

Policy Report 2022



Stronger and Empowered Rural Women for Resilient and Prosperous Pelagonija

“When women thrive, all of society benefits.”
Kofi Annan

“If women farmers have the same access to resources as man, the number of hungry in the World could be reduced by 150 million”.
FAO, State of Food and Agriculture, 2011

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List of abbreviations

IPARD	Instrument for pre-accession assistance for rural development
PERUWOT	Pelagonija Rural Women Training
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Home
UN	United Nations
SEEC	South Eastern European Countries
BCs	Balkan Countries
MAFWE	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy
EU	European Union
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
IARNM	Institute of Accreditation of Republic of North Macedonia

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Statements and quotes of the women from rural areas in Pelagonija

Organic production is good on many levels. Firstly, for us producers, while working is much better as we are not exposed to harmful chemicals, for our families as they are the first consumers, for our customers...and the for the land and environment itself, as it stays alive full of good microorganisms, producing more and better quality products. Otherwise, land treated with pesticides and herbicides becomes dull and gives less and less products...

(Roza Anackovska, s. Dobrushevo)



Unfortunately, rural women's voice has not been heard for a long time. Systematic collection of data, regular meetings and collaboration with the academia, local and national bodies is required for improving the situation of rural women in Pelagonija. And it will take time to solve the issues...if it is not already too late.

(Tanja Divjakoska, s. Sveti Mitrani)



Branding of some products and relating the agricultural supply to the touristic offer can be very helpful. Mariovo's beaten cheese, ajvar, cocktails from wild berries to name a few. Krushevo women are already producing and selling those products to the tourists and paragliders....

(Lefkija Gazoska, Krushevo, Feel Krushevo organisation)

What is needed is mentorship of the women and better education and skills trainings on systematic and regular level, with special focus on young and entrepreneur women. In situations where complex documentation is needed, and women from rural areas are faced with its preparation for the first time, a mentoring approach is needed, which will aim to facilitate the application process and clarify the extensive documents and forms. A mentor should be appointed throughout the procedure to guide the women throughout the whole process, from the beginning to the last stage.

(Biljana Stojanoska, Krushevo)



Main findings

This Policy Report aims to identify the challenges and concerns that rural women in Pelagonija are facing, as well as to highlight some of the most promising opportunities that are available to them. Based on the survey analysis, interviews and wide consultations with rural women and other actors in rural areas, the Report brings forward several main findings and recommendations with the aim to empower Pelgonija women.

Women in Pelagonija believe that their voice is not been heard in a longer period. There is no systematic way of gathering information and data from the official bodies on the ground, and women believe that without assessing the real situation and problems on the ground, no effective decision making and policy making can be done.

Socioeconomic status determines the agricultural and business behaviour of women in North Macedonia. Younger woman, more educated women, and those living in bigger villages, closer to towns are more likely to be interested in agricultural innovations and skill improvements, as well as organic production. Mainly, women have high school degree. They are interested in additional training, mainly related to improving their business and farming skills. They requested a **closer mentoring programme that will support their activities.**

The organic production is rare in Pelagonija. Less than 1 in 1000 farmers produce organic production for sale, of which almost none women. Main reasons are related to complicated procedure, lack of information, lack of know-how and bureaucracy problems. On the other hand, most families produce organic products for exclusive use of their families. Hence, they are aware of the detrimental effects of non-organic production, but believe that their organic production will not be financially sustainable. **Closer and continuous cooperation between academia, local governments' bodies and farmers is required.**

Agricultural cooperation in Pelagonija is weak. Women admit that there is lack of cooperation between farmers (horizontal cooperation or cooperatives). In addition, there is lack of competitive food industry and buyers (vertical cooperation). The **oligopsony market structure** is a problem for agriculture in Pelagonija, characterised with small number of buyers and many small sellers. The role of various agencies and institutions that are regulating the markets of various products has an important role, but mostly they are perceived as distrustful.

Divided and scattered land and production does not allow for using economies of scale. For some of the land, farmers do not have documentation due to old or non-existent urbanistic plans. In addition, this means unused mechanisation, duplication of costly equipment and inappropriate allocation of resources. Forming cooperatives and appropriately distributed concessions (with appropriate system of control and responsibility) of land are needed.

Infrastructural problems are also huge hindering factor for agricultural development in Pelagonija region. Lack of agricultural roads, weak or non-existent irrigation systems, continuous problems in electricity and water supply just to name a few. Without basic infrastructural facilities there is no place for initiating progress. **Long term planning and execution of the plans needs strong monitoring from international donors side.**

Subventions are important driving force, with 80 percent of producers claiming subventions. However, there are many issues in the distribution of subventions, such as delays, technical problems and inefficient distribution, with lack of control and monitoring from the state bodies. In addition, women stated that sometimes some state subventions are in conflict with other agricultural goals, hence requiring **revising and better planning**. Women believe that subventions shall not be necessary instrument, only if the position of the farmers in front of the buyers is better protected by law and on the grounds, by the agencies. In this case, the producers will reach good satisfying price on the free market, without compensation from the state budget.

The IPARD programme and other finances' access are highly welcomed but mainly very distant, especially for small farmers and those in Pelagonija. Women are usually disadvantaged as applicants, as usually the males in the family are the one running the business. Starting with issues with the high requirements for official documents, lack of knowledge and lack of time, women believe that the finances are mainly for big projects and sometimes for newcomers that buy land in Pelagonija just to use these funds on the equal-regional distributional basis which is a form of almost publicly known misuse. Women believe that only direct support can be helpful as well as better monitoring of sustainability of the finances and investments.

Lack of data for proper analysis of the situation and for better planning are necessary. Census of Agriculture needs to be performed urgently, in order to have data for any analysis and evidence based decision making in agriculture.

Women believe that **branding of the region and of some products** is can also be helpful, as well as connecting the production with rural ecotourism. "Mariovo bitten cheese", bitten peppers with garlic, ajvar, home-made pies, white pine honey, home-made organic jams, juices from domestic but also wild berries are some of the products that can be interesting for supply. Short live span of the agricultural products and no freezing facilities are problem for most of the farmers. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) need to be developed in order for the agricultural products to gain longer life span and more value added in the supply chains.

