women’s land rights and investing in education ... promoting divisible technologies or smaller input packages that are more affordable and opportunities for groups to achieve economies of scale ... considering interactions among inputs rather than treating each input in isolation, and taking gender roles into account when designing and implementing projects” (Diaz and Najjar, 2017, p. 6). Gender-transformative solutions, however, remain rare in the ECA region and, therefore, require greater investments and longer-term commitments.
4.3 Selecting modalities for gender-responsive rural advisory services

The delivery methods and forms that RAS take can either create barriers for women as clients or may offer greater opportunities for women’s participation. There are many modalities for RAS, but unfortunately it does not appear that any detailed evaluations of their efficacy in reaching women have been conducted in the ECA region. However, there is a consensus that the conventional top-down methods of providing information are less inclusive than approaches that create enabling environments for discussion and mutual knowledge creation. Gender-transformative EAS and RAS systems are those that facilitate knowledge transfer among farmers rather than merely disseminating information or technical know-how to them.

Similarly, women are more likely to participate in RAS when group-based approaches are used, as opposed to EAS that only targets individuals or heads of farms that often overlook women’s contributions. Global practice confirms that if women are to benefit from RAS, extension services must be offered “systemically at the farm level,” based on a whole farm analysis at the household level (SIDA and Farnworth, 2010, p. 41). Group-based approaches emphasize the co-creation of learning.
platforms between extension agents and clients and, when based around farming households, they can also encompass wider goals such as family nutrition and health, and children’s education. When EAS or RAS is oriented towards household-centred support, attention should be paid to differences between male-headed and female-headed households, in terms of the different roles that women and men play in each, as well as differences in access to resources.

The following are sample modalities that have been used in projects to increase RAS outreach to women and which seem to lead to more gender-equal outcomes. Note that adopting any one of these modalities is not a guarantee in itself that RAS will be gender-responsive. Rather, these are methods that, when applied while also using a gender lens, are more likely to be inclusive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modalities that promote inclusivity and equal participation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participatory and learning-by-doing approaches</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Farmer field schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Peer-to-peer mentoring and education</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Farmer-to-farmer exchanges and study visits</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Demonstration sites and field days</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Participatory rural appraisals</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Group-based approaches</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Family/household-centred support (such as household farmer learning groups or mentoring)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Horizontal models of training/group information sharing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Hub-and-spoke” model(^3)</td>
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<td>• Dimitra Clubs(^4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Working through women’s self-help groups or women’s social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Incentivized group learning methods</td>
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### 4.4. Partnerships in extension and advisory services

Extension and advisory services today encompass a far greater range of providers than has been active previously. In addition to public institutions, providers may include NGOs, input suppliers, private consultants, producer organizations, bilateral or multilateral donors, and others. The diversity of clients for RAS with varied needs and priorities is increasingly being recognized. RAS today can encompass a great variety of topics, ranging from the introduction of innovation and technologies, to business and marketing skills, household nutrition and soft skills.

The pluralistic landscape means that there is potential overlap in the services available to rural communities. This is especially the case for gender-responsive RAS, which intersects with initiatives

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\(^3\) The “hub-and-spoke” model has been used to disseminate innovative farm technologies and food processing technologies, for example, based on building the capacity of a “hub” to work in partnership with smaller groups, such as rural women’s associations and organizations, that are the “spokes”.

\(^4\) Dimitra Clubs are an FAO-supported “community-driven approach that facilitates socio-economic empowerment, women’s leadership and self-help. They are informal groups of rural women and men (single sex or mixed) who decide to join together on a voluntary basis to identify their common problems and solve them using local resources” (FAO, IFAD and WFP, 2020, p. 86).
to empower rural women economically and in other ways. For instance, many countries in the ECA region have programmes for strengthening entrepreneurship, very often with a special focus on providing rural women with opportunities for income generation. Business support and advisory services that address topics such as business planning for start-ups, financial literacy and marketing may use training, seminars and coaching – activities that could either replicate or enhance RAS.

The development of RAS also intersects with initiatives to upgrade vocational and professional agri-education in the region, to increase its relevance to today's markets and to attract students, including women, into research positions and as extension agents. Additionally, the development of RAS parallels that of e-agriculture and the introduction of digital tools for farming. The digitalization of agriculture has implications for the content of RAS and has likewise expanded the role of extension agents. More broadly, the increased relevance of digital technologies for e-agriculture raises issues of gender-equitable technology transfer. It is important that policies and strategies on agricultural education and e-agriculture are linked to those on RAS, and also that they all acknowledge and address overlapping gender disparities.

