

EDITORIAL

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# Who do we want our ‘new generation’ of farmers to be? The need for demographic reform in European agriculture

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European agriculture is frequently characterised as being in a demographic crisis. ‘Generational renewal’ is highlighted as a priority aim of the 2023–2027 Common Agricultural Policy, and has been addressed in an EIP Agri Focus Group, multiple Horizon projects<sup>1</sup> and a European Parliament Review (Zagata et al. 2017). The European Commission’s webpage on ‘young farmers’ outlines the magnitude of the issue:

*“Only 11% of all farm holdings in the European Union are run by farmers under 40 – and persuading more young people to begin farming is a significant challenge ... Supporting the next generation of European farmers not only enhances the future competitiveness of EU agriculture; it also helps guarantee Europe’s food supplies for years to come.”<sup>2</sup>*

The apparent aging of farmers across the EU is cited as evidence of a need for intervention: start-up grants, income support and additional training for young farmers are intended to enhance the competitiveness of EU agriculture, and secure food supplies. Younger farmers are also believed to be more environmentally active and therefore oriented towards achieving Net Zero and biodiversity objectives (CEJA 2019). To this end, the European Commission has asked that member states increase the supports available to young farmers in the 2023–2027 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), from a maximum of 2% in the current direct payment budget, to a minimum of 3%. Options include income support and start-up aid, in addition to the standard access farmers have to direct payments and agri-environmental measures. But is the apparent shortage of young people in farming really a problem? Or rather, is it the demographic problem we should be seeking to address?

Yes and no. I argue that the problem is actually about access to farming as a profession, rather than the age structure of the sector. Establishing new farms is not a problem purely faced by young people, nor is the age structure of farming the only demographic

<sup>1</sup> FP7 FarmPath, H2020 Newbie, H2020 Ruralisation.

<sup>2</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/income-support/young-farmers\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/income-support/young-farmers_en) Accessed 5 December 2022.

feature of the sector which is problematic. The gender, race and ethnicity of EU farmers and farm workers are all wildly unreflective of European populations as a whole.

Let's start with age. Eurostat figures are easily misconstrued. Eurostat tracks the age of the 'farm manager', identified as a 'sole holder', assuming a single decision-maker. Although this may be accurate in some cases, most farms across Europe continue to be operated by families. Indeed, family labour in the EU comprises just over 75% of all farm labour.<sup>3</sup> In multigenerational farm businesses, the identified 'sole holder' is typically the oldest male. It is therefore unsurprising that few of these individuals are under 40 years of age. Nor is the figure that one third of EU farmers are over the age of 65 necessarily a problem,<sup>4</sup> because of what's known as the 'successor effect'.

In short, farm households with successors invest. Although succession is by far the most common way to enter farming as a profession, Eurostat does not track farm successors. Research has clearly shown that initiation of the process of farm succession influences farm investment decisions for a decade prior to the successor formally taking control of the farm business (Potter and Lobley 1996; Calus et al. 2008; Burton and Fischer 2014). Farm succession acts as a 'trigger event' which challenges farm households to think beyond maintaining their current farming trajectory and make major changes (Sutherland et al. 2012). In contrast, farmers without successors tend to scale back and slide into semi-retirement. A farm with a 68 year-old manager and a 40 year-old successor will invest for the future much differently than a farm with a 58 year-old manager and no successor. Without an accurate assessment of the age of the farming household, the true demography of European farmers is difficult to assess. However, it is clear that the situation is not as dire as the Eurostat figures could lead us to believe.

The perceived need to 'persuade' young people to begin farming is also a misnomer. There is very little evidence of a shortage of young people interested in farming, particularly in the wake of the Covid pandemic where access to green space and rural living rose in popularity. Instead, the research suggests that there is an abundance of young people interested in farming who do not feel able to do so, largely for financial reasons<sup>5</sup>. The 'shortage' of young people in large part reflects their reluctance to accept low or unstable income prospects in order to pursue their dreams of farming. In many regions in Europe, farming is essentially a closed profession, open only to those who inherit farming resources (Shortall et al. 2020). Difficulty accessing land and finance are consistently identified as the biggest barriers to young farmers and to new entrants to farming (CEJA 2019; EIP Agri Focus group 2016<sup>6</sup>). Inheriting a farm – typically through a drawn-out succession process which may last decades – is by far the most common way to access the resources to farm. Newcomers to the sector can rarely accumulate sufficient wealth to compete. That there are newcomers at all – and there clearly are a substantial cohort, often pursuing 'alternative' approaches to farming – is a testament to the appeal of the sector.

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Farmers\\_in\\_the\\_EU\\_-\\_statistics#:~:text=59.2%20%25%20of%20those%20working%20in,in%20the%20total%20working%20population.](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Farmers_in_the_EU_-_statistics#:~:text=59.2%20%25%20of%20those%20working%20in,in%20the%20total%20working%20population.)

