

LITHUANIAN WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE: GENDERED FARMING PRACTICES AND LANDSCAPE DIVERSIFICATION

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Abstract: This article aims to contribute to the production of knowledge on gender dynamics in the European farming sector. It explores women's roles in Lithuanian agriculture and their impact on the rural landscape. The study employs a mixed-methodology approach that combines statistical analyses, interviews with 50 farming families, and farm visits. The results highlight distinct characteristics of the Lithuanian context, both specific to Lithuania and common to other CEE countries. Women constitute a larger portion of the agricultural workforce than the European average. However, they primarily participate in small-scale farming, are less eager to expand their farms compared to men, and claim less aid than their male counterparts. Their roles mostly involve manual, low-skilled labour and subsistence activities. Finally, women farmers actively participate in conserving and diversifying traditional rural landscapes, thereby contributing to the Europeanisation of agricultural practices.

Keywords: Women, farming, rural, Lithuania, landscape

Résumé: Cet article vise à mieux comprendre les dynamiques de genre dans l'agriculture européenne. Il examine le rôle des femmes dans l'agriculture lituanienne et leur influence sur les paysages ruraux. La recherche s'appuie sur une méthodologie mixte, combinant des analyses statistiques, des entretiens menés auprès de 50 familles d'agriculteurs et des observations de terrain. Les résultats soulignent les spécificités du contexte lituanien, tout en mettant en évidence des similitudes avec d'autres pays d'Europe centrale et orientale. Les femmes représentent une part plus importante de la main-d'œuvre agricole que la moyenne européenne. Toutefois, elles se concentrent principalement sur les petites exploitations, aspirent moins à l'agrandissement de leur exploitation et demandent moins d'aides que les hommes. Elles prennent en charge les activités manuelles et peu qualifiées, ainsi que les activités de subsistance. Enfin, les agricultrices jouent un rôle clé dans la conservation et la diversification des paysages ruraux traditionnels, contribuant à l'européanisation des pratiques agricoles.

Mots-clés: Femmes, agriculture, rural, Lituanie, paysage

Highlights

- Lithuanian female farmers mainly manage and work on family and small-scale farms, even if they are significantly represented in the Lithuanian agricultural sector.
- Female farmers frequently occupy low-skilled, undervalued roles in agriculture and require less financial support.

- Women farmers aspire to engage in family farming and to cultivate small and medium-sized farms.
 - Women farmers are essential for preserving Lithuania's rural landscapes and promoting diverse farming practices.
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1. Introduction

In recent years, particularly in light of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for 2023–2027, there has been a surge in studies examining gender dynamics and women's roles in the European Union's agricultural sector. Notable examples include European research initiatives such as the Horizon Projects FLIARA (Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas) and SWIST (Supporting Women-led Innovation in Farming Territories). These projects have produced several publications that compare the situation of women across rural Europe (Dabkienė, 2025; Diamanti and Duncan, 2023; Sarkki et al., 2024).

These studies pay relatively little attention to the Baltic countries, especially Lithuania. Therefore, agriculture in the Baltic states and the broader Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region has unique characteristics, influenced by both their socialist past and the farming sector's decollectivisation and subsequent industrialisation since the 2000s. This history has impacted women farmers' daily lives, including the ongoing presence of small-scale farming and subsistence practices (Aistara, 2015; Balezentis et al., 2021; Stępień et al., 2022). In Lithuania, the agricultural sector employs a significant number of women: they account for 42% of the agricultural workforce in Lithuania, whereas they make up only 29% in Europe. Thus, Lithuania's CAP strategic plan designates them as a key social group to be supported by policies in the upcoming years (Lithuania CAP Strategic Plan, 2022). Nevertheless, there is a lack of statistical data or economic and sociological research that directly address this issue (Balezentis et al., 2021; Mincyte, 2012), compared to other CEE countries.

This article on rural geography seeks to enhance understanding of the lives of Lithuanian women farmers amid significant changes in agriculture since the 2000s (Maciulyte, 2025). It specifically focuses on the role of women in the Lithuanian agricultural sector, examining their impact on rural areas and the landscapes they manage. The article uses a multi-scalar approach by cross-referencing national dynamics and local practices. This approach will be supported by a mixed methodology that includes statistical data, interviews, farm visits, and observations in three rural villages within the Lithuanian districts of Molėtai, Joniškis, and Šalčininkai³.

The analysis will focus on women farmers working on family farms, since this is the most common model in the country. In 2020, family farms accounted for 99% of all farms, and by 2023, 92% of farmers were operating family farms (National Statistics, 2023). To understand the role and impact of women in agriculture, we will examine: i) their working conditions, including productive

³ The exact names of the villages are not specified to guarantee the respondents' anonymity.

and reproductive work, and the types of agriculture they are involved in, and ii) how their everyday practices shape agricultural and rural landscapes at various scales.