FAO views RAS as integrated services based in rural communities that could potentially also encompass health care, nutrition and social services, including employment, for example. Given the potentially very wide scope of RAS and pluralism among EAS actors, collaboration and “active efforts by organizations to align, integrate and synchronize services, target groups, methods and approaches” are necessary (FAO, 2021f, p. 3). In this way, resources are optimized, rather than duplicated, and services are more likely to be inclusive, with less risk that particular groups will be left behind. Effective collaboration requires identifying key providers, assessing and monitoring their performance and conducting regular information exchange.

Ideally, today's extensionists should have at least basic skills in conducting gender analysis to identify barriers to women's engagement and in how to apply gender-sensitive approaches, but given the realities of resource and budget constraints, it is not possible that all extension providers will include full-time gender advisors. Thus, collaboration and partnerships should encompass actors that work directly with rural women and girls, such as state institutions with mandates on the promotion of gender equality or on women's empowerment, NGOs and other types of centres and associations (such as the centres for women's entrepreneurship development set up in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, as well as several other countries in the region), international development and donor agencies, and private companies (specifically, through public-private collaboration models). Leveraging gender expertise and resources (for instance, tools and approaches) from other institutions has been shown to be effective in addressing shortages in human resources but also to better align activities to amplify gender mainstreaming in a particular context (USAID, 2019).

Unfortunately, coordination is lacking in the ECA region, leading to a situation in which the links between the diverse EAS and RAS actors are “generally weak and unsystematic” (FAO, 2011, p. 7). Furthermore, lack of coordination also reflects a missing “system perspective”, which results in an unclear articulation of methodological approaches, desired results, tasks and target groups. Weak coordination between the active or potential EAS and RAS providers complicates the process of ensuring that extension services are gender-responsive.

On the other hand, the processes that are underway in Europe and Central Asia to strengthen national extension systems are also opportunities to integrate gender considerations from the outset. FAO thus advises that when designing gender-responsive RAS, a starting point should be a mapping of the key providers of services that are oriented towards rural women and girls. A solid understanding of the overall landscape means also considering ways in which RAS intersects with other initiatives that have important gender dimensions in order to improve collaboration and effectiveness.
Good practice: Rural business support for women farmers

Sweden: The Federation of Swedish Farmers (Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund – LRF) is an independent membership organization, which is made up of around 140,000 individual farmers, as well as agricultural cooperatives and farmer-owned company members. The federation has a commitment to gender equality and also works on projects to diversify the rural economy. The federation recognized the untapped potential of women in rural areas; many were interested in developing their rural businesses and they had valuable off-farm work experience, but still encountered challenges based on gender stereotypes. From 2012 to 2015, the federation developed and conducted a targeted business training programme that combined theory with practical exercises, coaching activities, peer support and networking through social media. By the end of the programme, 50 out of 60 participants had approved business plans. Some of the lessons learned from the programme were the need for further training in soft skills, such as leadership, as well as technical skills, such as accounting, and the usefulness of individual coaching.

Key resource:

Collaboration can enhance evaluation of what has proven to be most effective in mainstreaming gender into RAS. There has been limited evaluation of gender-responsive RAS in the ECA region, but identifying good practices is essential for the further transformation of RAS systems. There is also a need to “learn from each other” and share good practices and lessons learned across pluralistic systems. For example, many donor-supported projects have targets for women trainees, or dedicated training for women, that have generated important information about effective methods for increasing women’s engagement. These should be more widely disseminated and replicated by public sector providers. At the same time, targets for women’s attendance at training should be understood as a short-term strategy as it is ultimately not a transformative approach.
The following section synthesizes lessons learned about the design and implementation of gender-responsive RAS in the form of recommendations. The recommendations are directed to FAO and are relevant to its support for strengthening national EAS and RAS systems. Additional recommendations are made to governments that manage public extension systems, primarily through ministries of agriculture, and to extension and advisory services providers themselves.

A. Gender-responsive RAS should be based on sound analysis and evidence of the barriers that impact on women as clients.

**For FAO**

- Promote the use of GRAST or other analytical methodologies when supporting the development of national extension systems.

- Create a database or online repository of GRAST country reports so that the findings of the analysis, conclusions and recommendations are available to a wider audience.

**For government and national institutions**

- Conduct gender and situational analyses that identify resources, stakeholders and effectiveness of EAS and RAS when drafting national policies, strategies and action plans.

- When conducting an agricultural census and other periodic surveys of holdings, include questions for individuals of farms/farming households about training or educational events that they have attended, disaggregated by sex.

**For providers of EAS and RAS**

- Maintain sex-disaggregated records of RAS clients, ideally also disaggregated by other characteristics, such as age, size of farm and type of production, and periodically analyse the data about women's and men's participation for planning outreach and content of RAS.

- Conduct gender analysis in the local context to inform the design of new activities and to scale-up effective methods.

