

Why do we need to talk about rural feminism in Romania?

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Rural women face double discrimination. The first is directed against the rural areas, which are marginalized by public policies, are invisible in relevant debates, ridiculed and blamed at for its social and economic problems, poverty, lack of education, migration and many other consequences of historical and systemic discrimination. The second is the discrimination against women and girls, which places Romania on top of charts of domestic violence, teenage motherhood and lack of representation of women in decision-making structures – all of which have amplified effects in the case of rural women. The lack of interest and data that could shed light on the issues that rural women face, that could support appropriate public policies, remain an obstacle in finding solutions. Feminism is not fully understood as a social movement for human rights, from which society as a whole can benefit, but rather it's trivialized or seen as a threat against traditional values. In the following, you will discover the perspective of some peasant women, supplemented by data and official information about the multiple problems and obstacles that rural women face.

The general context of the rural population of Romania

At the national level, 46% of the population lives in rural areas¹. The rural areas of Romania are overwhelmingly dominated by peasants and small producers, half of them being women.

According to the national agricultural census of 2020, 96% of people active in agriculture work farmlands under 10 hectares. Adding the numbers for holdings with areas between 10 and 100 ha, the result is a total of 99.4% of peasants and small and medium scale producers. Only 0.56% of people work farmlands larger than 100 hectares – these being the industrial farmers². Thus, we can conclude that peasants and small scale food producers represent the overwhelming majority of people who are active in agriculture.

The rural population of Romania is also significant at the level of the European Union. Romania has the largest number of agricultural holdings (31.8% of all farms) and the largest number of peasant women and men (at least 5 million) in the EU³⁴.

Holding/household dimension	No. of ha	%	No. of farmers	%
0 – 9,9 ha	4 004 290	31,3%	2 723 090	95,8%
10 – 99,9 ha	2 653 680	20,7%	102 400	3,6%
> 100 ha	6 104 850	47,8%	16 010	0,5%
Total	12 762 820		2 841 500	

The agricultural surface worked by peasants and by the industry in Romania. Source: Eurostat (2020)⁵.

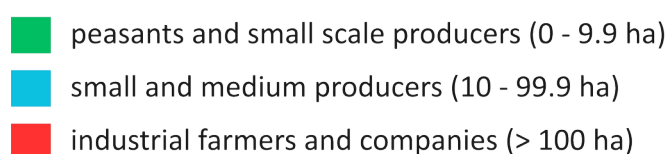
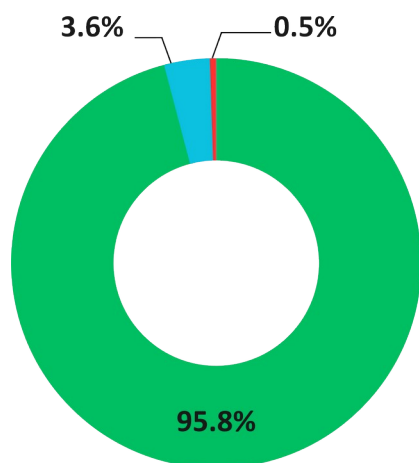
¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=RO>

² https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/rga_2020r.pdf

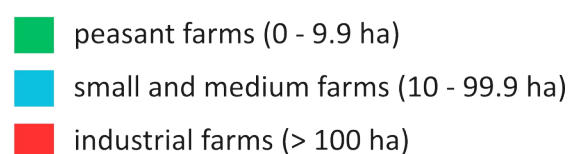
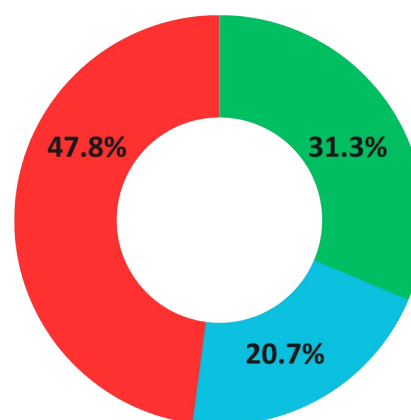
³ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/73319.pdf>

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0391>

People



Agricultural land



Source: Eco Ruralis⁶.

Since the population of peasant women in Romania is a considerable one, we cannot exclude or ignore it from the feminist discourse, as we end up not addressing adequately their needs. That is why it's essential to consider their perspectives in the fight for women's rights.

Peasant women and other rural women are exceptionally important. They have contributed greatly throughout history, not only to the well-being of their families and communities, but also to the process of food production and the management of common natural assets (soil, water, biodiversity, seeds, etc.).