We propose three main hypotheses:

- Gender inequalities and the difficulties faced by women farmers in Lithuania partly stem from the unique context of Central and Eastern Europe. This region is marked by a socialist legacy, decollectivisation, and the industrialisation of agriculture following Lithuania's EU accession.
- A key characteristic of women's agricultural work in Lithuania is the blend of productive and reproductive work. Women engage in professional farming alongside food self-provisioning (FSP) and subsistence practices, which often lead to the undervaluation of their roles. Their work is primarily organised at the micro-local level and deeply rooted in daily life.
- The role of women in agriculture and their farming practices' specificities make them important stakeholders in landscape diversification at different levels.

We will explore the role of women in family farming, which has experienced considerable transformation since the country joined the EU, and how their farming activities (balancing productive and reproductive work) help diversify rural landscapes.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Gender dynamics in the farming sector: shedding light on the Lithuanian situation through European scientific literature

After long ignoring the issue, the scientific literature emphasises gender issues in the European agricultural sector and in rural areas. It highlighted the inequalities women face (Dabkienė, 2025). In rural areas, they often have limited access to education and employment opportunities and may be victims of violence (Bock, 2015). They also experience isolation, and they face mobility difficulties; women in the most precarious situations (single mothers, for example) have difficult access to social services in rural areas (Bock, 2015). In the farming sector, they have less access to land, farming education, and public aid (Diamanti and Duncan, 2023). Despite these inequalities, women also play a crucial role as stakeholders in driving change and fostering innovation (Dabkiene et al., 2025; Sarkki et al., 2024). They invest in sustainable agriculture and agroecology and advocate for sustainability issues in their communities (Ramirez-Santos et al., 2023), even though some inequalities persist in these sectors (Vizuite et al., 2025).

Research on the living conditions of women in Lithuanian rural areas has been relatively limited, unlike in other CEE countries (Sõukand et al., 2020). The issues identified in the scientific literature on the Lithuanian situation often mirror those found in other European countries: although the situation of rural women has improved since the 2000s, socio-economic inequalities between men and women remain (Šukyte and Vaičiūniene, 2009). In the Lithuanian countryside, as in other rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe, women actively participate in fostering rural

communities through associations (Dedeire and Maciulyte, 2012; Kiełbasa, 2024). Their goal is to rebuild social ties among villagers via collective efforts and to motivate them to address local issues (Dedeire and Maciulyte, 2012). However, the role of women in the agricultural sector is rarely addressed (Mincyte, 2012), unless the focus is on young farmers (Balezentis et al., 2021) or “innovators in agriculture” (Dabkiene et al., 2025), despite the fact that women are relatively numerous in the Lithuanian agricultural sector. In 2023, they account for 42% of the workforce in Lithuanian agriculture (National Statistics, 2023). This is notably higher than the European average of 29%, and far exceeds the figures for countries like the Netherlands and Denmark, where only about 10% of farmers are women (Diamanti and Duncan, 2023). Still, the role of women in agriculture and rural areas is a significant issue in Lithuania. Demographic studies indicate that the rural population is ageing, and while the number of women farmers remains substantial, it continues to decline (Jurkėnaitė, 2013). This trend is supported by the latest national statistics, which show that from 2005 to 2023, the percentage of women in the agricultural workforce decreased from 50% to 42% (National Statistics, 2023). In this context, women continue to play a central role in specific sectors, particularly dairy farming and, above all, in small-scale farming (Mincyte, 2012).

Although research on gender dynamics in Lithuanian rural areas and agriculture is limited, European academic studies highlight the importance of addressing these issues, as gender inequalities tend to be more pronounced in rural regions and manifest in particular ways within the agricultural sector (Sarkki et al., 2024). This article will contribute to a better understanding of gender inequalities in the CEE, using the Lithuanian agricultural sector as a case study. We will compare our findings with existing research on CEE countries (which include EU member states with a socialist economy legacy that shifted to a capitalist one), because we believe this context is relevant for studying women’s farming practices in Lithuania, given that it has shaped Lithuanian rural life areas (Jehlička et al., 2020; Sovová et al., 2025).

2.2 Farming sector transformations in Central and Eastern Europe

Understanding the role of women in Lithuania's agricultural sector also involves examining the evolution of family farming since the country gained independence in 1990 and joined the European Union in 2004. The transformations in Lithuanian agriculture were initially marked by decollectivisation, i.e., the transition from a socialist and collectivist farming system to a capitalist one (Maciulyte, 2025). This also led to significant land issues with the creation of legislation in favour of a large-scale redistribution of land to families, especially those who had been deported and dispossessed during the forced collectivisation under Soviet occupation (Maciulyte, 2025). Lithuanian agriculture was then marked by the introduction of the CAP, which led to extensive research into the development and innovation capacities of Lithuanian farms in both the conventional and organic sectors (Kaufmann et al., 2011). Rural areas and the agricultural sector were then characterised by economic fragility, with the majority of farms being small agricultural holdings with little capacity for innovation (Karazijienė and Černikovaite, 2025; Stępień et al., 2022).