Finally, **corruption and distrust in institutions** are perceived as a highest concern of the women In Pelagonija. These are considered as main factors, along with the lack of jobs, as main factors for the extensive immigration from Pelagonija.

Finally, the lack of surveys and region-directed specific measures and work on a terrain are one of the main comments. Building capacities for gathering information on the ground and conducting proper analysis is necessary.

Background

The Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations¹ warns the World of the possible shortages of food, emphasizing that the food crisis can be especially hard in developing countries (FAO, 2022). A key part to decrease food insecurity is to take actions towards better prevention, anticipation, and targeting of agricultural production and to address the root causes of food insecurity. Women can play a vital part in solving the problem, as they are well educated and equipped with equipment and know-how can provide significant support to the efforts (UN Food agency, 2021).²

In the last two years economic growth in North Macedonia slowed down considerably, mainly, due to the Covid-19 crisis and global crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The prolonged economic crisis, accompanied by huge dependency from imported electricity and supply chains interruptions, came to affect the country's economic performance by having a measurable negative impact on production, investment and raising inflation into two digit numbers. The agricultural sector is especially hit by the crisis on both sides – supply and demand side. Among the main exports and import agricultural partners of North Macedonia are Russia and Ukraine, hence the country faces serious food and also other agricultural materials supply shortages, but also export problems. The rising minimum wage and other social protection measures on private consumption that were designed to help socially vulnerable groups did not help in combating the high inflation in the country that reached above 16 % in summer 2022. Inflation especially put agricultural producers in unfavourable position, by increasing costs, devaluating the value of the delayed state subventions and making export and placement of products impossible. A further rise in inflation, threatens to worsen the situation even more, especially for small agricultural producers. In this worsened economic context, rural women in Pelagonija become especially vulnerable, as their families and farms are pushed close to the survival boundaries.

Pelagonija, southwest of North Macedonia is a huge agricultural valley abundant with fertile land and sunlight. Characterised with great agricultural production in the past, now Pelagonija's lands and potentials remain only partly used, due to immigration and bad policies in the past. Pelagonia region has agricultural land with an area of 276.777 hectares, of which 117.770 hectares are arable agricultural land, and the remaining 159.007 hectares are pastures. The structure of arable land – plotted fields and gardens participate with 83 percent (<https://pelagonijaregion.mk/en/>).

With a constantly decreasing population, due to immigration of young people and aging of inhabitants, the region is abundant with almost empty villages, surrounded by unspoiled and unused natural resources, land and water springs. In addition, poverty is one of the main problems, as many households; especially in the rural Pelagonija face the challenge to meet ends (UNICEF, 2022).

Main income activity in the region is agriculture, more precisely, traditional subsistence agriculture, with intense use of human labour, women and even children included (<https://pelagonijaregion.mk/en/>). Alongside hard work on the fields, children, women

¹ Global Report on Food Crises: acute food insecurity hits new highs; <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/global-report-on-food-crises-acute-food-insecurity-hits-new-highs/en>

² Empowering women and girls is crucial to ensure sustainable food security in the aftermath of COVID-19, say UN food agency heads ahead of International Women's Day; <https://northmacedonia.un.org/en/115246-empowering-women-and-girls-crucial-ensure-sustainable-food-security-aftermath-covid-19-say>

(sometimes pregnant) and men are exposed to the pollution that comes from uncontrolled use of pesticides and herbicides. In addition, non-existent legal or other rules, creates perfect ground for discrimination of women and children labour, and in many cases happening even within the family. Pelagonija is mainly famous for its production of tobacco leaves, wheat, corn and various vegetables. Although with the support of government funds, many households managed to buy basic equipment such as tractors, the disintegrated small plots and intense agriculture methods do not yield high efficiency, or any economies of scale.

In this male-dominated socio-economic setting, rural women of the region are involved in agricultural production as family unpaid workers or as low-paid informal manual labourers and rarely as farming women, alongside their key role as providers of unpaid care work for the whole family (Analysis of the situation of rural women in North Macedonia, more obstacles than opportunities (2018)). According to some estimates, 85-90 percent of their active day time rural women spend on unpaid household activities, whether working for the farm or for the household. This, accompanied by the relatively lower educational status limits their capacity to advance their knowledge and self-confidence and limits significantly their contribution to the household and community. In fact rural women were in a very difficult situation and often they are among the poorest population, with no-paid work within the household or sometimes very low-paid jobs. In rural households in Pelagonija, mainly the man is breadwinner, who traditionally owns and inherits the entire property, making women fully dependent. This tradition is still favored. Hence, a large proportion of women living in rural areas are not employees, and the low level of education, mainly high school degree, contributes largely to this, which is usually the result of early marriage and family formation.

Legal framework – rural women considerations

North Macedonia's legal and regulatory framework is declaratively favourable to rural women. However, the EC Progress Report (2021)³

...Calls on North Macedonia to take steps to ensure an adequate representation of women in all decision-making positions, and to further address the lack of implementation of women workers' rights and tackle gender stereotyping, gender imbalance and the gender pay gap in the labour force; points to significant gender differences in terms of participation and quality of work, insufficient action on sexual harassment in the workplace, discrimination in legal provisions related to maternity leave and the lack of childcare and pre-school capacity; acknowledges the amendments to the law on the rights of the child and the completion of the deinstitutionalisation process...

In general the Constitution does not make distinction between men and women, putting them in the equal position. North Macedonia has also commitments as it has signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the European Convention for human rights. However, this furthermore means that the rural women are not positively discriminated. Positive discrimination is necessary in order to improve the subordinated position of women for the start. In

³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0133_EN.html

addition, several other Laws that have been approved in North Macedonia define the gender equality concept that needs to be applied⁴.

- Law for equal opportunities of women and men (2006)
- National plan for gender equality (2007-2012)
- Law for equal opportunities for Women and Men (2012)⁵
- Strategy for Gender Equality
- Law for combating and protection of Discrimination (Official Gazette No. 50/2010)
- Law for Agriculture and Rural Development (2008)
- Law for Organic production (2010).

In line with international commitments and EU accession requirements, North Macedonia adopted the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in 2006 and later in 2013, in which the 'gender equality approach' was developed into a gender equality framework. The Law on Equal Opportunities on Women and Men regulates the basic and the special measures for establishing equal opportunities for women and men, the institutional network and their competences, the procedure for identifying the unequal treatment of the women and men, the rights and duties of the mediator for equal opportunities on women and men.

