

The Invisible Backbone: Investigating The Role of Rural Women in Western Balkans Through a Mixed-Methods Approach

Abstract

Examining the multifaceted roles of rural women in the Western Balkans, this research explores their contributions to agriculture, entrepreneurship, and social cohesion while addressing challenges such as limited resources, gender inequalities, and infrastructural gaps. Employing a mixed-methods approach—combining qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups) with quantitative analysis (a survey of 2,214 rural women across six Western Balkan countries/territories)—the study applies the Alkire Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index to analyze cross-country data. Key areas of focus include women's decision-making in production, access to land and credit, and unpaid labor. The findings provide evidence-based policy recommendations to enhance rural women’s leadership and economic opportunities, supporting governments and organizations in fostering inclusive rural development.

Keywords: agriculture, empowerment, mixed-methods, rural women, Western Balkans

Why visual?

Presenting this research through a visual format enhances clarity and impact, allowing complex data and cross-country comparisons to be easily understood. Visual tools like charts, graphs, and infographics effectively highlight the complex research design and some of the key findings from the different methodological approaches, in particularly the disparities in empowerment indicators across the Western Balkans. Additionally, visual storytelling helps to

convey the multifaceted roles and challenges faced by rural women, making the data more engaging for diverse audiences—policymakers, practitioners, and academics—thus supporting informed decision-making and advocacy efforts.

Problem statement: Rural women in the Western Balkans play a crucial role in agriculture and rural economies, yet they face persistent barriers to empowerment. Gender inequality, weak property rights, and cultural stereotypes restrict their control over income and assets, while rural migration exacerbates socio-economic disparities. Despite progress toward gender equality, challenges remain, shaped by traditional values, limited social services, and gendered labor dynamics (GEI, 2024). The absence of comprehensive cross-country data further obscures these issues, hindering effective policy responses. This study fills that gap, offering empirical insights into rural women’s roles and challenges to guide gender-inclusive rural development strategies.

Research question(s) and objectives: This study aims to explore the roles of rural women in the Western Balkans, identify the challenges they face in agriculture and rural development, and analyze cross-country variations in empowerment using Alkire Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index as a base for the analyses. Through a mixed-methods approach, it seeks to generate evidence-based insights to inform policies that promote gender equality and socio-economic empowerment. The central research question is: What are the key roles, challenges, and barriers to empowerment faced by rural women in the Western Balkans, and how do these factors vary across countries in relation to agricultural participation, resource access, and decision-making power?

Methods

A mixed-methods approach is employed in this research, integrating desk research, policy analysis, expert interviews, and focus group discussions to evaluate the status of rural women in the Western Balkans. The research is based on studies from Western Europe, adapted to the specific cultural and agricultural conditions of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* (*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo* Declaration of Independence.”), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Republic of Srpska, and Serbia. The methodology includes a detailed policy review

and qualitative research components, such as expert interviews and focus group discussions, which preceded a quantitative survey to shape its design and hypotheses.

The desk research consists of an extensive review of policy documents, reports, academic studies, and national statistics on demographics, education, employment, agriculture, and infrastructure.

Expert interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by rural women. Each country/territory included five to six representatives from relevant sectors, such as policy-makers in agriculture, rural development, women's entrepreneurship, employment, and social issues, as well as local community representatives and rural women in leadership or entrepreneurial roles. A semi-structured interview guide facilitated discussions on policy gaps, farm diversification, off-farm work, and potential for circular, green, social, and environmental entrepreneurship. Participants also recommended strategies for improving rural women's economic and social status.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized to explore rural women's perspectives in more depth. Two FGDs were conducted per country/territory, each including 7–10 participants. One group comprised rural women entrepreneurs engaged in innovative activities, while the other included women from agricultural households without leadership roles. The discussions examined economic challenges, employment opportunities, and community participation.

Data

Drawing on national policy documents, statistical reports, and international datasets, this study ensures a comprehensive analysis of the role of rural women in the Western Balkan. National sources offer insights into demographics, education, and employment statistics, while gaps are supplemented with data from the World Bank, UN Women, FAOStat, Eurostat, and ILOSTAT. Despite variations in data availability, triangulation through desk research, interviews, focus groups, and case studies strengthened reliability. Despite efforts to ensure data reliability, inconsistencies and gaps in national reporting posed challenges to comparative analysis across the Western Balkans.

To provide structural data and comparable results between the countries, the Alkire Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) was applied across all methodological approaches (Alkire, 2013). The first index assesses empowerment of women in five domains (production,

resources, income, leadership and time allocation) - using domain-specific indicators of empowerment that pinpoint the critical areas where further policy interventions and efforts for women's empowerment are needed (evidence-based policy making). A case study of a rural woman entrepreneur offered an in-depth perspective on success factors in rural business ventures. The findings informed evidence-based policy recommendations to enhance women's socio-economic inclusion across the region.

Results

Rural women in the Western Balkans play a crucial role in agriculture and local economies, yet they face persistent barriers to empowerment. Limited access to property, financial resources, education, and institutional support restricts their economic potential. While government initiatives, such as financial aid for older female farm owners, have provided some relief, institutional backing remains insufficient. Many women struggle to secure loans due to a lack of property ownership and alternative financing options. Additionally, underdeveloped social services, including counselling and healthcare, further limit their ability to engage in entrepreneurship.

Family support is vital for rural women's entrepreneurial success, yet many emphasize the need for mentorship, education, and better institutional communication. While awareness of sustainable practices is growing, financial and knowledge gaps hinder their adoption. Concepts such as the circular economy and social entrepreneurship remain largely unfamiliar, and greater financial support is needed for technological innovation. Networking opportunities are scarce, as women often juggle household and farm responsibilities, leaving little time for participation in associations. Despite recognizing the benefits of these networks for training and confidence-building, engagement remains low.

A successful model of rural women entrepreneurs in the Western Balkans is shaped by several key factors such as: commitment to continuous learning to adapt to market changes and innovation, community engagement and networking to enhance business sustainability, family support and rural values as a foundation for entrepreneurial endeavours, adaptability and resilience in navigating financial and institutional challenges, sustainability and green practices to align with modern agricultural and business trends, preservation of local craftsmanship to maintain cultural identity and economic viability, vision for growth and innovation to expand market opportunities and improve productivity, etc.

Empowerment index calculations reveal significant disparities across countries. Younger rural women (18–40) in Albania and Kosovo* show particularly low empowerment levels due to restricted access to resources and support systems, while Serbia records the highest levels, especially among older women. Generational differences are evident—older women (41+) exhibit stronger leadership skills and greater financial control, with 21% falling into the high empowerment category compared to just 10% of younger women. This reflects disparities in property ownership, financial access, and education.

Closing these gaps requires a multi-faceted approach, including financial support, institutional backing, and expanded networking opportunities. Targeted policies focused on mentorship, education, and inclusive economic strategies can bridge the empowerment divide, ensuring that younger rural women gain the resources and leadership roles necessary for sustainable rural development.

References

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