Over the past twenty years, the structure of farms has undergone significant changes, including modernisation and farm expansion in size, as well as the industrialisation of agricultural practices (Galnaitytė et al., 2017). As a result, the agricultural sector is facing similar socio-economic and demographic trends to those of other CEE countries (Bilewicz and Bukraba-Rylska, 2021): an increase in farm size, a decrease in the number of farms, ageing, and a decline in the farming population, among others (Jurkėnaitė, 2013; Agricultural Census of Lithuania 2020, 2022). The country has also recently witnessed the development of organic farming and short food supply chains around major cities, particularly near Vilnius, despite socio-economic difficulties highlighted in the scientific literature (Blumberg and Mincyte, 2020).

Like other Central and Eastern European countries that experienced communist rule in the 20th century (Maurel, 2021), Lithuania's agriculture is still characterised primarily by family farming (that is to say farming where the workforce consists primarily of family members) and a small number of agricultural holdings, combined with a large number of small farms (Blumberg and Mincyte, 2020; Vitunskienė et al., 2020).

The 'small farm' definition is a subject of debate in the literature, as it is inconsistently defined and based on different criteria. In scientific literature on CEE farming sector, a "very small farm" tends to be defined as one with an area of 5 hectares or less, and a "small farm" can be defined as one with an area of 20 hectares or less, with a gross annual income of €25,000 or less, and a workforce that consists mainly of family members (Borychowski et al., 2024; Stępień et al., 2022). In Lithuania, national data indicate that the number of small farms has decreased, with 100,795 ceasing to exist between 2007 and 2020 (Agricultural Census of Lithuania 2020, 2022). Conversely, large farms (exceeding 50 hectares) increased from 6,889 to 11,215 during the same period (Agricultural Census of Lithuania 2020, 2022).

This article explores women's roles in this agricultural sector in CEE, with a focus on Lithuania, and their impact on the transformation of family and small-scale farming.

2.3 The role of women in shaping CEE rural landscapes

Research in social sciences, especially in economics, influenced by feminist approaches, reveals that evaluating women's societal roles is complicated. Their work is frequently connected to the undervalued domestic and reproductive sphere and to unpaid tasks (Federici, 2018; Mies, 1986). In research on the farming sector, women's work can be seen as lying between paid professional roles and various informal reproductive tasks, such as unpaid work on the family farm, food production for household consumption, and maintenance of the farm, home, and garden. Thus, this dimension is crucial when analysing gender dynamics in the agricultural and food sector of CEE, as multiple researchers emphasise the central role of subsistence practices and food self-provisioning (FSP) in this region (Aistara, 2015; Jehlička et al., 2020; Sovová et al., 2025). Subsistence activities here refer to all domestic practices performed by women on their farms, including the movement and exchange of materials, knowledge, and products (Pruvost, 2021). These activities aim to support and care for the family and also involve managing

the outdoor living space. Within these subsistence activities, FSP refers to food production for the family's own consumption or for donation, without monetary exchange. In these food supply networks, which are frequently examined in connection with urban areas but less so in rural regions (Decker, 2019), women constitute the majority (Mincyte, 2012; Pungas, 2020). In Lithuania, Mincyte demonstrated that from the 2000s to the 2010s, these informal food supply networks developed between urban and rural areas were driven by women's informal practices and agricultural activities (Mincyte, 2012).

Researchers also highlight the strong resilience and environmental sustainability of this type of agriculture in CEE (Czekaj et al., 2020; Jehlička et al., 2019; Mincyte, 2012), despite most case studies being centred on urban or peri-urban regions. They also showed that, despite their significance in daily life, these agricultural practices are often underappreciated or overlooked in European policies and are encountering growing challenges amid the industrialisation of agriculture (Blumberg and Mincyte, 2020; Pungas, 2023).

Given the ongoing changes in Lithuania's agricultural sector, this article explores how women farmers, through their domestic and professional roles, influence rural areas. Considering this, we will analyse how their farming practices influence the preservation or transformation of rural landscapes. Landscape studies have greatly contributed to understanding large-scale changes in rural areas, focusing on the creation and preservation of these landscapes at the European level (van Zanten et al., 2014). The concept of food landscapes has emerged to describe and analyse the intricate interconnections within the food system and planning at both regional and urban levels (Parham, 2019).

Here, this article seeks to develop a micro-scalar analysis of landscape evolution through ordinary practices, drawing on materialist and feminist studies that emphasise the connection between women's practices and the environment in the broadest sense (Federici, 2018; Pruvost, 2021; Pungas, 2022). This approach considers the landscape as a spatial outcome that can be seen and touched, shaped by a range of everyday domestic and professional practices. Many of these practices are non-verbal and involve objects and resources exchanged and utilised in daily life (Pruvost, 2021). Here, we illustrate how this landscape approach can be applied to the study of rural practices, populations, and regions in the Lithuanian post-socialist context.