The rural women are specifically targeted with various activities under the objectives of the National plan for gender equality and Strategy for Gender Equality. Within these documents assessment on the women rights of rural women, their educational problems and needs as well as raising the awareness and building capacities for realization of rights of rural women are planned. In addition, some of the measures planned are related to the increasing rural women participation in decision making, and tackling the employment issues of women in rural areas by: encouraging them as business operators and by increasing their knowledge and business skills through education and trainings.

In general the gender equality policy and Laws in North Macedonia are declaratively sensitive to rural women needs. However, some of the measures on the ground are not based on sound analysis and therefore they do not manage to reach the goals. In general, the Laws, policies are criticized by the legal experts as non-systematic, with lack of accountability mechanisms on reporting on the implementation of National plan for gender equality or Strategy for Gender Equality.

Law on prevention and protection from discrimination accompanied by the independent seven member anti-discrimination Commission is another guardian of rural women rights. Antidiscrimination commission has advisory role, providing advice and recommendation on the available protective measures in front of the courts and other institutions. However, not many cases were brought in front of this Commission.

Rural development is defined within the Law for agriculture and rural development (2008). The law does recognize specific situation of the rural women, by adopting a Decree (No. 137/2008) which offered operationalization of the rural development policy, positively discriminating the rural women. Namely, in Article 4, p.3/a the Decree, 20 points will be awarded to woman applicant, and 15 points to women entrepreneurs for IPARD and National programme funds. The Government also encouraged rural women by awarding 10 points in comparison to the male farmers for receiving

⁴ More on the specific Laws and their impact can be found in the Analysis of the situation of rural women in North Macedonia, more obstacles than opportunities (2018).

⁵ Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 6/2012 of 13.1.2012, http://www.mtsp.gov.mk/WBStorage/Files/zem_2012.pdf, accessed June, 21, 2022.

refundable resources from the government in the area of modernization of the agriculture. The possibilities for acquiring financial help are even greater (20 additional points) for the women candidates that are aged between 18 to 40 years, and are registered as a farmer and live in difficult and poorer areas. Having in mind the traditional setting and mainly male ownership of the farms and lands, it can be said that these measures are rather cosmetic ones, and do not improve significantly the position of the women.

The organic production is regulated under the Law for organic production which is aligned with the EU Regulation No 834/2007 and the Commission Regulation 889/2008. The control system is consisted by two certification bodies (Balkan Biosert and Pro-Cert); which are authorized by MAFWE for control and certification in organic production, and accredited by the Institute of Accreditation of Republic of North Macedonia (IARNM). They conduct expert control, certification and also consultations in line with the MKC EN 45011 (General requirements for bodies working with product certification systems). In order for the organic products to be exportable, the IARNM authority is supported by Mutual Recognition Agreement of Accreditation Certificates (EA-MLA) with the European cooperation for Accreditation. Again, within the positive discrimination is not defined.

In general, the country has made significant efforts to harmonise its legal framework with the laws of the European Union. By widely and thoroughly describing the measures, acts and the responsibilities, it ensures that the legal framework is defined as to ensure the rights of the women, rural women including. However, the criteria, standards and practices are yet to be implemented, even in the public institutions and urban areas. The situation is even worse for the agricultural sector and areas, where traditional and patriarchal values and norms “are somehow above” the Laws. In Pelagonija, this mentality prevails, while there are no monitoring bodies or they have little control.

Of late, there are many domestic and internationally founded actions that promote the gender equality concept. However, the results are coming slower than anticipated. In addition, a number of other challenges in the society remain. These issues are equally burdening for men and women living in Pelagonija. Weak rule of law, high level of corruption, weak institutional capacity worsen the otherwise difficult life in Pelagonija, even more so for the rural women. Their inherited subordinate position in society is not treated systematically, but with separate measures and interventions, that sometimes prove to be inappropriate or totally displaced.

Pelagonija's agricultural production – general overview

Agriculture (including forestry, hunting and fisheries) in North Macedonia contributes to the GDP gross value added (GVA) with around 9%, and encompass 13.9% in total employment, which is decrease as compared to the past (EU INSTRUMENT FOR PRE-ACCESSION (IPA) RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2021-2027). However, when it comes to the number of the enterprises, agriculture participate only with 2 605 or 3% in the total enterprise number in North Macedonia. Mainly, above 90 % enterprises are micro and small, up to 19 persons employed. In 2019, cultivated land represented around 519 thousand hectares or about 41% of total agricultural land (EU Rural Development Report, 2022), leaving almost 60% of land unused. Even more devastating is the fact that the irrigation systems are installed for around 164 thousand hectares, however, only 7.2% of agricultural land is actually annually irrigated due to obsolete and deteriorated irrigation systems (EU INSTRUMENT FOR PRE-ACCESSION (IPA) RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2021-2027).

Main crops that are cultivated in Pelagonija are: tobacco, cereals, wheat, vegetables, and potatoes. The crop production usually depends on the size of the farm. The large agriculture holdings usually produce cereals (mainly wheat), while small agriculture holdings produce fresh fruits, tobacco and vegetables. It is noticeable that many studies have confirmed that the average yields on various crops are usually below the average of the SEE countries and far below the average yields of cereals recorded in EU-28 (EU INSTRUMENT FOR PRE-ACCESSION (IPA) RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2021-2027).

Almost 40 percent of the agriculture holdings in Pelagonija are breeding livestock. In Pelagonija, the number of breeding livestock farms has largely decreased in the last decade, as well as the number of animals. Usually in Pelagonija, dominate cattle, pigs, sheep and goats as well as poultry, and mainly those are small farms breeding less than 6 heads of animals. Small scale breeding holdings usually produce raw milk that is sold to milk companies, but only small percentage of it is compliant with EU standards, due to unconsolidated dairy sector, use of antibiotics, and non-compliance to the EU norms.

Rural women in Pelagonija – Survey Results, Facts and Figures

INOS from Prilep conducted a study using novel data from the Survey on rural woman in Pelagonija. Based on the survey data, the educational seminars were tailored suiting the needs of the Pelagonija's women. Hence, this study brings forward several key messages and policy recommendations for policy makers in North Macedonia.

