Policy Brief – February 2026

THE GENDER DIMENSION OF FARM DIGITALISATION

Abstract

Despite longstanding EU commitments to gender equality, structural disparities continue to restrict women's participation and leadership in agriculture and rural development. Digitalisation is increasingly promoted as a catalyst for addressing these inequalities. However, there is a limited holistic understanding of the conditions under which digital innovations can foster inclusive and sustainable outcomes. A key barrier is the absence of integrative frameworks that can systematically categorise the multifaceted evidence emerging from digital transitions. This limitation hampers both the comparability of findings and their practical relevance for policymaking. CODECS evaluates how digitalisation intersects with gender inequality in EU agriculture and identifies policy options and recommendations to overcome digital divide in rural areas, also in relation to gender disparities.

Establishing the context

The EU is prioritising its twin transition agenda, which merges the green transition, aiming for a climate-neutral and environmentally sustainable economy by 2050, with the digital transition, intended to promote the adoption and integration of digital technologies across all sectors [1]. Digitalisation is recognised as a critical enabler of the green transition, supporting more efficient resource management and modernisation of infrastructure [2]. This strategic vision is articulated in key policy frameworks such as the European Green Deal and the European Commission's initiative "A Europe Fit for the Digital Age" [3].

Across multiple levels of EU governance, various policy instruments actively promote the integration of digital technologies in agriculture and rural areas. Flagship strategies, including the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Common Agricultural Policy (2023-2027), explicitly prioritise digital tools to enhance sustainability, competitiveness, and rural well-being. This commitment is reinforced by the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, which introduces the "Rural Digital Futures" flagship initiative and outlines ongoing actions to support agricultural digitalisation [4]. Dedicated funding programmes, such as Horizon Europe and the Digital Europe Programme, further advance this agenda by supporting research and innovation in the digitalisation of agriculture, forestry, and rural areas. Notable projects include QUANTIFARM, DESIRA, and CODECS. Additionally, the European Innovation Council's accelerator challenge targets innovative technologies for sustainable agriculture. Together, these efforts represent a coordinated push to modernise and strengthen the resilience of the agricultural sector through digital innovation.

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Digital agriculture, often expressed through concepts such as smart farming and Agriculture 4.0, has emerged as a transformative force capable of reshaping agri-food systems and generating broad socio-economic benefits [5]. Technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, and the Internet of Things (IoT), enable farmers to make data-driven decisions by providing real-time insights on soil conditions, pest detection, crop health, and weather patterns. Digital tools also help close information gaps, improve access to market intelligence, expand fintech-driven microfinance solutions, and strengthen agricultural human capital [6]. At the farm level, digital technologies enhance resource efficiency, reduce losses, and improve climate resilience, contributing to higher productivity. Evidence indicates that precision agriculture using Global Positioning System (GPS), drones, and IoT devices can increase yields by 20-30% while reducing input waste by 40–60% [7]. On a broader scale, agricultural digitalisation in the EU is expected to generate substantial environmental and economic gains, including reduced greenhouse gas emissions and increased GDP across member states.

Despite these opportunities, the digitalisation of agriculture raises substantial concerns. Current efforts are driven mainly by narrow economic and efficiency objectives, heavily shaped by industrial interests, and may intensify under expanding free-trade conditions [8]. Moreover, most of the existing research remains techno-centric, paying insufficient attention to the socio-technical dynamics that determine who benefits from digital innovation and who is excluded [5]. If efficiency continues to dominate the policy narrative, digital farming may move toward extensive automation, potentially reducing employment while leaving market forces largely unregulated [9]. Such a trajectory risks overlooking critical social dimensions, exacerbating inequalities, including those affecting vulnerable groups such as women, and generating tensions within communities or across regions. It may also consolidate agricultural data in the hands of large corporations, amplifying their power and influence [8]. For these reasons, a shift toward a more inclusive and sustainability-oriented vision is needed, supported by robust supranational commitments to social equity.

A key step in achieving an equitable and sustainable digital transition in agriculture is addressing the sector's longstanding gender inequalities. Gender equality has been a foundational EU principle since the 1957 Treaty of Rome. It has been progressively strengthened, including through the 1996 Communication on Gender, which introduced gender mainstreaming by integrating gender perspectives into all policies from the outset [10]. The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 further advances this commitment through a dual approach that combines gender mainstreaming with targeted actions and places greater emphasis on intersectionality.