<sup>4</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20180719-1#:~:text=There%20were%2010.3%20million%20people,the%20age%20of%2040%20years.>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/publications/eip-agri-focus-group-new-entrants-final-report>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.newbie-academy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NEWBIE-Policy-Recommendations.pdf>

It is also important to distinguish newcomers from young farmers. Although EU policies pay lip service to enabling newcomers to enter the sector, the focus is clearly on young farmers. These are overlapping but distinct cohorts. A decade ago, European Commission (EC) policies and statements conflated new entrants to farming with young farmers (Zagata and Sutherland 2015), but the EC rhetoric is now clearly focused on young people – generational renewal and young farmers, rather than newcomers per se. This itself is problematic, as the research shows that new entrants – regardless of age – tend to be more innovative than established farmers or their successors (Sutherland et al. 2015; Hopkins et al. 2020). Although the EC’s definition of new entrants as “setting up for the first time in an agricultural holding” implies an emphasis on newcomers to the sector, a review of the current CAP undertaken for the European Parliament found that most of the funding was being received by farm successors (Zagata et al. 2017). ‘Young farmer supports’ are thus often ‘farm successor supports’, and are primarily accessible by successors who take over the farm or establish side businesses, before they are 40 years of age (McKee et al. 2018).

Does it matter that successors receive the bulk of supports? In economic terms, no. There is evidence that younger farmers tend to run more economically efficient farms, but these are largely successors (Zagata and Sutherland 2015). As argued above, the existence of a successor corelates to investment in the farm business. In addition, there is growing evidence that although *ex novo* new entrants bring innovations and advanced skills, they contribute very little economically to the sector in their first few years of operation (Hopkins et al. 2020), owing in part to the limited resources they are able to invest. This includes their own labour – they often work off-farm to keep the household and farm business afloat. In addition, new entrants also include a subset of hobby or non-commercial farmers – farmers who come into the industry as a lifestyle choice, often later in life. These individuals may be innovative but are not seeking to contribute economically to the agricultural sector (Sutherland et al. 2019). Subsidising succession processes is thus good for the industry, in terms of encouraging innovation and investment in EU farms. But - these subsidies should not be conflated with supports which help new people to enter the industry. Therein the problem lies.

There are major social justice issues embedded in the EU agricultural sector and associated subsidy structures. The CAP currently occupies about one third of the EU budget,<sup>7</sup> amounting to some €386.6 billion over the 2021–2027 period. The ‘sole holders’ and ‘farm managers’ who receive these subsidies are predominantly older, white men. With the current focus on area-based payments, recipients include corporations and religious organisations – similarly run by older white men. In supporting existing farm structures and emphasising sole holders, EU subsidies reify the huge gender imbalances and lack of ethnic and racial diversity amongst agricultural landowners in Europe. In addition, the ‘cheap food’ policies underpinning farm subsidies encourage the systematic exploitation of the one ethnically and racially diverse cohort which is working European agriculture – migrant labour. These are the problems we should be seeking to address.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/106/financing-of-the-cap#:~:text=Total%20CAP%20commitments%20for%20the,below%20%E2%80%93%20line%20\(6\)%5D.&text=The%20EU%20budget%20for%202021,budget%20\(EUR%2055.71%20billion\).](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/106/financing-of-the-cap#:~:text=Total%20CAP%20commitments%20for%20the,below%20%E2%80%93%20line%20(6)%5D.&text=The%20EU%20budget%20for%202021,budget%20(EUR%2055.71%20billion).)

Eurostat figures focused on ‘managers’ or ‘sole holders’ not only make successors invisible, they often make women invisible. The statistics on women-led farms are just as problematic as the statistics on the lack of young people in farming, for similar reasons. Women who are not the ‘sole holder’ are relegated to the category of ‘family labour’, regardless of their contribution to decision making on family farms. Gender mainstreaming was adopted as the official policy approach in the European Union in the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) and strengthened in Article 8 of the Treaty in 2012. The treaty obliges the European Community to “eliminate inequalities and promote equality between women and men in all its activities” (European Commission 2000). To date, this treaty does not appear to have influenced how the CAP is operationalised (e.g. definition and targeting of beneficiaries), or indeed how Eurostat data is collected.

The under-reporting of women’s role in decision-making on European farms is likely to be more problematic in some countries than others. The percentage of women sole holders across Europe varies considerably by member state – from just 5% in the Netherlands to 45% in Latvia and Lithuania, averaging 29%. Although a recent EC Agriculture and Rural Development report posited that the number of women-led farms is increasing,<sup>8</sup> most of this increase can be attributed to the accession of new member states, rather than any change to demographics in western Europe. Even in countries where women-led farms are common, when women lead farms, these farms are considerably smaller than farms led by men. This is in large part because farms across Europe continue to be predominantly inherited by men (Shortall 2010). Although this is a cultural practice rather than a legal practice, even in countries like Norway, where the first-born child has had the right of farm inheritance since the introduction of Oedal laws in 1976, only 16% of farmers are led by women (Bjørkhaug 2021).

