Women are being increasingly recognised for their role as sustainability leaders in the field of agriculture.

But despite a concerted push to encourage women to enter the field, the number of women in the agrifood world still remains low.

In this Event Report, EURACTIV takes a look at the barriers for women to enter the profession and how we can concretely bridge the gender gap in the agrifood sector and overcome the issues women face when accessing funding.

https://eurac.tv/9V1e
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A number of female agri entrepreneurs are not able to tap into their potential and scale up their businesses due to an unconscious bias among investors, according to Lukxmi Balathasan, business creation manager for EIT Food, who said that this results in a worse outcome for all.

The role of women in the agricultural sector has been increasingly at the forefront of discussions on sustainability.

But while many are making all the right noises, there are still a number of barriers in the way for women to scale up their businesses.

Conversations on tackling this problem often centre on training and education, and finding ways of encouraging women to enter the ‘field’.

But while this is important, this does not necessarily reflect the true barriers that prevent women entrepreneurs from taking their businesses to the next level, according to Lukxmi Balathasan, who stressed that it is not a pipeline problem.

“Women are starting to come through more and more in the agrifood and health space,” she told EURACTIV in an interview, highlighting that there is often a personal passion for
food issues alongside a high technical skill-set.

Pointing out that there is high engagement in programmes run by EIT Food, such as the upcoming Empowering Women in Agriculture networking event, Balathasan said she does not “really know what investors mean by pipeline problem”.

“I feel [it is] a little bit lazy on their part to just say it’s a pipeline problem. Because our data has clearly shown that there is sufficient interest from women, so it’s a bit more complicated than that,” she said.

IT’S NOT ME, IT’S YOU

Balathasan put this down, in large part, to a clear, but unconscious, bias of investors when it comes to women entrepreneurs.

“I was shocked to see how differently the investors treated [women],” she said, pointing to anecdotal evidence where investors clearly “didn’t know how to interact with a woman.”

According to a recent EIT Food female entrepreneurship survey, 83% of female entrepreneurs said they had experienced a negative gender bias while pitching, while 97% suggested that training was needed for men to tackle the problem.

As such, to ensure equal access to funding opportunities, Balathasan pointed out that women entrepreneurs are increasingly highlighting the need to “fix the men, not us”.

“Women are often saying to me ‘stop coming to us for the problems – it’s better to engage with men in decision making’, it’s better to establish standards to tackle their biases,” she said.

Tackling this is a challenge, but Balathasan said she was encouraged to see that some associations, such as the British Venture Capital Association, had taken up the important task of adding diversity and inclusion to their training for the next generation of venture capitalists, ensuring that more women are in decision making roles.

“This is important, because women investors are more likely to invest in, or take a chance on, women,” she explained.

ECONOMIC SENSE

And this diversity is not just a “nice thing,” but actually makes concrete economic sense, she pointed out.

“The impact of not giving women equal access to technology and funding actually has a detrimental impact on outcomes of innovation,” she said, pointing to evidence from the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) that suggests that several million more people would be fed if women had more access to resources to take on the roles in the agrifood chain.

She added that more diversity also often results in a stronger economic return, as evidenced by numerous studies, but that, despite the evidence, this narrative is not enough to push investors to back women entrepreneurs.

“Obviously, the return on investment is great. But even with the statistics published 10 years ago, which show that women are a better bet – it’s not changing anything, and that’s crazy because you would think that would be your only metric that’s a value,” she said.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND DATA

According to Balathasan, there is a big window of opportunity to make an impact from a European policy standpoint in terms of accountability.

She said venture capitals can have metrics in place to get help and help the startups be more inclusive.

“But then who is holding them accountable, saying that they need to be deploying funding in a more equitable manner?” she queried, saying that she would “love to see” something from the European Investment Bank or the Environment Investment Fund.

Specifically, she said there was a need for a deeper understanding of the metrics they use to decide who to give money to and the type of women startups getting funded.