The EU recognises discrimination as politically unacceptable, economically inefficient, and legally prohibited [11]. Although gender equality concerns both women and men, global evidence shows that women consistently lag behind in the digital transformation. UN Women, for example, reports that 327 million fewer women than men worldwide own a smartphone or have access to mobile internet [12]. These persistent disparities highlight the need to understand and respond to the specific challenges women face. Bridging the gender digital divide in agriculture, therefore, requires deliberate and informed action. Ensuring that women can fully participate in and benefit from the digital transition is not only a matter of rights and fairness but also a prerequisite for achieving inclusive and sustainable agricultural development.

This document aims to highlight the key barriers and intersectional challenges contributing to gender disparities in EU agriculture and to provide suggestions for ensuring that the benefits of digital farming are realised inclusively. It draws on secondary sources and analytical reasoning.

Current situation and context

State of farm digitalisation in the EU

The current state of farm digitalisation in the EU presents a complex picture of varied adoption and evolving challenges. While basic digital tools and general information technology (IT) software are widely integrated, with nearly all farms using at least one and a significant majority using three or more, the uptake of specialised crop- and livestock-specific digital technologies is notably slower and more heterogeneous. This specialised adoption ranges from a low of 3% to 23%, with 79% of farms using at least one crop-specific technology and 83% employing at least one livestock-specific tool, but far fewer using three or more in either category (29% and 17% respectively) [13].

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The period between 2008 and 2020 saw substantial growth in digital technology adoption, but this momentum has since decelerated, primarily due to increased economic uncertainty. Connectivity remains a persistent hurdle for a segment of EU farms; despite 85% reporting adequate internet access, a considerable 15% still contend with insufficient or poor internet connectivity. The primary motivators driving the adoption of digital technologies in EU agriculture are multifaceted, encompassing the pursuit of enhanced efficiency, cost reduction, adherence to regulatory mandates, and an overarching desire to improve farmers' quality of life [13].

Women in EU agriculture

Insert text, paragraphs, etc Women in EU agriculture play a pivotal and multidimensional role, underpinning the sector's economic vitality, the resilience of rural communities, and progress toward environmentally sustainable farming systems.

Economic contribution

Women constitute a substantial share of the rural workforce, with studies showing that women represent around 45% of the economically active population in rural areas, and roughly 40% of these women work on family farms. Moreover, about 30% of farms across the EU-28 are managed by women [14]. Their central involvement in agriculture is widely recognised for its contribution to rural development, improved food security, and the reduction of rural poverty [15]. These figures reflect not only women's importance in day-to-day operations but also their strategic role in farm management and decision-making.

Women's contributions extend significantly beyond direct fieldwork. They act as farmers, managers, business owners, and increasingly as innovators who bring new ideas to farm practices and community development. Their paid and unpaid labour is essential for maintaining agricultural productivity and household food security, especially on small and family-run farms. Women frequently support value-adding activities, help sustain family enterprises through periods of market volatility, and drive the long-term resilience of rural livelihoods [14].

In addition to their central involvement in farming, women are key drivers of economic diversification in rural regions. Activities such as rural tourism and agritourism have created important opportunities for women to enter the workforce, achieve economic independence, and gain professional recognition. Agritourism, encouraged by EU policies as a strategy for agricultural diversification, opens new markets and creates employment opportunities for women and young people [16]. Women are also prominent in artisanal and sustainable food production, where female food entrepreneurs contribute to developing innovative products, strengthening local value chains, and promoting regional economic growth.

Women's entrepreneurship is further emerging as a catalyst for sustainable development and a critical enabler of the green transition in agriculture [17]. Empowering women in farm management and rural enterprise fosters more resilient farming systems and accelerates adoption of eco-efficient practices. Research indicates that women-headed farms often perform strongly in terms of green innovation and resource efficiency [18], positioning them as key actors in achieving the EU's sustainability objectives and supporting climate-responsible agricultural transitions.

Furthermore, women play an increasingly influential role in reshaping local food systems through their engagement in cooperatives, farmers' markets, and short food-supply chains. Evidence shows that women participate more actively than men in direct sales and short supply networks, helping retain economic value within local communities and reducing dependence on intermediaries [19]. Their involvement strengthens market access for small producers, enhances producer-consumer relationships, and stimulates local economic development. Cooperative models often appeal to women due to their principles of solidarity, democratic governance, and social responsibility, and women's cooperatives have been shown to increase household incomes, elevate social status, and contribute more broadly to community development [20]. Collectively, these roles underscore the vital contributions women make to building inclusive, sustainable, and resilient rural economies across the EU.

