

International Day of Rural Women

The achievements of rural women, and their advisory needs, deserve greater recognition abroad ... and at home

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The first World Rural Women's Day recognising the contribution of women to agriculture and rural development took place on 15 October 1997. It was organised by the Women's World Summit Foundation (WWSF).

In 2008, the United Nations (UN) formally recognised the International Day of Rural Women as a day of global observance. The day formally honours the role of rural women, recognising rural women's importance in enhancing agricultural and rural development worldwide.

In recent years, the day has tended to focus more on the role of women in developing countries. It is equally important, however, that the unique challenges faced by women in agriculture and rural development in Ireland are recognised and actions are taken to address these challenges.

It is also important to celebrate the contribution and successes of the many women working in agriculture and rural development in Ireland.

Rural women make up a quarter of the world's population and comprise 41% of the world's agricultural labour force. They play important roles in the rural economy, working as farmers, wage earners and entrepreneurs.

In Ireland, 2016 figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) show that just under 13,000 women were employed in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors. This is 10.8% of the total and far below the EU-28 average of 28.5%.

It is important to note that this figure includes only those in paid employment. The most recent Census of Agriculture (2010) shows that 12.4% of farms in Ireland are owned by females yet they make up 27.2% of the farm workforce.



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Advances have been made in recent years and some women are now heading organisations connected to agriculture (FBD, Glanbia, etc). Women involved directly and indirectly in farming and agriculture are becoming more visible, over 20% of Teagasc advisors are women. The views of three female Teagasc Authority members are included in this edition. But more can be done.

Teagasc advisor Aisling Molloy recently investigated "How Teagasc advisory services can improve engagement with and empowerment of farm women" in her Walsh Fellow thesis. Aisling's supervisors were Monica Gorman of UCD and Jane Kavanagh of Teagasc.

"The study, which included postal responses from 233 farm women in Co Wexford, highlighted the diverse needs and roles of farm women," says Aisling. "The women were between 41-55 years. The average farm size was 51-100 acres and beef, dairy and sheep enterprises predominated.

"More than half of the respondents were sole owner, joint owner or working in a partnership. Almost a quarter had a form of agricultural education.

"There was an obvious lack of recognition of the work that women contribute to farms, particularly by themselves, as 64% of the women who classified themselves as 'not working on a farm' carried out at least one farm task. Eighty-five per cent of the respondents carried out farm tasks, mainly farm accounts and/or form filling, DAFM schemes and making decisions.

"The women mainly engaged with advisory services for the Basic Payment Scheme, scheme applications and technical information. One-third said they would like to have more engagement with advisory services.

"The women wanted to learn more about cashflow planning, business planning, soil fertility and applying fertiliser, animal nutrition, updating their personal development and computer skills. They mainly wanted to learn through training courses and online courses."

The women suggested that they could be empowered by encouragement to become more involved with agricultural advisory services, through female discussion groups, practical agricultural training, education and awareness, computer training, giving them responsibility, through shared/equal partnerships to allow for joint decisions to be made and by planning for the future, eg succession and inheritance.

The main barriers to engagement with advisory services by women were perceptions that "women producers were not taken as seriously as male producers", the perception that women are not entirely welcome in many agricultural groups, a lack of self-confidence, a lack of knowledge, and training and isolation.

Suggestions to tackle these barriers included: agricultural education, succession and inheritance planning, not referring to the farmer as "he" all the time, encouraging more women to get involved, providing a social outlet for farm women, practical training, holding courses of interest to women, including both male and female parties in advisory activities, female discussion groups and naming female family members on the Teagasc contract and on correspondence.

While eight advisors in the county thought that there was more scope to involve farm women with advisory services, only three had attempted to do so and five advisors saw the relevance of gender analysis in their



Wexford farmer Hannah Doyle with her daughters Niamh and Ciara.

work. There was a difference between what farm women actually want and what advisors think that farm women want from an agricultural advisory service. A form of gender awareness training for advisors to recognise these potential issues and how they can be overcome may be beneficial.

Many farm women suggested including family members at events and encouraging women to engage with advisory services. One respondent said:

“Encourage farm wives to attend meetings. Advisors should engage with them to a greater extent during farm visits. Wives don't give themselves credit for all they do. How professionals engage is important – if they acknowledge the wives' input, then the husbands might do so more.”

Part of the rationale for this study was that the agricultural advisory and education needs of farm women are unknown. Therefore they are unlikely to be considered when Teagasc is developing programmes or proposing policy changes.

There were strong arguments for and against female groups, both in the literature and among advisors during a focus group held as part of the study. There is a recently established farm women's group in South



Wexford dairy farmer Phil O'Neill.

East Ireland called South East Women in Farming Ireland (SEWFI). Other branches associated with this group (currently suspended) have been established in Munster, Connacht and in Northern Ireland.

These are groups of women of different ages, roles and enterprises that meet regularly with a specific theme at each meeting, such as social media, health and safety and education.

Collaborating with pre-established groups like these to provide information and resources would be valuable to farm women and resource-efficient for Teagasc. Female discussion groups were suggested by the farm women in Co Wexford. They would act as a direct link to help improve engagement between farm women and advisory services.

Editor's note: Teagasc strongly and actively encourages women involved in farming to participate in Teagasc education programmes, farm discussion groups, events and conferences and to avail of local Teagasc advisory services, etc. As soon as the first Teagasc women's group has found its feet we will feature it in *Today's Farm!*