Inheritance of land is a reflection of, and plays into, the perception of men as farmers. Women born on farms are socialised into gendered expectations that their brothers will inherit and therefore are more likely to ‘marry in’ to farms, reinforcing patrilineal power hierarchies (Fischer and Burton 2014). There is qualitative evidence that both successors and *ex novo* new entrants express more egalitarian gender relations (Sutherland et al. forthcoming), but Eurostat figures on female farmers under the age of 40 have them at 23% - less than the 29% average for the sector as a whole. That is, there is no statistical evidence that younger farmers are more likely to be women.

Recognising women and the role they play is critical to ensuring that their needs are met. There is a substantial literature on women in agriculture (e.g. Bock and Shortall 2016), reports to European Parliament (Shortall 2010) and two recent Horizon projects ‘FLIARA’ and ‘#GRASSCEILING’ have been commissioned on women in agriculture, but the problem remains. Academic literature has usefully demonstrated how women innovate differently than men: women are more likely to be involved in farm diversification activities, particularly if those activities are public facing (e.g. direct marketing, agri-tourism) (Pinto-Correia et al. 2015; Trauger 2004), and to undertake smaller-scale initiatives which they can undertake in tandem with their caregiving responsibilities (Seuneke and Bock 2015). Women’s innovative actions may thus be missed by both

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<sup>8</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/news/females-field-2021-03-08\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/news/females-field-2021-03-08_en)

agricultural subsidies and those intended to promote rural development. There is also a literature on masculinity in farming (e.g. Bell et al. 2015; Roy et al. 2014; Coldwell 2007) but only very recently has literature which addresses queer farmers emerged (Hof-felmeyer 2021; Dentzman et al. 2021).

Still – Eurostat does at least collect data on gender. Despite European charters and declarations on diversity and inclusivity,<sup>9</sup> Eurostat does not track ethnicity or race in relation to farm management. The overwhelming whiteness of European farmers remains undocumented and therefore unchallenged. It also stands in stark contrast to the characteristics of the non-family agricultural workforce, particularly in the fruit and vegetable sector, which is strongly characterised by seasonal migrants. Eurostat figures show that the vast majority of farm labour is part-time or seasonal – only 18.7% of labour is full time.<sup>10</sup> Family labour can be expected to reflect the ethnicity and race of the ‘farm manager’, but hired labour is much different. Although Eurostat does not track the race or ethnicity of farm workers, it does track the migration of seasonal workers from ‘third countries’, allowing race and ethnicity to be implied to some degree. Thousands of migrant workers from Africa enter Europe every year. However, these data have major gaps, with widespread recognition of the volumes of informal and illegal employment practices in the sector. In Italy, for example, it is estimated that more than half of seasonal workers are hired informally (i.e. without contract, Corrado 2018).

The precarity of migrant agricultural employment is notorious, with power balances heavily skewed towards their employers. A review for the European Parliament (2021) unequivocally stated that “the reality of seasonal agricultural work is a harsh one, with generally poor working and living conditions.” Seasonal workers are treated as replaceable ‘commodities’, managed by procurement organisations with variable degrees of ethical concern (Laurent and Nguyen 2022). Women migrant workers have it worse than men: a report for the European Commission specifically addressing migrant women’s labour on EU farms (Palumbo and Scriuba 2018) found that they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, including human trafficking and sexual violence. Academic analyses are scathing, identifying institutionalised racism and sexual exploitation, and drawing links between colonialism, slavery and contemporary practices of white male landowners overseeing disenfranchised black farm workers (e.g. Rogaly 2021; Melossi 2021). This imagery is far more troubling than that of a shortage of young people.

The rights of migrant workers are a problem that the European Commission is seeking to address. There are a number of European directives attempting to ensure that seasonal migrants benefit from the same standards of employment as nationals (e.g. the Seasonal Workers Directive 2014/36/EU. In addition, Regulation (EU) 2021/2116 stipulates that financial support from the CAP must to comply with major EU regulations regarding workers). However - isolation, language-barriers, limited knowledge of their rights, and jobs linked to their housing, immigration status and opportunity for repeat employment, as well as a cheap food imperative and sparse direct government oversight,

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.eudiversity2022.eu/european-diversity-month-2022/eu-platform-of-diversity-charters/#:~:text=What%20are%20the%20Diversity%20Charters,and%20inclusion%20in%20the%20workplace.https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics->

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Farmers\\_and\\_the\\_agricultural\\_labour\\_force\\_-\\_statistics#Farming\\_remains\\_a\\_predominantly\\_family\\_activi](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Farmers_and_the_agricultural_labour_force_-_statistics#Farming_remains_a_predominantly_family_activi)

make these directives difficult to enforce. It is also notable that there has been no connection made between the apparent shortage of young farmers, and the potential for farm workers to step into this gap. European policies seek to protect farm workers, but not to enable them to become farmers themselves.