The research was conducted with a structured questionnaire consisting of 3 parts: the first part are questions related to the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, the second part of the questionnaire refers to the knowledge that respondents have about business and marketing, legal framework for organic production, as well as financing opportunities. The last part refers to characteristics of the agricultural and farming practices and activities of the respondents.

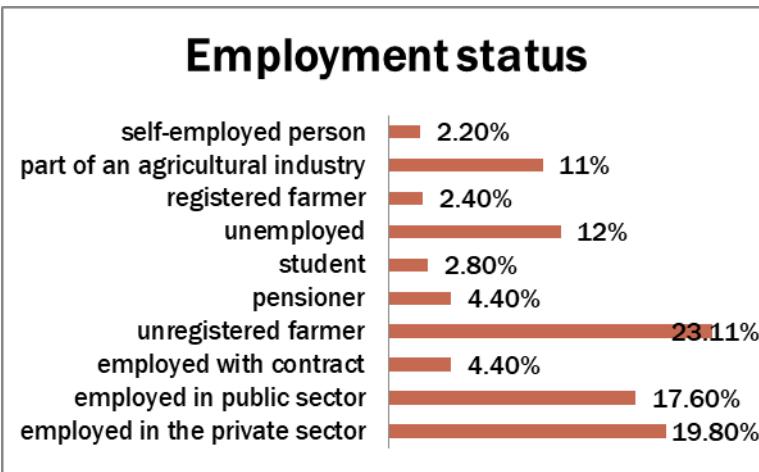
The questionnaire was distributed online using the Google Forms platform. In addition, a team of researchers from the Center for Innovation and Development Inos Prilep and students from the local University "St. Kliment Ohridski" Bitola conducted terrain research by visiting the rural areas of the Pelagonija region and surveying the women who live there. The research was conducted on 327 women of different ages from rural areas of Pelagonija region as follows.

Table 1: Age of respondents (rural women in Pelagonija)

Age	Percent
18-29	17%
30-40	27%
41-50	32%
51-64	20%
65 and more	4%

Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Figure 1 Employment status of rural women in Pelagonija



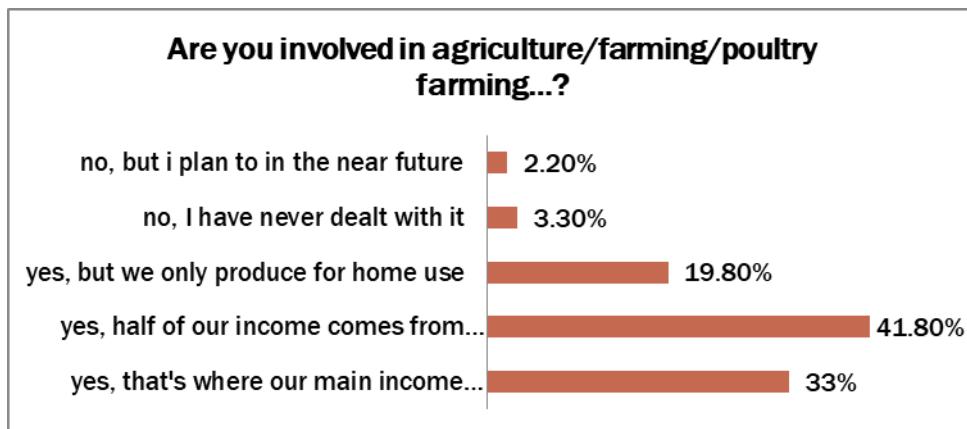
Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Most of the respondent women (23,5%) are registered farmers or are part of the agricultural industry (11%). Around 5,5 % of the respondents are engaged in agriculture but are not officially registered as such. The others respondents are employed in public (17,6%) or private sector (19,8%).

Agriculture facts

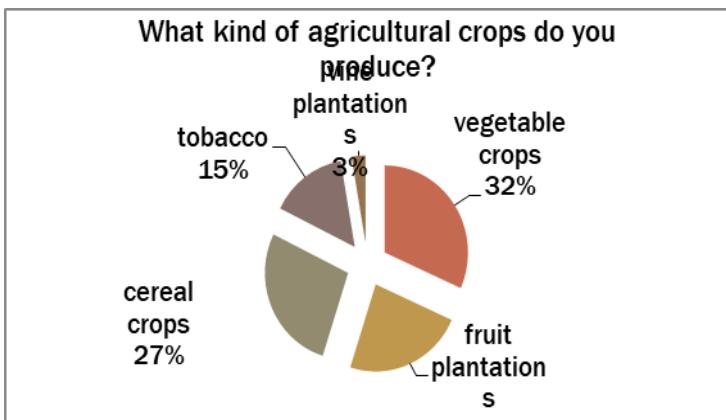
The agriculture and farming are the main work activity of the people from rural areas of Pelagonija region. According to the results 94.5% of women are engaged in agriculture, farming or poultry farming. Even for 33% of them their main income is from this work. Around 41.8% of respondent women derive half of their income from agriculture/farming. About 20% produce agricultural and farming products only for domestic use.

Figure 2: Agriculture/farming/poultry farming activities



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Figure 3 Types of agricultural crops produced in Pelagonija region



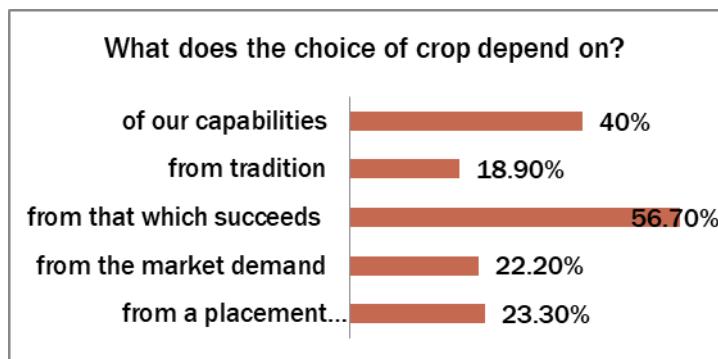
Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Pelagonija region is characterized by fertile soil suitable for growing different crops.