3. Methodology

The research employs a mixed-methodology approach that integrates an analysis of Lithuania's national agricultural statistics with interviews and observations conducted in three distinct districts: Joniškis, Molėtai, and Šalčininkai (see Figure 1).

The first set of interviews took place in the lowland of the Joniškis district (n=26), where agriculture is predominantly cereal-based and intensive, exploiting some of the most productive and expensive land in the country. The second and third sets of interviews were conducted in the highlands, focusing on the districts of Molėtai and Šalčininkai (n=24), where agriculture tends

to be more extensive, primarily involving cattle farming and the recent emergence of market gardening and short food supply chains supplying Vilnius.

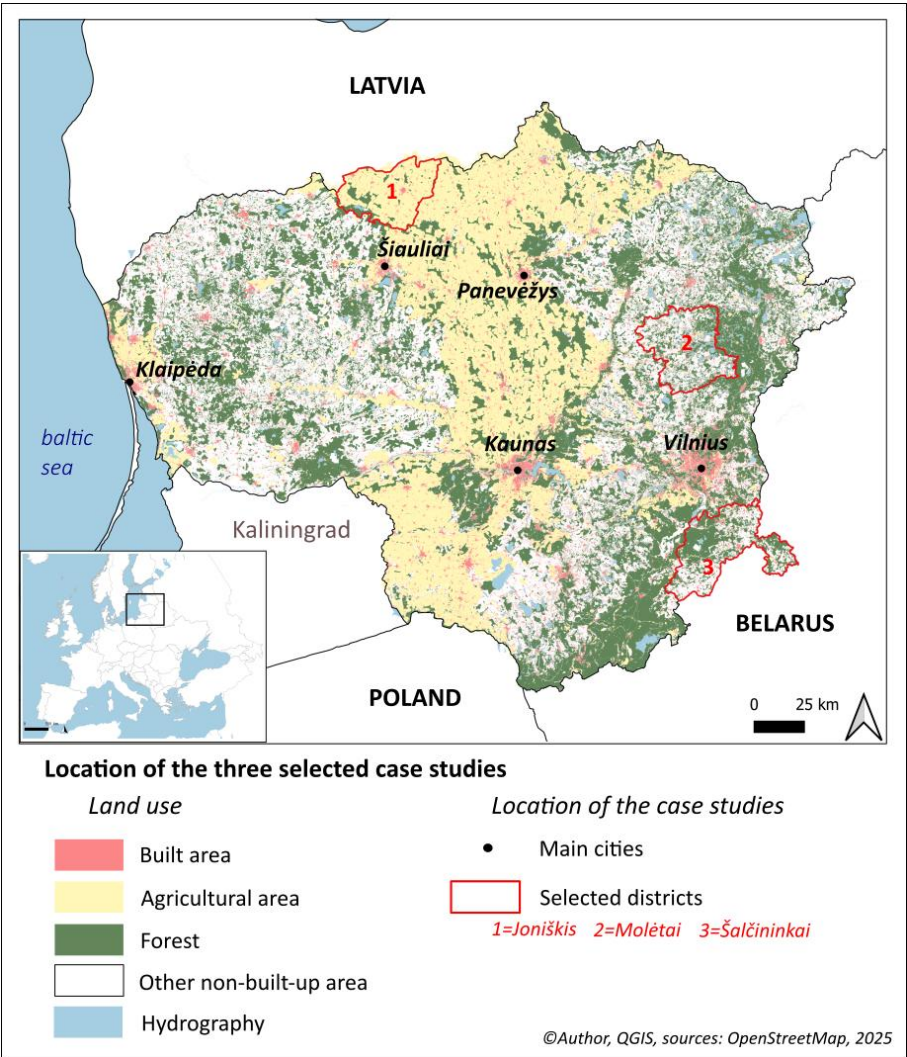


Figure 1. Three case studies in Lithuanian highlands and lowlands. Source: C. Robert-Boeuf, 2025

The map (see Figure 1) clearly illustrates the Middle Lithuania Lowland, with the grain-growing plain extending across Lithuania from north to south (in yellow). The three case studies were selected to represent the country's agricultural diversity: Joniškis in the lowland, and Molėtai and Šalčininkai in the highlands (in the Aukštaičių and Medininkų hills). Within the districts of Joniškis and Molėtai, two *seniūnijos*⁴ (municipalities) were selected to facilitate a comprehensive municipal-level survey. We engaged with the majority of farmers in these two municipalities to gather a representative sample of respondents from the studied areas. The district of Šalčininkai was later included to complete the interview sample, providing insights into the extensive agriculture in the highlands and on the role of the capital’s proximity.