However, the role of rural women is one that is unrecognized, invisible, that is easily overlooked and one that continues to be disregarded and unrewarded. That is why it's necessary for peasant and other rural women to be educated on rural feminism, and most importantly to have access to the existing structures and institutions that promote equal opportunities and the elimination of the domestic violence.

What is feminism and rural feminism?

Before discussing the importance of rural feminism, we must first answer the question: "Why is the movement called feminism and not humanism or egalitarianism?". Often times, people's reluctance towards this movement begins with a lack of understanding of its terminology.

Feminism is a social movement for human rights, respectively for the rights of women and girls, which aims for equal opportunities and the achievement of women's rights – equal to men, socially, economically, civilly, culturally and politically. Feminism analyzes the cause of the problems faced by women and proposes solutions, that can change for the better the daily life of

⁵https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EF_M_FARMLEG_custom_6562704/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=182de566-93d0-4d11-8da5-fbca736fe59d

⁶ <https://www.ecoruralis.ro/2023/08/07/taranii-polenizatorii-si-agroecologia/>

women and that can lead to the progressive elimination of the most widespread form of discrimination and social inequality. Rural feminism aims to recognize the role and work of peasant and all rural women in society and support them, using all the democratic means at our disposal.

Therefore, while feminism strives for gender equality, it cannot be achieved without giving back to women everything that has been denied to them thorough history. Thus, the concept highlights that the obstacles that do not allow the achievement of equal opportunities, are due to the fact that women are not viewed and treated, in society, in the same way as men are.

Eco Ruralis, an association of peasant women and men in Romania, which unites almost 20 000 members, is preoccupied with rural feminism. Within the association there is a working group dedicated to this topic, where peasant women from all counties share their experience and step by step, try to develop a feminist social movement with a rural character. In 2021, Eco Ruralis published a peasant women's manifesto that can be consulted on the association's website⁷.

Stela Zămoiu, peasant woman and coordonating member of Eco Ruralis: “For me, feminism means everything - it means to be in a family, to be united as a community (...) In the countryside, women are not really taken into account, here discrimination between men and women comes into play, the man wants to be above the woman and the beatings and all that happens ... but we aren't so down anymore, we have to get up and stand up for ourselves”.

Brîndușa Bîrhală, peasant woman and member of Eco Ruralis: “There are many examples of women around me that inspire me and that I aspire to – these are the women that somehow, I don't know how, manage to do everything – the household part, but also the [working the] land part”.

Ramona Duminicioiu, peasant woman and coordinating member of Eco Ruralis: “Rural feminism is a necessity. We must live our lives and participate freely in whatever activities fulfill us, make small or big decisions for our families and our communities, without fear of violence, without always being on guard that we might suffer from prejudices, or other consequences”.

Tradition and rural feminism

Traditions are still prevalent in the rural areas and are generally respectful and wise, being based on centuries of community experience. However, traditions often discriminate and marginalize women, and they have a strong say in the organizing of families and communities. Even within the family, the traditional division of role works according to the popular logic: “the man is the head and the woman is the neck”. This indicates the hierarchy in which the man is the one who thinks, makes decisions, is responsible for the family and is recognized as its representative, while women provide support, have extremely reduced functionality, and is dependent on the head. It is no coincidence that the family is where women face the most widespread form of violence – domestic violence. And in a community's case, the formal leaders traditionally remain the priest, the policeman and the mayor, the last two being almost always exclusively men.

The “traditional” social customs relate to cultural customs and practices that are perceived as being normal in a given society. These customs and practices often include gender roles that are

⁷ <https://www.ecoruralis.ro/2021/03/08/manifestul-tarancilor-de-8-martie-ziua-internationala-femeii/>

passed down through generations. In many rural communities in Romania, they restrict women, but also the effects of laws, because traditions often intervene in the implementation process.

Gender roles refer to the social expectations associated with masculinity and femininity in a particular culture or society, which are fundamentally based on the myth that men do the heavy physical work involving physical strength and technical skills and women do the “domestic” work. Thus, especially when we talk about the rural areas, there are expectations that women should assume “domestic” responsibilities and take care of the family, whereas men are more likely expected to ensure the functioning and organization of agricultural production and to provide financial support for the family. In reality, women perform physical labor almost equally to men, caring for animals, performing agricultural labor for all types of production.

Ramona Dumnicioiu: “In our village you can no longer find men for season agricultural work. For vineyard works, crops, land work, harvesting and much more, you can only rely on women. This work involves physical strength and skills that destroy the myth of the weak woman, but the parable of women who can’t open a pickle jar by themselves still successfully goes around”.