Most of the respondents grow agricultural crops (51.50%). Another crop that is the most common and characteristic of the Pelagons region is cereal with 44.40%. Fruit plantations account for 37.8%, while tobacco accounts for 24.40%.

When making the decision to choose a crop, most of the respondents start from plant that is successful on the soil, 56.7%, as well as from their work capacities, such as mechanization and land at their disposal, as well as human labor. The choice of plantation also depends on what is demanded in the market (22.20%) and what they have previously agreed with the buyer to whom they sell the products (23.30%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: factors on which the selection of the plantation depends



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

The experience of women farmers has shown that the main problem during production is the placement of their products. Almost every year farmers have a problem with the placement of their products. They face low purchasing prices, insufficient export support, and demonstration of power by the rare buyers. Farmers market their products in different places. Thus, 33% of the interviewed women answered that they give the products to a reseller for a further resale. Around 31.8% sell them on the local market, while 28.4% have an agreement with a buyer, but do not know further where he markets the products.

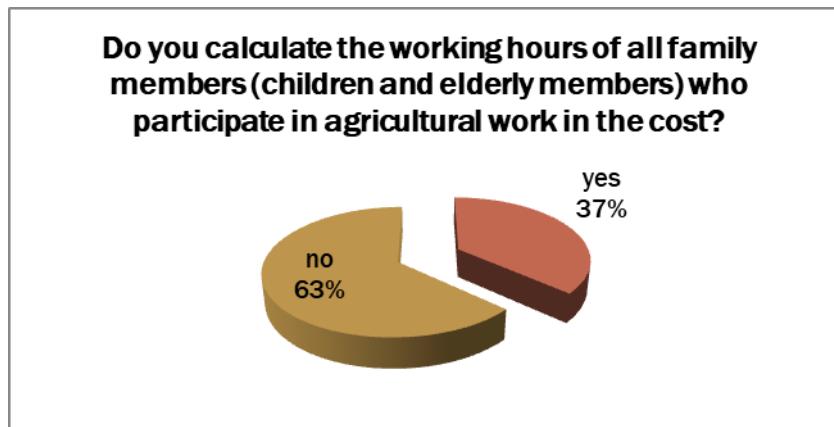
Figure 5: Market of the agriculture products



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

In the subsistence agriculture practised in North Macedonia all members of the family are involved in production and farming. Children from a very young age, as well as elderly people help with agricultural work. However, it should be emphasized that their work is not calculated as a cost and is considered as help. High percentage of 63% of the women answered that they do not calculate it as an income or family cost.

Figure 6: Calculation of the working hours of all family members who participate in agricultural work in the total cost



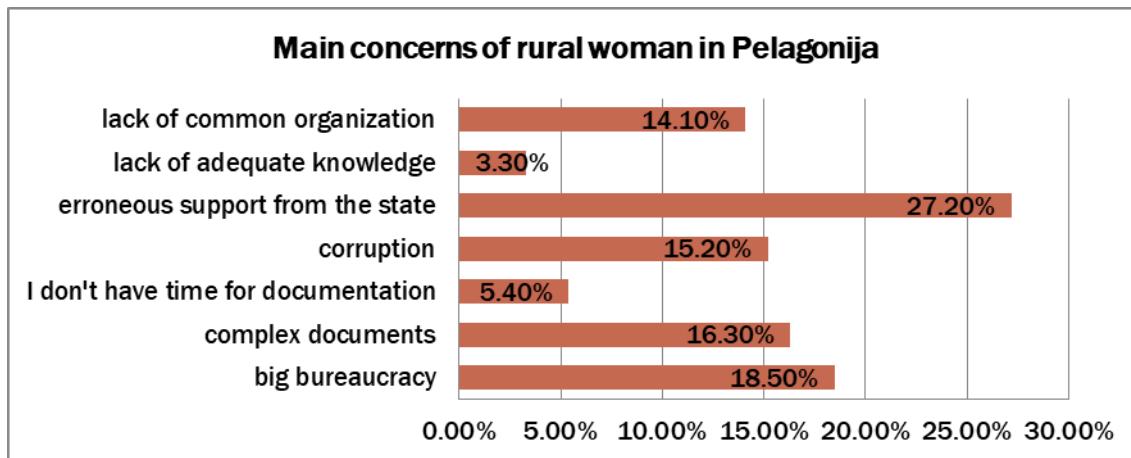
Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Working in agriculture and crop production can be a profitable business for many, but only if they manage to sell the products to the final customers. Around 64.4% of the women thought about starting their own business for selling agricultural products, but the main obstacle to the realization of such idea is the limited financial resources, which are not enough for starting the business. There are also those, about 11%, who do not have enough knowledge about running and starting a business.

Main concerns and training interests

Most rural women emphasized the system problems as the main concerns that affect their life and production. Almost half of the women identified the complicated documentation process (21.3%), great bureaucracy (19.7%) and no time for the procedures (6.6%). The rest think that the high level of corruption (14.8%) and inappropriate support from the government (23.0%) also contribute to the problems. Interestingly, rural women believe that not having the appropriate knowledge is not a main issue. Having in mind that mainly rural women have high school degree, probably they have confidence that they can easily be trained and educated, as well as possibly some are not aware of its importance.

Figure 7: Main concerns of rural women in Pelagonija



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

When asked what are their main training interests, most rural women emphasized almost equal need for additional trainings in the sphere of application documentation, business skills, marketing, legal framework.

Figure 8: Types of trainings and knowledge that women are interested in



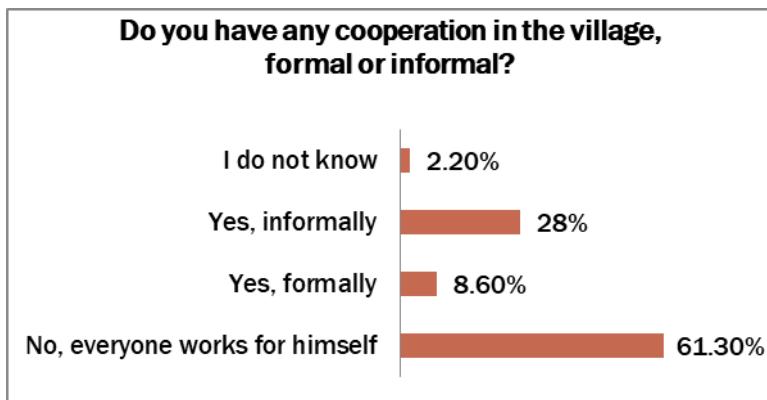
Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

It seems that rural women are becoming aware of the need for continuous education in contemporary business World, agriculture including.