⁴ The *seniūnija* is the smallest administrative division of Lithuania, the Lithuanian equivalent of municipality. Deprived of political and financial autonomy, these local territorial units have very limited scope for action and are subordinate to the district authorities (savivaldybė).

The data collection methodology was mixed with three types of quantitative and qualitative data: 1) statistical analysis; 2) in-depth interviews with 50 farmers' families; 3) farm visits and observations with 28 of these interviewed families.

The first dataset used in this article includes agricultural and demographic data from Eurostat and the Lithuanian National Statistics, covering the period from 2005 to 2023. These statistics were used to understand significant trends in the Lithuanian farming sector, assess the situation of women, and, where applicable, identify differences between them and male farmers.

Between 2024 and 2025, 50 farming families were interviewed (see Figure 2). To meet the farmers, we relied on multiple sources of information and contacts. First, we reused lists of farming families surveyed in the 2000s in the same regions (Maciulyte, 2004). We also contacted local *seniūnijos*, who possess detailed knowledge of the area, are familiar with active farmers, and have provided us with their contact details. During each interview, we asked farmers whether there were others in their village, so we could create a comprehensive list of all farmers in the area. We contacted all the farmers and interviewed those willing to meet, ensuring our sample was representative by farm size, farming type, and production. We explained the study's purpose to all farmers and obtained their formal, informed consent. We used a questionnaire comprising 110 closed and open-ended questions, organised into seven sections. These sections covered the following areas: the interviewee's profile; activities prior to entering agriculture; general characteristics of the farm; agricultural practices and production details over the previous 2 years; the interviewee's development and family strategies; and environmental issues. All interviews were anonymised. Farmers' answers were transcribed during the interviews (not recorded), then coded and entered into a comparative table for cross-referencing. Ethnographic notes were kept during fieldwork to capture observations related to the interviews and farm visits.

Of these 50 farming families, 30 men and 20 women served as farm managers⁵. While the farm managers were the primary subjects of our survey, several family members participated in the interviews, especially when couples worked together on the farm. By not restricting our focus solely to female managers, we could compare the circumstances of farms managed by men with those managed by women in the three districts. Additionally, we observed that women, who primarily did not hold official management roles, often handled and coordinated farm work. Interviews showed that 11 of the 30 farms studied, officially operated by men, had at least one woman (mostly the mother or wife) working on the farm and helping to organise agricultural activities. We managed to meet a few of these women, some of whom were present during the interview with the farm manager and occasionally participated in the discussion.

⁵ The term "farm manager" is used here to refer to a person who oversees the farm, even if he or she is not officially recognised as the "head of the farm." The farm may often be registered in one person's name, but managed by another. In the results section, we will analyse these complex situations in agricultural work, where informal contributions from various family members are common.

Table 1. Socio-economic profiles of interviewees on 50 farms. Source: C. Robert-Boeuf & J. Mačiulytė, 2025

	Age (average)	Size of farms (average)	Type of farming	Annual declared farm income (average in 2023)
Female manager farms (n=20)	59	23ha	- 2 cereal farms - 12 farms with livestock (mainly dairy cows) - 5 in mixed farming - 1 in horticulture	17,337€
Male manager farms (n=30)	52	166ha	- 15 cereal farms - 4 farms with livestock (mainly dairy cows) - 6 in mixed farming - 5 others (market gardener, beekeeper, ...)	111,913€

Of the 50 farms where interviews were conducted, we visited and observed 28. This opportunity allowed us to conduct informal interviews with family members on the farms. We gathered more detailed information regarding the distribution of agricultural work by gender and among different family members. Additionally, 1,077 photographs were collected to analyse the evolution of farms and the landscape transformation in the studied districts.

4. Lithuanian women in the farming sector and their impact on the rural landscape

4.1 A majority of women in Lithuanian family farming and smallholdings

In Lithuania, agricultural work in family farming is structured around both formal (declared) and informal (undeclared) cooperation among family members. Most of the 50 families interviewed work as couples or involve one or more family members in the farming activities. Children often assist their parents with labour-intensive tasks, such as harvesting, or with household tasks when they return home from university in the summer. Most farmers interviewed also supplement their farming income with a pension or a second job. In family farming, women play a crucial role (see Figure 2), as they are highly involved, even when not in managerial positions.

Lithuanian women farmers are primarily found on smaller farms, which tend to have the lowest incomes and rely on manual labour. As statistics show, in 2016, women constituted 52% of formal workers on farms with zero income, but only 43% on farms with annual incomes of €500,000 or more (Eurostat, 2016). Our fieldwork supports this data, revealing that farms managed by women average 20 hectares and generate a profit of €17,337. In comparison, the men we interviewed manage larger farms, averaging 166 hectares, with an average declared annual income of €111,913. It should be noted that most small farms analysed are actually in the upper end of the size range, between 10 and 20 hectares. Despite regional statistics (National Statistics, 2023)

suggesting a prevalence of very small farms, those under 5 hectares have almost vanished in the three case studies. Out of 50 farms studied, 7 are under 5 hectares, with women managing 4 of them. Additionally, we observed that women who participate in farming activities are mainly found on small farms. In the sample of 50 farms, we found that 18 women farmers (whether managers, employees, or informal workers) work on farms of 20 hectares or less, 3 work on farms between 21 and 50 hectares, and 10 work on farms of 51 hectares or more.