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Social and community contribution

In rural areas of the EU, women are essential to social cohesion and family stability, contributing far beyond their economic roles. They carry a significant share of unpaid farm and household work, including domestic tasks, childcare, and elder care, which often leaves them with heavier workloads and less free time than men. Studies from countries such as Bulgaria and Slovenia highlight these dual responsibilities, noting the crucial yet frequently unrecognised labour women provide for the well-being of farm families and the wider rural community [21].

Women also play a key part in preserving local heritage, transmitting traditional farming knowledge, and sustaining cultural practices that define rural identity. Their active involvement in community groups further strengthens social bonds [22]. Although women remain under-represented in formal agricultural leadership, they commonly exert strong informal influence, driving community-led initiatives and fostering social innovation. Across Europe, women-led initiatives address local challenges while promoting gender equality by challenging marginalising practices and introducing new approaches to rural development [23]. Through these efforts, women significantly enhance the resilience and vitality of rural areas throughout the EU.

Environmental stewardship

Evidence increasingly underscores the critical role women farmers play in advancing environmental sustainability within the agricultural sector. Their commitment is demonstrated through a significant and active engagement in green farming practices, notably through the adoption of agri-environment-climate schemes and other sustainable methods. Women on farms are not merely participants but are proactive stewards, often receiving and utilising support to implement these practices. This engagement directly contributes to enhanced eco-efficiency and long-term environmental stewardship [18]. Their focused efforts are vital for the conservation of key natural resources, including soils, forests, and water, thereby strengthening the overall resilience of rural ecosystems.

Despite their vital contributions, women continue to face significant barriers in accessing land, finance, education, technology, and meaningful decision-making power, leaving them at a disadvantage compared to men in nearly all areas of agriculture and rural life.

Intersections and challenges

The uneven landscape of digital adoption and its associated challenges interact profoundly with existing gender disparities in EU agriculture, contributing to what is often termed a "triple divide," encompassing digital, gender, and rural inequalities. This means women in rural areas face compounding disadvantages in accessing and benefiting from digital advancements.

Digital divide in rural areas

A stark disparity in high-speed internet access exists between urban and rural areas. This infrastructure deficit critically undermines the adoption of digital farming technologies, as foundational tools from online advisory services and real-time market platforms to IoT sensors for precision agriculture require reliable, high-capacity connectivity that many remote farms and businesses simply lack [24].

Concurrently, digital literacy across the EU varies sharply by age, education, and gender, with rural populations often facing compounded disadvantages. Although rural women generally have access to smartphones, they frequently lack the specific skills to leverage these technologies for economic advancement due to factors like lower educational attainment, limited time, poor access to finance, and restrictive social norms [25]. This exclusion is systemic, as evidenced by the notable underrepresentation of women in digital research and innovation, limiting their role in shaping the technological tools meant to serve their communities.

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Gender disparities in EU agriculture

A core issue is the disparity in asset ownership, particularly land, which directly drives financial exclusion. Women's limited control over property restricts their access to credit and loans, a barrier compounded by financial institutions' risk-assessment models that penalise women for their lack of collateral [26]. Furthermore, official increases in the number of female farm holders often mask a reality of statistical inclusion, where women are registered as owners to secure subsidies without wielding actual decision-making authority, thereby reinforcing traditional power hierarchies [27].

These financial and ownership barriers are inextricably linked to severe market access constraints. Women are disproportionately concentrated in small-scale and subsistence farming, a structural position resulting from patrilineal inheritance norms and limited resource access. Managing smaller holdings restricts their ability to produce marketable surpluses and enter lucrative value chains [28]. Their market participation is further hampered by a significant time poverty due to a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, underrepresentation in professional cooperatives, and gender-based prejudices from buyers that lead to lower prices for their products.

Underpinning these economic barriers are pervasive socio-cultural norms that define farming as a male domain. These norms influence land inheritance patterns, daily task allocation, and the recognition of expertise, confining women to less profitable roles and less recognised labour. This cultural framework leads to the systematic invisibility of women's contributions, as they are often classified as unpaid family workers rather than farm managers, denying them social protections and economic independence [29]. Finally, these disparities are perpetuated by limited access to information, as extension services and training are frequently inaccessible or ill-adapted to women's schedules and responsibilities, creating a critical knowledge gap [30]. Collectively, these interconnected disparities in finance, markets, time, culture, and knowledge sustain a system where women's agricultural labour is extensive, but their economic empowerment, autonomy, and recognition remain fundamentally constrained.