Cooperation

Additional worrying fact is that Pelagonija's women are not having any formal cooperation. Only 6.5% of them answered that participate in some formal cooperation, while around 30 % cooperate in some informal way (Figure 9). Rest, that is approximately 60 % are working separately. This situation reinforces the oligopsonic power of the buyers on the markets.

Figure 9: Cooperation of rural women in Pelagonija



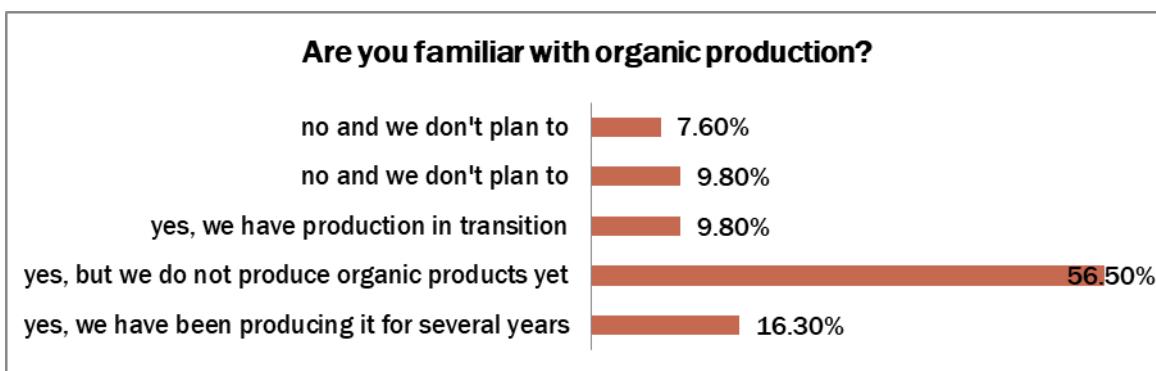
Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Additionally, support and cooperation from government and local institutions, which is very important for agricultural and business development, is lacking. Around 91% of women think that the municipality should help them in some way, 76% of women are not satisfied with the support they receive from the municipality they belong to, and 86% are not satisfied with the support they receive from the state.

Organic production

More than half of the women are familiar with organic production, but have not yet started to apply it in their production. On the other hand, the 16.3% of respondents who already practice this method of production to some extent, as well as the 9.8% who have production in transition, are encouraging numbers, even though they are few. It should also be mentioned that the answers received which refer to the Law on Organic Production, shows that 70% of these respondents declare that they are not familiar with the legal framework for organic production.

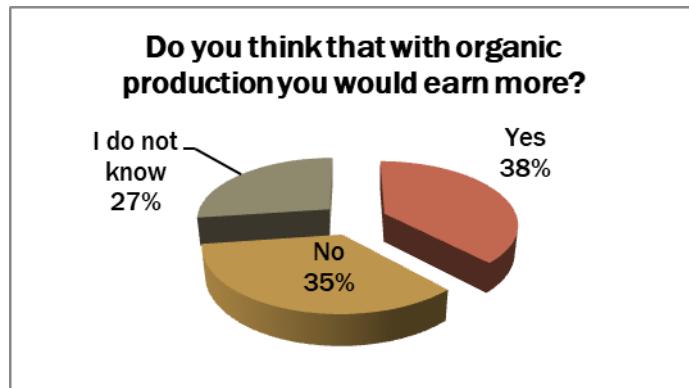
Figure 10: Familiar with organic production



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Figure 11: Perception for the income from organic production

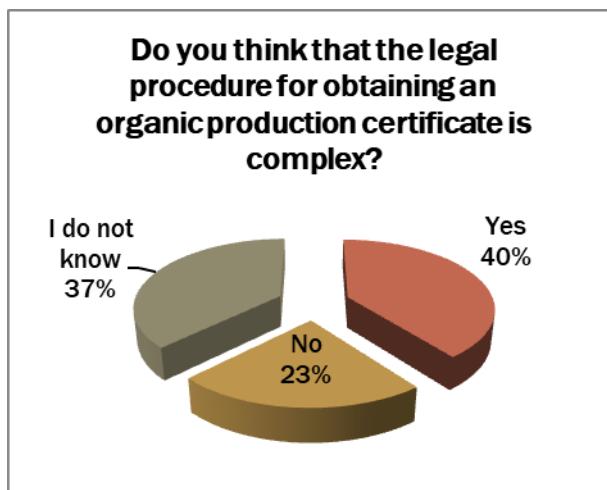
When it comes to organic production and the income from it, the views of the women are divided. So, 38% of them believe that with organic production they would earn more, almost the same percentage of respondents, that is, 35% believe that organic production is not profitable.



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Before starting with organic agricultural production, it is necessary for producers to meet certain prerequisites that are necessary for obtaining an organic production certificate. The legislator in the country has prescribed how the procedure goes. Regarding the procedure, 40% of women consider that the procedure for obtaining an organic production certificate is complex. On the other hand, 23% consider that the procedure is not complex.

Figure 12: Complexity of the legal procedure for obtaining an organic production certificate



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Corruption is still the main problem that citizens face. Even in this case, 58% of women believe that there is selectivity in law applications and there is corruption among all the bodies that do the Certification. Only 5% of them believe that there is not such issue. The percentages are the same when it comes to the bodies that award the subsidies, that is, 60% of respondents believe that there is selectivity and corruption in the awarding of subsidies to farmers.

Figure 14: Corruption among all the bodies that publish the list or do the Certification

Do you think that there is corruption or selectivity among all the bodies that publish the lists or do the Certification?

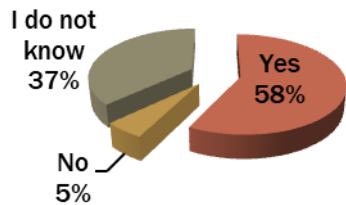
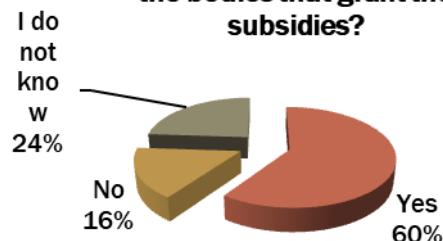


Figure 13: Corruption among all the bodies that grant the subsidies

Do you think that there is corruption or selectivity among all the bodies that grant the subsidies?