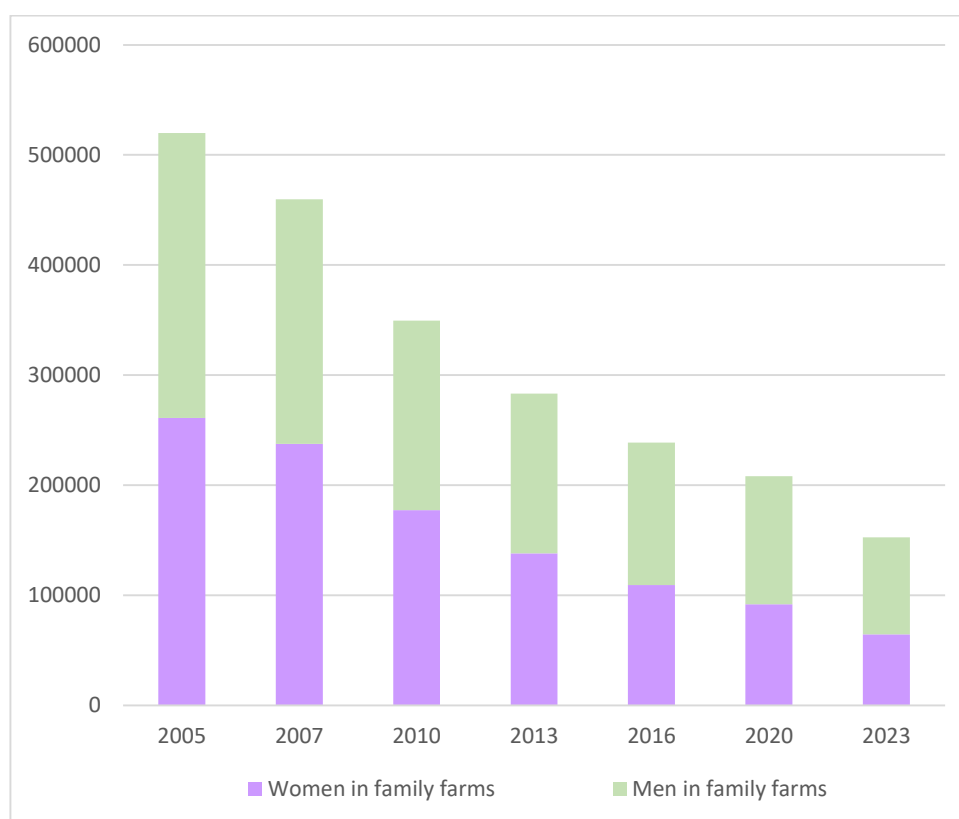


Figure 2. Evolution of the agricultural workforce in family farms by gender (2005–2023). Source: C. Robert-Boeuf, 2025, Official national statistics of Lithuania, 2026

As these women work mainly on small farms, their work is less mechanised and more manual. Although women farmers often say in interviews that they know how to drive a tractor, for example, they also agree that they do not use it often and that it is mainly men (their husbands or sons) who use it. Vita⁶, a 61-year-old female farmer who owns 6 hectares in Molėtai district, is the only female farmer to mention that she regularly drives the tractor and enjoys it. During the interview, she explains: “We do everything the other way round [laughs]: he [her husband] plants the potatoes and repairs the machinery, but that’s all. I handle the fodder, operate the tractor, chop wood, and perform repairs around the house. I enjoy these tasks. My husband cooks, prepares meals, and cares for the chickens.”

Furthermore, across the three territories studied, young farmers are predominantly men: of the 50 farmer managers interviewed, 11 are under 40, including only 3 women. The average age

⁶ To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, all names have been changed.

of the male farmers surveyed is 52, while the average age of women is 59. This data aligns with the national trend. The 2020 agricultural census shows that men under 40 make up 19.5% of family farmers, whereas women in the same age group represent only 8.9%. Conversely, men aged 65 and older comprise 24.9%, while women in that age bracket account for 28.4% (Agricultural Census of Lithuania 2020, 2022). This trend is supported by other research on the subject (Balezentis et al., 2021), suggesting that the decline in the number of women in the agricultural sector will likely continue.

