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Rural women in Europe

Opinion¹

Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs

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A. Conclusions of the committee

The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs fully supports the report and draft resolution presented by the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men and congratulates its rapporteur, Ms Carmen Quintanilla Barba, on her excellent work. Taking into account the importance of women's contribution to the development of agriculture, the committee proposes the following amendments.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, replace paragraph 7.3 with the following sub-paragraph:

“provide for the involvement of rural women in agricultural policy development at national, regional and local level and in all decisions affecting them;”.

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 7.8, insert the following sub-paragraph:

“support information and communication networks between rural women and governmental institutions, with the help of professional organisations, civil society and the media;”.

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Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 9.2, insert the following sub-paragraph:

“assess the value of unpaid or low-paid work performed on the farm during married life so that it can be taken into account in the couple’s separation or divorce;”.

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, replace paragraph 9.5 by the following sub-paragraph:

“include in regional and local development strategies educational programmes for rural women to improve their vocational skills in the field of sustainable agriculture and promote entrepreneurship among them;”.

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, paragraph 9.7, replace the words “new technologies” with the following words: “new information and communication technologies;”.

Amendment F (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, at the end of paragraph 9.9, add the following words: “such as telecommunications, local services, tourism and leisure;”.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms John-Calame, rapporteur for opinion

1. Ms Quintanilla Barba’s report rightly points out the important role women play in the development of rural areas. Over the last few decades the contribution of women in the agricultural sector to the economy has become particularly visible through their involvement in agricultural multifunctionality. Rural women successfully combine responsibility for their household with involvement in agricultural production.
2. The development of agricultural multifunctionality and new forms of agricultural production have created new economic opportunities for women. Nevertheless, their working conditions, as underlined in the report, are still suffering from employment insecurity, low wages and limited opportunities for the development of their professional skills. The committee therefore shares the rapporteur’s concern regarding the need to eliminate the existing discrimination against rural women and in particular in relation to their economic and social rights.
3. As is rightly stated in the report, “the great majority of women are involved in agricultural work on the family farm; they do not earn a wage which is separate from their husband or relatives”. In the event of separation or divorce, the situation of women working on a family farm which they do not own is very delicate, or indeed extremely precarious. In most cases these women will lose everything: the family environment and the whole working context, because they have no recognised occupational status, often no independent income and therefore no social cover worthy of the name. It is vital, therefore, to provide legal protection to defend the rights of rural women in the event of separation or divorce and ensure that unpaid or low-paid work performed on the family farm is recognised and assessed at its true value.
4. To combat the existing discrimination, rural women should also have the same access as men to the decision-making and planning processes at local and regional levels. Often this low representation of women in decision-making bodies is explained by the persistence of stereotypes about the traditional roles of women and men in society.
5. Local and regional authority support for associations and networks of rural women, as well as the establishment of direct information channels between these organisations and governmental institutions, will enable women’s associations to have access to information about available rural development programmes and projects, and will encourage them to apply for funding for development initiatives. Closer co-operation between rural women’s professional organisations and local and regional authorities can be instrumental in promoting rural women’s participation in the decision-making process.
6. In order to eliminate the barriers that still prevent rural women from fully contributing to the development of their communities, local and regional authorities include in their development strategies special programmes promoting educational opportunities for rural women to develop their agricultural and entrepreneurial vocational skills. Such vocational training in rural areas should be re-oriented from the

traditional form of home economics to environmentally sound farming methods, new forms of production, farm management in accordance with sustainable development criteria, budgetary planning and other important activities for rural development.

7. Rural development today is greatly influenced by globalisation, which brings new technologies and growing non-agricultural sectors to rural areas. These new sectors, such as telecommunications, local services, tourism, leisure and environmental protection open up new employment opportunities for rural women.

8. Agrotourism is one of the new sectors in rural development which increases employment opportunities for rural women. It also improves access to natural resources, helps to protect agricultural areas, land under cultivation and rural landscapes, and encourages the development of other local services, such as transport, leisure, communication and commerce. The promotion of agrotourism also helps to build bridges between rural and urban areas by presenting agricultural activities to city-dwellers and encouraging investment in rural areas.

9. Processing of farm products and direct sales are gainful activities which can also help to increase income while diversifying work.

10. The involvement of women in the promotion of new economic sectors in rural areas will strengthen their social status, and local and regional authorities should thus develop special policies for increasing women's quality of life and opening up possibilities for them to be a part of these projects. More campaigns should be mounted to inform rural communities about the economic and social benefits of agrotourism.

11. Since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, more attention has been given by the international community to the relationship between women and the environment, and in particular to the role women play in the provision, management and conservation of water.

12. There are still countries in Europe where, due to their traditional roles in society, women are obliged to supply their household with water in very difficult conditions. This kind of discrimination against women should not be tolerated and the authorities should provide financial resources and build capacities to make sure that drinking water and sanitation are safe, clean, accessible and affordable in all villages of Europe.

13. In the light of the above comments, the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs shares the concern of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men on the situation of rural women in Europe and considers that the Parliamentary Assembly should monitor this situation in its future reports.