Diversity is not solely a social justice issue. There is considerable evidence that – on aggregate – diverse businesses are more innovative (Herring 2009). Inclusion of the ‘other’ in discussions leads participants to think more critically, and accept a broader range of ideas (Phillips 2017). There is mixed evidence of whether this diversity leads to stronger businesses – some research suggests it does, others find no significant difference, but there is no suggestion that increasing diversity could be bad for an industry or sector. There is also no question that it is difficult to achieve.

So what can we do? As academics, we need to recognise that we have been complicit in reifying existing farming demographics. We have played along with the fallacy of the ‘sole holder’ because it suited our research needs. Including multiple household members as decision-makers in research processes is incredibly messy and time consuming. Burton and colleagues (Burton and Fischer 2014; Burton and Otte 2022) argue for the use of ‘household age indices’, rather than age of the ‘farm manager’ for characterising the farming sector. This would enable the identification of the lifestage of the farm household and reflect the heterogeneity of farm household members. But doing so would take considerably more effort – and budget. It is much more straightforward to interview a single representative per farm, or consider a farm business as a homogeneous entity. Minority voices are also more difficult to access, and we risk respondent burnout if we over-investigate. Migrant workers are difficult to access and represent high risk groups. But does that mean we should not try?

There are a number of steps we can take:

- Analyse the demographic characteristics of agricultural subsidy recipients and make visible the demographic issues embedded in European agricultural policies and subsidies
- Be critical in our use of Eurostat figures. Lobby for the data that would make these invisible cohorts visible, and highlight where data is missing. Gender disaggregated data is often absent or only estimated for inclusion in official data sets (Shortall 2014). In addition to the gaps in Eurostat, a review for the Horizon 2020 SALSA project (Small farms, small food businesses and sustainable food security) showed that few member states even collected the required data on women’s participation CAP-funded actions and events, yielding a lack of evidence on which to enact change.
- Produce disaggregated data: simply identifying the gender, ethnicity and race of our study respondents in our data collection and reporting it in our methodologies can help to establish the evidence base. Identify the lack of diversity in respondents in the limitations to our research methods presented in reports and journal articles. When peer reviewing for journals, ask authors to provide more demographic details on their study samples.
- Design research methods which utilise age indices and other measures to accurately characterise and include farm decision-makers and workers, and develop method-

ologies to effectively engage with the diverse members and potential members of the agricultural sector

- Advocate for the myriad of options which have been proven effective for increasing diversity, including quotas and actions which proactively address farmer retirement. Switzerland, for example, refuses payment of state pensions to farm subsidy recipients (Zorn and Zimmer 2022), a measure which would be wildly unpopular in Europe, but may be what is needed to make change happen. The 3% of the direct payment envelope made available to young farmers is unlikely to make a substantive difference – a recent study from the Horizon 2020 Newbie project<sup>11</sup> found that although 90% of new entrants and their supporters valued the European subsidies, two thirds found them insufficient. Joint ventures between existing farmers and newcomers remain rare but have considerable potential to enable newcomers to build equity in existing businesses, while learning management skills. Pilot projects to enable migrants with farming experience to establish new farms should be attempted.

Increasing the diversity of our own institutions will increase the creativity and critical thinking inherent in our own research and better equip us to work with diverse populations. Enrolling a diversity of students in our courses, actively encouraging diverse groups to pursue advanced degrees and normalising diversity amongst the researchers studying agriculture in Europe are also important steps to take.

We also have our own embedded assumptions and biases to challenge. The gender in agriculture literature is siloed – a topic addressed by a strong but small group of researchers – and research on the ethnicity and race of farmers is almost non-existent. On a personal level, for the first 20 years of my career I steered clear of ‘gender research’, not wanting to be stereotyped as a female researcher, interested in gender. But the evidence about the exclusivity of the sector and my own part in perpetuating it has become too overwhelming to ignore.

EU agriculture is faced with an extensive set of challenges – Net Zero, biodiversity, climate change, and food, water and energy security. We cannot afford to leave some of the ‘best players on the bench’ by continuing to allow EU agriculture to be dominated by a narrow demographic cohort. Neither can we continue to tolerate a two-tier system where the farm workers we rely on to harvest our food have no chance to become farmers themselves. Generational renewal is indeed critically important to the future of European agriculture, but the need is much broader – and diverse – than is currently being addressed.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.newbie-academy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NEWBIE-Policy-Recommendations.pdf>

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