Our research indicates that the concentration of women on small farms is attributable to several factors. First, both male and female small farmers we met often explained that they established their farms through land acquisition thanks to the land redistribution process in the early 2000s (Maciulyte, 2025). After Lithuania regained independence in 1990, several land redistribution laws encouraged the settlement of small farmers and new entrants into farming (Maciulyte, 2004). This large-scale land redistribution, particularly the redistribution of small plots (3 hectares), appears to have benefited small farmers, which may help explain the significant presence of women in agriculture in Lithuania and on small farms. These 3-hectare plots are a direct legacy of Soviet subsidiary farms, where rural families (primarily women) were involved in food production for personal consumption or, if they had excess, for sale on the black market (Maciulyte, 2025; Mincyte, 2009a).

Secondly, interviews reveal that while many farmers do not want to expand their operations (31 out of 50), this is especially true for female farmers (15 out of 20). In contrast, a larger proportion of male farmers wish to expand their operations (14 out of 20). The expansion of agricultural activity is primarily driven by land purchases or rentals, with little attention to diversification. This trend mainly involves men: 25 interviewees plan to buy agricultural land in the near future, of whom 17 are men. Among the 20 women farm managers, 15 do not wish to expand their operations, and 12 of these managers do not plan to purchase additional land, as they believe they currently have sufficient land. When asked about their ideal farm size, the female farm managers indicated an average of 38 hectares, whereas the 30 male managers mentioned an average of 260 hectares. These proportions are consistent across all three studied sites, with no notable differences. When questioned about the reasons, the women highlight that they own enough land to operate a profitable business and make a living, or express greater uncertainty about their land access than men do. Among the 20 female managers, 3 think they will achieve their ideal farm size, 9 are unsure or doubt they can (because land is unavailable or too costly), and 8 have already reached it. All managers who have achieved their ideal size manage farms smaller than 20 hectares.

Overall, the interviews emphasise the difficulties women face in agricultural work, which either discourage them from pursuing farm expansion (because it seems undesirable or unfeasible) or impede their access to essential material resources. In Joniškis district, 60-year-old farmer Danutė, who manages three cows on her 4-hectare land, describes the situation pessimistically. She feels anger towards the government and scientists, who she believes have let small farmers down. Initially hesitant, she agrees to the interview only after some informal chat on her

doorstep. As the interview progresses, she opens up: she produces her own cheese and remains one of the few small-scale farmers in her village. Only she and her neighbour remain, both watching out for each other. The village's sole other dairy farm is a large industrial farm housing 2,000 cows year-round in barns. She works tirelessly: milking daily, making cheese, and tending livestock are daily chores. While she takes pride in her cheese, believing it surpasses mass-produced varieties in quality, the work is physically exhausting, especially since she has been ill and needs regular breaks during the workday. She is no longer able to produce enough to sell; she only occasionally sells to her neighbours. Therefore, she prefers to maintain her current business rather than expand.

Even women overseeing large farms face similar challenges. In Molėtai district, Loreta, a 60-year-old farmer running a 60-hectare farm with approximately 50 dairy cows, encounters the same issues. Her daily routine is demanding; she must constantly care for the cows for milking, grow her own food, and handle household chores, including caring for around forty chickens, turkeys, and peacocks, as well as maintaining a small vegetable garden. Her husband assists with machinery repairs, but she manages most other tasks, making her daily workload heavy. She also feels unrepresented by unions, which, she says, mainly support large dairy farmers. Although she wishes to expand her farm to 150 hectares, land availability is limited since she inherited 30 hectares from her parents in 2010 and currently rents 25 hectares from neighbours. Moreover, the additional workload would be too much. Thus, she doesn't believe she can achieve 150 hectares in the near future.

Thus, the women farmers interviewed are less eager to expand their farms because they already have a heavy workload and do not want to take on more. In contrast, men are more interested in acquiring agricultural land and are more confident that they can do so in the future.

4.2 Inequalities and specific issues for women farmers

The over-representation of women in small farms highlights the challenges women farmers face in Lithuania.

Case studies indicated that female farm managers are less likely than their male counterparts to inherit family farms. Moreover, there is a noticeable gender imbalance among farmers: 16 of 30 male managers inherited family farms, compared with only 4 of 20 female managers. This disparity has been further emphasised in farm succession during interviews, where sons or male family members are more likely to take over farms than daughters or female family members. When we asked farmers about their aspirations for their children to become farmers, the responses reflected this imbalance, with no significant difference between female and male respondents: the majority of those with sons wanted them to continue farming (15 farmers in favour and 9 against), compared to those with daughters, where opinions were evenly split (11 farmers in favour and 11 against).