The intersection of the digital, gender, and rural divides creates a compounding cycle of disadvantage for women in EU agriculture. For instance, in the case of skills and confidence gap, lower digital literacy, particularly among older women, reduces both the know-how and the confidence needed to adopt new technologies or digital public services. This gap fuels financial and informational exclusion, as women farmers are statistically less likely to access the internet than rural men, causing them to miss out on essential e-extension services, online credit applications, and cooperative networks. These barriers are further reinforced by design and social biases, where agricultural technologies are frequently developed without considering women's specific needs or literacy levels. A critical driver of this oversight is the lack of gender-disaggregated data [31], which renders women's challenges and contributions invisible to policymakers and developers, stifling targeted interventions. This results in digital solutions that are less relevant to women, creating a feedback loop where low adoption yields even less data from their operations. The cycle culminates in data disempowerment, excluding women from the benefits of the data-driven agricultural economy and perpetually compounding inequality.

Policy options and recommendations

1. **Bridging the digital infrastructure and access gap**

- *Invest in equitable digital infrastructure*: Expansion of affordable and reliable internet access, including broadband, in rural and underserved areas should be prioritised. This is crucial as a lack of access exacerbates existing divides.
- *Support for small-scale adoption*: Implement targeted programs and incentives to help small farms, since they are mostly female-owned, and rural enterprises adopt digital technologies, recognising that they may face financial constraints and a lack of knowledge.

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2. **Enhancing digital literacy, skills, and education**

- *Develop gender-inclusive digital literacy programs*: Design and implement specific, targeted digital literacy programs and online tutorials for women and diverse groups in rural areas, addressing their limited knowledge and particular challenges. This should also involve re-training and re-skilling initiatives.
- *Integrate digital skills in education from an early age*: Foster girls' and women's acquisition of digital skills and competencies by challenging gender stereotypes in learning materials, particularly in mathematics and science, to prepare them for careers in digital economies.
- *Provide specialised digital training and support*: Offer ongoing training, resources, and incentives for all users, especially rural populations and women, to adopt new technologies and benefit from digitalisation, strengthen the role of extension services, technology providers, universities, and research centres in facilitating technology diffusion and training.

3. **Promoting gender-inclusive digital ecosystems and innovation**

- *Address gender bias in AI and digital solutions*: Ensure that criteria, indicators, and algorithms used in developing AI and other digital solutions adequately consider the needs of, and do not discriminate against, diverse women, men, girls, and boys. Legislation should specifically address gender bias in AI for equal treatment across various sectors.
- *Foster women's participation in leadership and innovation*: Create action plans to improve gender equality in leadership roles within the digital sector and promote women's representation in research and innovation at the digital frontier.
- *Challenge social norms and stereotypes*: Implement policy actions that not only foster women's and girls' inclusion in the digital economy but also actively address stereotypes and social norms that lead to discrimination.

4. **Ensuring robust data governance and ownership**

- *Develop clear data sharing policies*: Establish clear policies, regulatory frameworks, and business practices that address privacy, security, and data ownership concerns to build trust and facilitate data digitalisation.
- *Promote data interoperability and prevent monopolies*: Create cohesive frameworks for seamless data sharing and interoperability across diverse applications and stakeholders, while actively working to prevent data concentration and monopolies by large entities. Ensure data ownership and benefits are directed according to policy goals.

5. **Integrating gender into digital policy-making and governance**

- *Gender mainstreaming in digital policies*: Institutionalise gender-responsive governance by ensuring all policies, programs, activities, priorities, and budgets in the digital sector explicitly consider the different needs and concerns of women and men and actively work to reduce inequalities.
- *Conduct gender impact assessments*: Mandate gender impact assessments for all draft laws and policies related to digitalisation to assess how well they address gender inequalities and ensure gender responsiveness.
- *Collect disaggregated data*: Improve the availability and accessibility of precise sex-disaggregated data, further broken down by age, ethnicity, rural/urban location, and disability. This evidence-based approach is critical for informed policy development and monitoring.

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