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

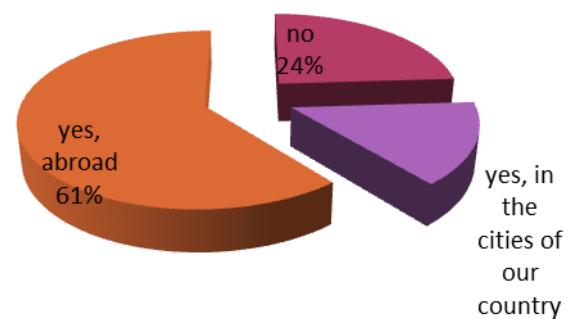
Immigration

Similar to all regions in North Macedonia, rural Pelagonija has problem in keeping the young population, especially in the rural areas. Unsatisfactory age structure (65+ years old) is evident in Pelagonija. The share of the oldest group in the population increased in the last decade significantly (EU Rural Development Programme, 2022). Women in Pelagonija are especially concerned about immigration, naming lack of jobs, lack of financial support and perspective, as well as bad conditions and non-existent rural areas as main reasons for its increase. The high unemployment rate of young people (15-24) is an additional problem that leads to the out migration of the young labour force from rural areas to urban centres and abroad.

Figure 15 Migration of close family members

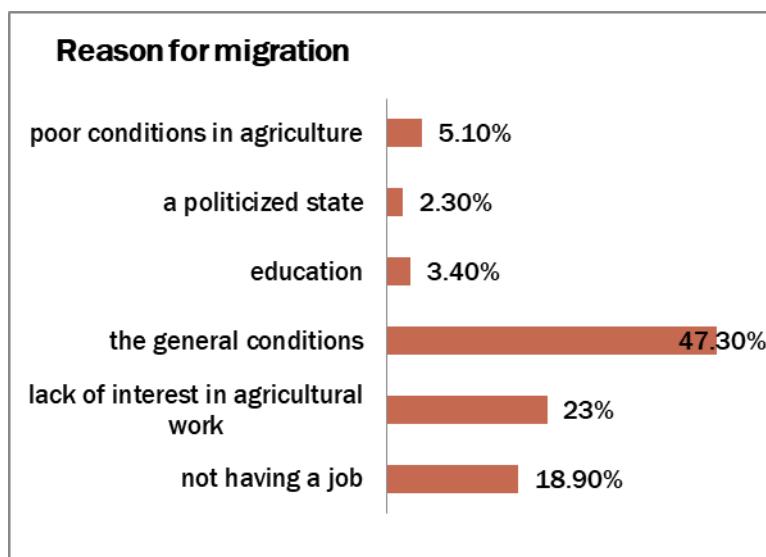
The rural areas of Pelagonia region are experiencing high levels of migration, both in the cities of the country and abroad. The results of this research confirmed this trend. Around 76% of women answered that they have members of their close family who have immigrated, from whom 61% have immigrated abroad, and only 15% have immigrated to the cities of our country

Do you have close family members who have moved away?



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

Figure 16: Reason for migration



According to the respondent women, one of the main reasons for migration are the general conditions in which people live (47.3% of the women). Another reason is that the inhabitants of the rural areas in the Pelagonija region, especially the young people, are not interested in doing agricultural work, which is tedious and physically demanding. Bad conditions in agricultural sector are also identified as main reason for migration of 5.10% of women.

Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

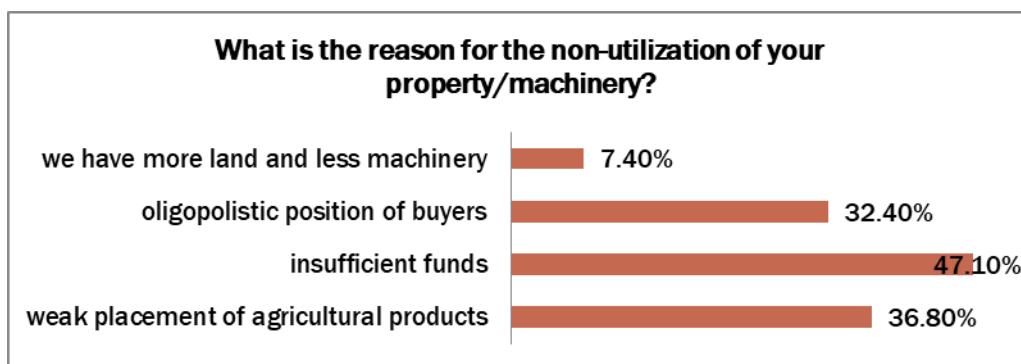
Infrastructure, parcels and irrigational systems

Only 144,9 thousand ha of agricultural land can be irrigated, although the irrigation systems are installed for around 164 thousand ha (51.1% of agricultural land). As reported by the Public enterprise for Water Economy only 7.2% of agricultural land is actually annually irrigated due to deteriorated irrigation systems (EU INSTRUMENT FOR PRE-ACCESSION (IPA) RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2021-2027).

The average parcel size is very small (high frequency of parcels below 0,2ha) and with significant presence of borders in between or dispersed small plots of unorganised agricultural space. Agriculture roads are absent or unorganised in between small parcels. Agricultural holdings are organising their production on many parcels, estimated to 5 land parcels per holding.

The Pelagonija region is characterized by large areas that remain uncultivated. As many as 75% of the women answered that they have uncultivated land. As the main reasons for unused land and machinery, they state: insufficient finances (47.10%), poor placement of products (36.80%) and the oligopolistic position of buyers (32.40%).

