

THE EUROPEAN UNION OF WOMEN
REPORT FOR THE 60th ANNIVERSARY COUNCIL MEETING
Food Agriculture and Consumer Commission
Topic: THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS ON WOMEN

Background & trends

The UK produces less than 60% of the food it eats. Many farmers supplement their income by diversifying activities away from pure agriculture. For instance Biofuels present new opportunities for farmers, against a background of rising fears about fossil fuel prices, energy security, energy sustainability, and climate change.

Spain is still connected to the land and property and vast tracts of the country are still under agricultural production. However the considerable differences in the climate and geography of the Regions of Spain means that there are huge differences in the type of agriculture and cultural traditions. Some land in this mountainous country cannot be tamed into production! However, the country is generally self-sufficient in grains, meats and poultry, fruit and vegetables and vegetable oils. Spain exports rice, fruit, vegetables, meat, olive oil and of course wine.

Economic Position

Despite skilled farmers, high technology, fertile soil and subsidies, which primarily come from the European Union (EU), farm earnings are relatively low, mainly due to low prices at the farm gate. In part due to this low base, agriculture in the UK prior to 2012 generally performed well in the recession. The value of UK farm output totalled £23.9 bn in 2012. The industry has even created more jobs - the national agricultural workforce grew by 1.2% in 2012, the third year of consecutive growth. However the average age of the British farm holder is now 59. Fewer young people can afford the rising capital cost of entry into farming and more are discouraged by low earnings.

Spain has 10% of the economically active population in the agricultural sector, but this masks the thousands of retired (mostly) men who still tend the vines, the olive and citrus trees. Because of the crisis, family land which was previously deserted because of employment opportunities in bars and hotels, has been cleared again, ploughed and brought back into production. Some produce is for the family table: Other areas have been replanted with new citrus and olive trees and new organic wine production. Women do not seem to feature in this work, except for the specialised activities such as the sorting of grapes from the harvest.

Women In Agriculture

Recently, data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) revealed that there are 23,000 female farmers in the UK at present, compared with hardly any a decade ago. Last year saw a dramatic increase in the number of women farmers by 6,000. By contrast, there are 119,000 men, which dropped by 5,000 in 2012.

The figures suggest that more women are viewing food and farming and related areas as a real opportunity and carving out successful careers in the industry. Sarah Dawson, a Lincolnshire based vegetable specialist and grower, and chairman of the National Farmers Unions (NFU) horticulture and potato board, was the first woman to be elected chairman of a national NFU board. She has stated "My particular view is that post-1970s, the brawn necessary to produce crops and food has been replaced by brain. Increased mechanisation and automation has helped open up the whole food and farming industry as a very diverse career option with huge opportunities for everyone, regardless of sex. Inevitably this has made the industry much more accessible to women."

In Spain, the majority of farmland is owned, not rented and the majority is owned by men, but that percentage has reduced recently. Now 25% is owned by women and the rest is owned by men. The Spanish environment is harsh: irrigation is needed for most of the Regions of Spain. The place of women in agriculture is more prominent in Galicia when, through history, the men have been the fishermen, leaving the women to till the land. Compare this with Andalucia or Extremadura where men are the farmers. Recently, there has been an increase in the land owned by women over the age of 65.

Broader context of Women and Food

Women typically prepare meals, feed children and are generally responsible for growing, preparing and procuring food in their households. Food procurement is highly constrained with livelihood loss and food

cost increases, which has other social implications for instance women will tend to limit their intake in order to provide for the family.

In most parts of Spain the grandmothers buy the food and cook the family main meal. Eating is still a family event. Cooking is often a shared activity: men, as well as women, in hard times, end up working in the kitchens or as waiters in restaurants. Food is a national pastime.

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