“Because what I’m talking about is bottom-up, the training, the nurturing, the mentoring. And then from a policy approach, this has to be top-down. We need to marry the two to see any real change,” she pointed out.

“I can work with a really great cohort of entrepreneurs and investors. But until there are more women fund managers, and there’s more metrics being put down on VCs, that they need to diversify their portfolio, they’re not going to take the necessary steps,” she concluded.
It’s a (wo)man’s world: Women are ‘better’ leaders in times of crisis, agri stakeholders say

By Natasha Foote | EURACTIV.com

On the back of the COVID pandemic, experts point to mounting evidence suggesting that women’s involvement in the agrifood sector creates businesses more able to withstand crises, yet women still make up less than one-third of agri start-up leaders.

From climate change to the COVID pandemic, the agriculture sector is facing no shortage of crises. As such, conversations increasingly revolve around the need to increase the sector’s resilience.

These commonly centre on the need to reduce farmers’ reliance on external inputs, improve the long term viability of the sector or shorten the supply chain, all of which are outlined as key priorities in the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy.

But for Shima Barakat, director of the entrepreneurship for sustainability programme at the University of Cambridge, the research suggests that these conversations should also factor gender into the equation.

“Are women sustainability leaders? At this point in time, I think the simple answer is yes,” she told a recent event, highlighting that there is a wealth of studies conducted both before and
after the COVID pandemic to suggest that women are “better leaders during times of crisis”.

However, women currently make up less than a third of leaders in agrifood start-ups, panellists pointed out.

This is despite the fact that data from the startup scene over the past 10 years has consistently shown that women leaders and gender-balanced teams create better startup and business outcomes, Barakat pointed out.

“They use less resources, they do better in times of crisis, and they deliver higher returns,” she said.

And these numbers are not inconsequential, she said, highlighting that this can sometimes mean using as much as 20% fewer resources, or gaining 10% on returns.

The COVID pandemic has “completely thrown that into relief”, she added, pointing out that more diverse companies survived crises at higher rates, and that even countries that have had women leaders have “survived that crisis better”.

Noting the pace of change in attitudes from the sector and shifting perspectives, she conceded that going forward, women may not keep that leadership advantage, but that, “at the moment, [women] have a clear one”.

Meanwhile, Monica Sorribas, vice president of Europe marketing for agrochemical company Corteva Agriscience, emphasised that rural women are also often “key agents” in their communities and are really the “catalyst to achieve or to transform the economic, but also environmental, societal changes required for sustainable development”.

While the evidence for women’s role in the enhanced success of companies is clear, the reasons behind this are less so.

One reason put forward is that women tend to be more diverse, Barakat said.

“There are hints that, because of their diversity, women are better leaders in general, because they’re not one type of leader,” she said.

Moments of crises, including sustainability and environmental crises, also open space for women as they “play to their strengths as leaders” and create a more marked difference in leadership styles and decisions, she said.

“At times of non-crisis, we don’t see that difference quite so much – men, women leaders, everybody does somewhat the same [thing]. But as soon as there is a challenge, a startup challenge, COVID, sustainability, we see women actually rising above,” she said.

Corteva’s Sorribas added that women’s “democratic” leadership style may also have a large helping hand in their success.

“It is really much more related to building trust and to communal goals and they are more focused on conflict resolution to facilitate collaboration,” she pointed out.

**BARRIERS REMAIN**

However, despite their importance in the agricultural transition, increasing the number of women involved in the agrifood sector continues to be an uphill battle, according to Begoña Pérez-Villarreal, director of EIT Food in the South.

“Obviously, there are many barriers to overcome,” she said, citing, among others, economic and ownership issues.

For example, during a recent interview with EURACTIV, Lukxmi Balathasan, business creation manager for EIT Food, warned that a number of female agri entrepreneurs are unable to tap into their potential and scale up their businesses due to an unconscious bias among investors.