Figure 17: Reasons for non-utilization of the property/machinery



Source: Authors' own calculations based on Survey of women in Pelagonija (2022)

The small size of the farms, agricultural and livestock breeding ones, the inadequate production process in both, inadequate (autochthonous) seeds and breeds and plants and animal treatments still poses risks to low productivity of the agricultural sector and low quality of the products. In addition, the physical capital, such as machinery are rather obsolete, some aged from the previous state, while investments (mainly in tractors) are not big enough to modernise the agriculture. Hence, it is usually high labour intensive, with traditional methods and intense use of pesticides and herbicides. The low productivity is determined to a large extent by low level of mechanisation, low quality seeds and breeds and poor land and livestock management practices affected also by high land and property fragmentation. The distribution and trade of the agro chemicals is unregulated and uncontrolled leaving the matter on the big agricultural pharmacy importers and shops.

Furthermore, low level of producers' cooperation in Pelagonija also hinders the development of agricultural production. Horizontal integration is almost absent, and also the vertical organisation is weak especially in the food processing industry. Although there are emerging investments in the modernisation of the processing capacities, the logistic networks and marketing channels are inefficient and compound by retailers. Improvement of the farm management practises is precluding for benefiting the investments and modernisation of the farms.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

In general, the survey of women and the literature review suggest several main conclusions, some relating to the general conditions in Pelagonija, some related to the situation of women in particular.

The agricultural sector in Pelagonija **needs modernisation and additional restructuring** to sustain the increased requirements of quality products from the farms but also from the processing industry. Low productivity both in agricultural production, farms and processing related industries is also a result of **insufficient physical capital, low investments, lack of appropriate education, lack of cooperation, low quality in human capital and knowledge in organic production and, furthermore, poor management and marketing practices, in general**. Strengthening and modernisation of processing industry is very important due to the reason that it needs to compete to the big scale foreign processing units and it needs to create condition for using the raw agricultural products in order to increase value of the agricultural exports.

It is worth noting that the agricultural production in the individual small and scattered agriculture holdings **does not meet the EU requirements** always. In the case of agricultural production and livestock breeding, the control of the use of harmful pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics and other chemicals are the main problem, as well as the questionable seeding material, breeds, and way of farming in general. **Lack of storage capacities and freezing facilities** affects the potential of the agricultural and livestock production capacities. Aiming to increase competitiveness of the production, there is a need to improve the farm structure as this is of vital importance aiming to **Increase the productivity** which, in fact, can only be a result of a number of actions not only from the owners, but also from the state support. Moreover, the investments into physical capital as well as improvement of farm management and marketing practices through investments into human capital will result into increased competitiveness.

The **organic farming sector** is still at its initial development stage in North Macedonia and the number of farms certified as organic, or in transition, is relatively small,

especially in Pelagonia. According to some unofficial data only one in 1000 farms have or are in transition to produce organically. Although the farmers show an increasing interest in organic production, the number of certified organic farms, processors and traders is increasing very slowly as there is belief among producers that it is inefficient and financially not viable. The organic production is mainly exported, through specific agreements with foreign exporters, as the domestic market is still small and undeveloped. The **export demand for some organic products**, such as herbs, spices, fruits, vegetables and honey is especially increasing of late, while the domestic supply chains of organic products is almost undeveloped and small. Interestingly, mostly the market of organic products functions on the “word of mouth” principle, with limited linkages between the organic farmers, processors and customers. The domestic customers are largely not aware of the advantages of organic production to the environment and human health, but also the average household income is rather low, pushing the families to buy commercial and nonorganic products. Insufficient education and organisation of organic farmers is yet another barrier to organic plant production development in Pelagonija, too.

Vertical cooperation and food processors' industry, as well as slow implementation of EU standards are main reasons that hinder the food processing sector from becoming competitive on the mass product markets. Some processing establishments especially, the smaller ones in Pelagonija do not have the financial resources required to meet the strict hygiene and food safety standards of the EU, hence, the export is more difficult and problematic. The level of technological quality and innovations, which is important ingredient of competition in European Union, is low. Processing enterprises have also problems with obsolete equipment in the processes of quality control, packaging and labelling and marketing in general.

People, women especially, living in rural Pelagonija are less satisfied with the quality of life, which have been the main reason for the migration of young people, leaving behind a more vulnerable and poorer population in the villages. As evidence showed, rural women still have relatively **low educational status**, which puts them in a vulnerable position in the family in society setting. The introduction of the compulsory secondary schooling improve this situation, especially for the younger generation of rural women, but still in some areas there is a problem of early marriages and drop outs from school. Rural women in Pelagonija are prone to unemployment because of the limited offer of jobs in the rural regions and the tradition **patriarchal social milieu** that predestines the role of housewife and mother, meaning exploitation as unpaid family agricultural worker or low paid seasonal worker again in agriculture. Having limited social life and access to services and being faced with the patriarchal setting, rural women of Pelagonija have incentive to leave villages, sometimes even under the old **family-arranged marriage agreement**.

Therefore there is a need for **rural development policies** to increase investment in infrastructure to make the villages once again attractive places for young people and entrepreneurs to live and work. Given the problems of women in Pelagonija, and their potential for contribution to regional growth, urgent attention is needed to develop and execute supportive and development policies targeting women especially.

Firstly, on a central level, the state institutions and government need to simplify the procedures, and fight against corruption. The main demotivating factor for women is bureaucracy and distrust, hindering the efforts even before they start. Establishing industrial zones for small manufacturing and service industries and developing rural

cooperatives can be a start to build rural social capital and trust. The positive climate must be built in order for the trust to be restored.

Then, gathering data and assessing the real situation in the agriculture is necessary and urgent. Women believe that their voice has not been heard systematically, except in rare gathering before the elections.

The harmonisation of national legislation with the European Union standards in the area of organic production, environmental protection and plants and animal welfare, also in the processing food, milk and meat sectors require significant investments. It is not only the Laws, but also the implementation of the Laws and practices.

Additional efforts to support women, such as educational trainings are needed. Women in Pelagonija, need free of charge trainings or courses in practical issues related to business skills and organic production. In addition, they need training related to the use of the structural funds aimed at supporting the agriculture.

Formalisation of the cooperation throughout the Pelagonija region is required, in order to leverage the position of the producers in respect to buyers. Women can even better if they see interest in it.

In addition, substantial analyses of cost benefit of subventions for each agricultural product are required. Justification and proper valuation of subventions shall combat dubious agricultural activities and possible corruption.

Finally, independent monitoring on an on-going basis of the production, trade, and exporting of products is necessary for accurate and consistent analyses and evidence-based policy making.

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