The right to land – a historical issue

The unequal power relation between women and men can also be seen in the fact that we have a majority of men who own agricultural land – only 32.4% of agricultural land owners in Romania are women⁸. Here we run into a historical obstacle that still has effects, despite the agrarian reforms that established the right of ownership or inheritance for women as well. In most rural families, properties (houses and land) result from inheritances entitled for men, which creates conditions that influence from the start the future decisions regarding the welfare of the members of these families.

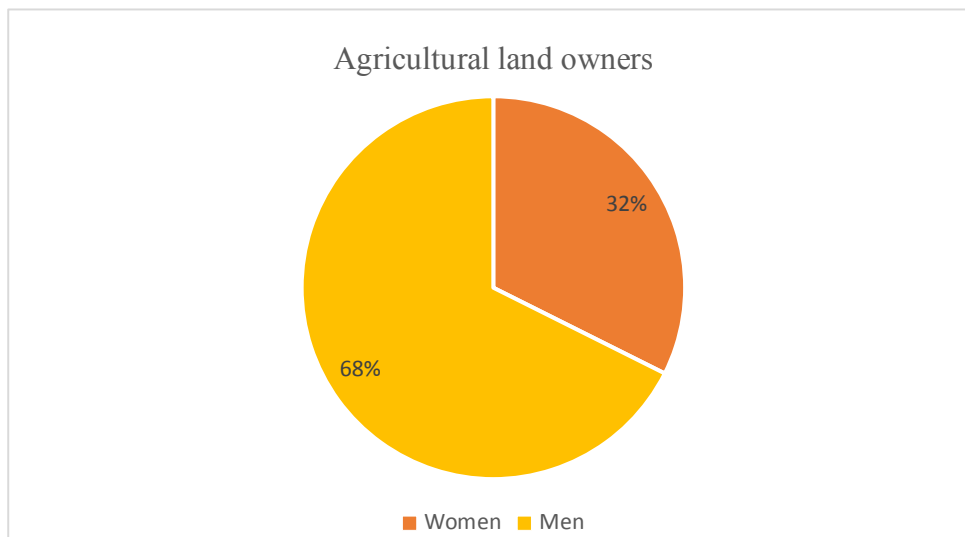
Globally, the situation is even worse. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)¹⁰, women own only 15% of agricultural land, while they represent 50% of the agricultural labor.

It is important to put the land rights situation in a historical context. The theft performed by the communist regime, directed against millions of peasants, radically transformed the countryside and impoverished it on the long term. Peasants were turned into agricultural workers on state farms, where most of the unqualified seasonal workers were rural women. In the ‘90s, Romania had probably the most successful agrarian reform in the communist bloc, through which most of the stolen agricultural land has returned to the peasants. But the means of production were never returned. This has put the peasants and peasant women in a terrible position to return to the precarious, archaic means of production, largely ridiculed by society, which still operate today. And it left behind millions of rural women, who worked in state farms in harsh conditions, without social support, in some cases being rewarded with very low retirement allowances and in other cases with nothing. On top of all of this, capitalism added a new set of economic inequalities. The peasants entered, without being prepared, in an unequal competition with the big multinational capital and with the Romanian oligarchy, which was born from ties with the old regime. At the bottom of the sea of problems, are rural women.

⁸ <https://www.fao.org/3/I8796EN/i8796en.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/data-map/statistics/en>

¹⁰ <https://www.fao.org/family-farming-decade/home/en/>



The right to education and development

Brîndușa Bîrhală: “Women give up hope in the countryside and then migrate (...) because they can’t find the basic necessities [here] – I mean proper education or maybe the agricultural work doesn’t bring them enough income to manage, but also the simple fact that when you have a child, you want them to have good medical care – meaning, geographically speaking, in very remote areas, if something were to happen, then you are far away from any possibility of help”.

Among the problems that women in rural areas face, there is the lack of adequate education. In most cases, in villages, the educational institutions available stop at the secondary level, and it becomes necessary for the youth to commute a considerable distance to continue their studies. Those who don’t have the resources to commute or whose parents don’t think that is necessary for them to continue their studies – because they have chores to do, children to raise, etc. – often stop there with their level of education. Also, the lack of sex education directly influences the number of teenage mothers who end up stuck in the role of a housewife, responsible for raising children, instead of having the opportunity to continue their education.