Panellists also pointed out that, while in some ways it could be seen that women thrived during the COVID pandemic, the majority of the increased workload at home fell on their shoulders.

“It is a fact of life that the load on the women during the pandemic has hugely increased,” Cambridge’s Barakat said.

“So we’re overloaded. Women in work have suffered through the pandemic, but women leaders have still outperformed their male counterparts,” she said, calling for more concerted efforts to help support women in the agrifood sector.
Women are faced on a daily basis by the challenges that agrifood companies are trying to solve, and have a unique perspective on the specific needs across the sector. Still, many of them adopt more cautious or conservative approaches when pitching, believing that they will have a higher likelihood of being considered as entrepreneurs if they follow the gender stereotypes of being a ‘good girl.’ Although research results indicate that female founded startups perform 63% better than male-founded startups, these experiences can and do contribute to women’s ability to continue their pursuit of a career in agrifood sector.

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Diversity is prerequisite for Innovation: Only cross-gender collaboration may translate to innovative solutions in the agrifood sector

By Aleksandra Bara
diversity in the agrifood sector and entrepreneurship ecosystem.

The inclusive innovation, which enables all people to be involved, is essential to a strong agrifood system which will benefit everyone. EIT Food is supported by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), a body of the European Union.

For Christine Lagarde, president of the European Central Bank, better decisions are made when women and men come together at the table. She believes that it brings a “larger horizon.” Her words resonate well with the statement of Dilian Popov, Education Director at Bulgarian Entrepreneurship Center and Co-founder at SmartVarna NGO, who appeared among experts during EWA Networking Online Event organised by EIT Food in December 2021.

“We observe differences between men and women in the investor’s relationship. Females have more realistic budgets, [...] They have a perfect plan for the next two years, which helps them to control the situation. But it makes them slower. Men operate differently. They bring the ideas, and they just want to sell them. They act more impulsively, the plan is coming later. I think that the best cure for both groups would be cooperation between the two genders. The male will push for more bold decisions and females will make more accurate plans,” he said.

Meanwhile, Marja Liisa Meurice, Director of EIT Food CLC North-East, emphasized that there is an undeniable need for female entrepreneurs to boost innovation in the food industry. “Women have the ability to look from a larger perspective, and they care about the well-being of the whole society. So it is important to balance participation of all gender in entrepreneurship and accelerate the female impact on the food industry”, she added.

The EIT Food Female Entrepreneurship survey also indicates a similar view of gender equality in business. One of the key findings of the study is that women have mixed feelings about exclusive female-only programmes. Respondents do believe that programmes work well when there is diversity, and no one stands out as a special group. It is important not to reproach men because they need to be part of the solution. “Men need to be mentors to women [so both can] learn how to build confidence among investors,” one of the survey participants claimed.

EIT Food responds to the above in the Empowering Women in Agrifood (EWA) programme, which aims to provide comprehensive support for early-stage female entrepreneurs in using their potential, providing them with appropriate knowledge and access to a wide network contacts so that they can successfully set up and develop a sustainable business in the agrifood industry.

For the past two years the programme has already supported 130 female entrepreneurs in nine European countries. For over five months EWA Mentees participated in workshops and dedicated events, while developing ideas under the individual supervision of a professional female or male Mentor. It created a unique opportunity for education and reducing negative gender bias.

The Empowering Women in Agrifood programme is expanding and will be continued in 2022. Countries selected for the third edition of the project are Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain and Turkey. Ten women from each country will receive a chance to be a part of an amazing journey and to have an influence to make a change in the agrifood business area. Registration will be open from April 2022.

50% of all respondents participating in The EIT Food Female Entrepreneurship survey say that the EIT Food Entrepreneurship programmes have strengthened their confidence as female entrepreneurs. Higher confidence equals ease to value and appreciation of one’s work, which translates into both professional and private life. If you identify yourself as female and would like to start your own agrifood business, this is one of the best options to do so with support of experiences mentors, qualified trainers and group of other women who want to transform our food system!