- Map existing providers and services working in rural communities to identify entry points for collaboration, especially with rural-based community centres that are already working with women.

- Support women to voice their own demands, so that RAS can be tailored to these demands.
B. Gender-sensitive policies and strategies in the agriculture sector are needed to support sustainable changes to EAS and RAS systems.

For FAO

- Develop capacities of national partners to mainstream gender throughout policy and project cycles in order to support the creation of gender-responsive public extension systems.

For government and national institutions

- National commitments to gender equality and the elimination of discrimination against rural women should be reflected in policies and strategic planning for developing gender-responsive RAS, with appointed implementors, clear and measurable targets, and dedicated budgets.

For providers of EAS and RAS

- Translate national policies into organizational gender action plans, with measurable targets and outcomes, monitoring and evaluation plans, staffing plans and budgets.

C. Partnerships between agricultural specialists and organizations that represent the interests of rural women, such as gender equality commissions and gender focal points in relevant ministries, NGOs, cooperatives, women’s resource centres, women’s business associations, and others are recommended for the strengthening of gender-responsive RAS systems.

For FAO

- Support collaboration within UN Country Teams and with other development agencies on improving access to services for women in rural areas, including EAS and RAS and services for agribusiness development.

For government and national institutions

- Improve cooperation between the ministries of agriculture and other public providers of extension services, rural development and education and the national institutions for the promotion of gender equality and/or improving the status of women, to contribute to the development of gender-responsive RAS systems and decrease duplication of services.

For providers of EAS and RAS

- Identify ways to leverage the gender expertise of other organizations that work with rural women or have mandates on gender equality.

- Engage in collaborative projects for the design and delivery of RAS, building on the skills and knowledge of both extensionists and experts from other organizations.
D. In order to improve gender-responsive RAS, extension and advisory services themselves must create enabling environments for gender mainstreaming.

For government and national institutions

- National planning and strategies for public EAS and RAS should require gender mainstreaming.
- Through ministries of education, identify and remove barriers for women in educational fields in order to diversify the pool of future agricultural specialists and improve connections between women in research and scientific fields and RAS providers.
- Ensure that providers of extension and advisory services have sufficient human and financial resources to provide gender-responsive services.
- Put in place systems for regular and sex-disaggregated data collection on EAS and RAS, as well as analysis of the data. Agriculture censuses can be a means to obtain baseline information about access to EAS and RAS.

For providers of EAS and RAS

- Commit to providing standalone gender sensitivity training for extension agents/RAS providers, both for new employees and on a continual basis.
- Proactive recruitment of women as extensionists (such as hiring targets or quotas) is needed, alongside transformative processes to improve the organizational culture, so that employment in RAS is a viable option for women.
- Establish gender advisors or gender focal points within extension service providers.
- Maintain sex-disaggregated records of staff and clients for services and conduct regular data analysis to track changes and for the purposes of evaluation.

E. Gender-responsive RAS should have a transformative objective by working to dismantle barriers that prevent women from accessing RAS to the same degree as men.

For FAO

- Develop capacities of national partners to design and implement gender-transformative approaches in the context of RAS and EAS delivery.

For government and national institutions

- Recognize women as legitimate clients for EAS and RAS and promote information about women’s contributions to agrifood systems as farmers and workers.

For providers of EAS and RAS

- Target women as clients for EAS and RAS; use quotas to increase women’s participation and ensure that women as farmers, members of farming households, heads of households and farm workers are included.
- Gender-responsive RAS should be provided holistically to farming systems, in which women and men work, rather than targeting men and women as individual farmers.
- Provide EAS and RAS that are the most relevant to women’s activities in agrifood systems and across different agricultural value chains.
- Use participatory methods that have been evaluated to be effective for engaging with women in agriculture and for meeting their needs. Engage women as experts and peers for mentoring.
F. Evaluation of what works in terms of increasing the gender responsiveness of RAS is lacking in the ECA region and should be improved. Additionally, efforts are needed to improve the measurement and evaluation of gender-transformative results in the area of RAS delivery and in agrifood systems generally.

For FAO

- Support gender-sensitive evaluation of FAO’s RAS projects in the ECA region and collect and share good practices and lessons learned that can be replicated.
- Support the development of indicators, including proxy indicators, to measure gender-transformative impacts as a result of RAS, in addition to conducting qualitative research of FAO’s projects that have gender-transformative elements.

For government and national institutions

- Ensure that the implementation of national plans on advisory services are evaluated and that such evaluations include a gender perspective.

For providers of EAS and RAS

- Monitor and periodically evaluate service delivery against specific targets for women’s inclusion and participation.
- Conduct analysis and research to assess clients’ satisfaction with services and to ensure that they align with the demands of both female and male clients, farmers and other agricultural workers.


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