Brîndușa’s statement adds to this important discussion: “It depends on her socio-economic context, there are wealthy women in rural areas who have resources so they have fewer obstacles, but if they don’t have this favorable context, their problems are different – lack of basic social services, lack of access to an adequate education or extracurricular activities (...) in our village we don’t have a school, we only have a kindergarten”.

Domestic violence

Another major problem among rural women is the domestic violence. Women are twice as affected by domestic violence. Unofficially, violence against women is much more widespread than what the statistics show us, being almost impossible to estimate. From official data, in 2021, the distribution of victims of domestic violence by gender, according to the place of residence, was:

- Women, urban: 4051,
- Women, rural: 3961,
- Men, urban: 2176,
- Men, rural: 2291.

And the number of deaths caused by domestic violence in 2020-2022 was:

Year	Deaths (murders)	Committed in urban areas	Committed in rural areas
2020	72	26	46
2021	67	28	39
2022 (2 months)	6	2	4

*Data provided by the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men (ANES).

Here we must take into account the fact that peasant and rural women face multiple barriers in the process of reporting acts of domestic violence: psychological factors, economic factors, lack of emotional support, fear of the aggressor, distrust in the measures taken by the authorities, the “staining” of their social life, etc.¹¹.

Although the Department of Social Assistance, where cases of domestic violence can be reported, operates at the communal level, there is a need for institutions that deal with the prevention of violence in rural spaces. Due to the fact that the institutions/organizations that deal with the prevention and the tackling of domestic violence, often have their headquarters in urban areas and tend to focus more on the specific circumstances of urban women.

Brîndușa Bîrhală: “The perception on women is very limited – it’s different from that of empowerment, although we see women as capable, somehow the discourse is not one that recognizes, celebrates and empowers – but rather one that undermines, ironizes”.

The statistical data says the same thing – there is a considerable number of people, 1 in 4, who think it’s acceptable for a man to not let his partner use her money as she wants, but also, 1 in 4 who think a woman can’t go out unaccompanied by her partner¹².

In the process of writing this article, the author requested data and information from the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men (ANES) regarding the issues of domestic violence against rural women, as well as the public services that are made available to them. Some of the information was included in the content of the article. You can check the detailed response here¹³.

Solutions

A change in the sense of ensuring a better life for peasant and rural women must come first of all from the administration, both local and national. But also, from rural communities, by changing the perception on the condition of women.

Stela Zămoiu: “I’ve made it to the age of 61 – until a few years ago, I had dedicated myself to my children, grandchildren ... now I think it’s my turn to live for myself too”.

Brîndușa Bîrhală: “For me, it starts with recognition – it is very obvious that women have an extraordinary capacity to do many things (...) and it would be desirable, from a formal perspective, to have stability in public policies”.

¹¹ <https://anes.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Studiu-privind-prevalenta-formelor-de-violenta-impotriva-femeilor.pdf>

¹² <https://centrulfilia.ro/new/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Barometrul-Violenta-de-Gen.-Romania-2022.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.ecoruralis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Raspuns-Eco-Ruralis-Info-Date-VD.pdf>

Ramona Duminicioiu: “We, peasant women, can be leaders in our communities and our work is the living proof of the capacity we have. Without feminism there can be no democracy or real development”.

The international instrument that guides us in the process of rural feminism is the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other People Working in Rural Areas¹⁴, whose Article 4 defines the right of peasant women and other rural women, as well as the states obligations:

“1. States shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against peasant women and other women working in rural areas and to promote their empowerment in order to ensure, on the basis of equality between men and women, that they fully and equally enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms and that they are able to freely pursue, participate in and benefit from rural economic, social, political and cultural development.

2. States shall ensure that peasant women and other women working in rural areas enjoy without discrimination all the human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in the present Declaration and in other international human rights instruments, including the rights:

(a) To participate equally and effectively in the formulation and implementation of development planning at all levels;

(b) To have equal access to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, including adequate health-care facilities, information, counselling and services in family planning;

(c) To benefit directly from social security programmes;

(d) To receive all types of training and education, whether formal or non-formal, including training and education relating to functional literacy, and to benefit from all community and extension services in order to increase their technical proficiency;

(e) To organize self-help groups, associations and cooperatives in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities through employment or self-employment;

(f) To participate in all community activities;

(g) To have equal access to financial services, agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities and appropriate technology;

(h) To equal access to, use of and management of land and natural resources, and to equal or priority treatment in land and agrarian reform and in land resettlement schemes;

(i) To decent employment, equal remuneration and social protection benefits, and to have access to income-generating activities;

(j) To be free from all forms of violence.”

¹⁴ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1650694?ln=en>