Additionally, small farms often have limited access to subsidies, resulting in lower support for women farmers compared to men. Among the 50 farms studied, only 5 of the 20 farms managed

by women received European Union aid for agricultural development, with an average aid amount of €22,325. In contrast, 16 out of 30 male-managed farms received aid, averaging €77,782⁷. Some women choose to develop activities on land below the subsidy eligibility threshold. Gintarė, a 59-year-old woman farmer from the Molėtai district, grows flowers she sells fresh at the nearby market or for events such as parties and weddings in Vilnius. She also works part-time as an accountant. She owns 10 hectares but leases 6 hectares to her son, who keeps 12 beef cattle. She has been cultivating 1 hectare of land for a year, while the remaining land is used for grazing, as she has one cow. Her husband suggested they grow flowers; he ordered the seeds and equipment, but died suddenly. She chose to continue with the project and is genuinely enjoying it. Her lifelong passion for reading about plants and flowers remains strong; she has no regrets. However, managing 1 hectare is already enough for her, even with her daughter-in-law's assistance when needed. She does not plan to expand further or apply for subsidies, as she is too busy with her 1ha plot. Other female farmers may have the option to apply for additional assistance beyond direct aid per hectare, such as installation aid or equipment financing. However, they often choose not to pursue it. This can be attributed to the relatively low demand for mechanical equipment, as work on small farms often involves manual labour. Additionally, many of the women interviewed are in their 50s or 60s and report having too much work, which prompts them to reduce their farming activities. The application processes they face can also be complex and not well-suited to their type of farming, which is less competitive and often viewed as unprofitable by administrative authorities and banks.

As other studies at the European level (notably the Copa-Cogeca Committee survey, with only some results publicly available⁸) and at the Lithuanian level (Dabkiene et al., 2025) indicate that funding structures on their own do not generate gender inequalities. Instead, women farmers often choose not to pursue available support because of time constraints or because the support promotes a farming type they are not involved in, such as the industrialisation of farming practices and competition for farm expansion.

The division of agricultural labour between women and men is a second factor of inequality within the farming sector. During interviews and farm visits, we observed that agricultural work is often organised along gender lines. Women are more actively engaged in livestock farming. Of the 50 farms, 12 of the 20 women-managed farms are involved in livestock farming, and 5 combine livestock farming with cereal farming. When they are not managers, women are also primarily involved in dairy farming, caring for the animals (mainly cows) and operating (often manually) milking. Their tasks are often considered 'secondary' by the manager, because they generate less income. For example, Emilija, a 66-year-old retired farmer in Molėtai district, still works on her son's and husband's farm, which spans 807 hectares and has nearly 300 beef cattle.

⁷ Declared amount that takes into account all aid received since setting up on the farm, excluding direct aid per hectare.

⁸ Some of the survey results, which include many female farmers from Lithuania, have been published by the Lithuanian Farmers' Society: <https://agrobite.lt/lietuva/aktualijos/a-pabedinskiene-moterys-ukyje-lyderes-be-atlygio>

In this very large farm, Emilija takes care of the 11 dairy cows they still have and produces cheese for their own consumption and occasional selling. During the interview, her husband Antanas, a 63-year-old farmer, answers most of the questions whilst she serves us tea. Antanas considers the farm's dairy activities almost a 'hobby' because they provide a very small income compared to the main farm's revenue and are mainly for family use. As a result, the farm's investments are focused on cattle and beef cattle farming, whilst Emilija does most of her work by hand (milking and cheese-making).

Women farmers are also primarily responsible for organising food self-provisioning (FSP) activities. In most interviewed farmers' families, the women take care of the vegetable garden and small livestock. Although these subsistence activities can generate income through informal product sales, they are generally seen as marginal by farmers, or at least not considered part of their main farming work. For example, during interviews, food self-provisioning was often underestimated. When asked whether the interviewee and their family kept small livestock or had a vegetable garden, they (mostly male interviewees) frequently responded that they only had a few chickens and a small vegetable patch. However, when inquiring about the size of vegetable plots or the exact number of animals, the figures were high. In fact, most farmers produce vegetables, potatoes, eggs, and chicken for self-sufficiency, according to the interviews. Most families produce a significant portion of their own food, with only five of the farming families interviewed not practising FSP. On average, the remaining 45 families produce 84% of the vegetables they consume, 80% of the potatoes, 70% of the fruits, and 75% of the eggs annually. Those who raise livestock such as cattle or sheep also consume their meat and dairy products, primarily cheese. This is especially true in the districts of Molėtai and Šalčininkai, where livestock and mixed farms are common. Farmers in these areas produce about 40% of the dairy products they consume themselves, compared to only 15% in the Joniškis district. Notably, women farmers interviewed reported higher levels of food self-production, especially for dairy and meat (see Figure 3). This is likely because most women work on small livestock farms where FSP plays a major role. These results support other studies on FPS in CEE (Mincyte, 2012; Stępień et al., 2022). FSP activities remain common in Lithuanian rural areas and among farmers, even after the industrialisation of agriculture, and are still primarily carried out by women.

Women, therefore, take on agricultural work that is less valued by interviewed men, such as informal work, secondary activity and food supply. These activities tend to be low-skilled and involve less mechanisation compared to the tasks performed by male farmers.

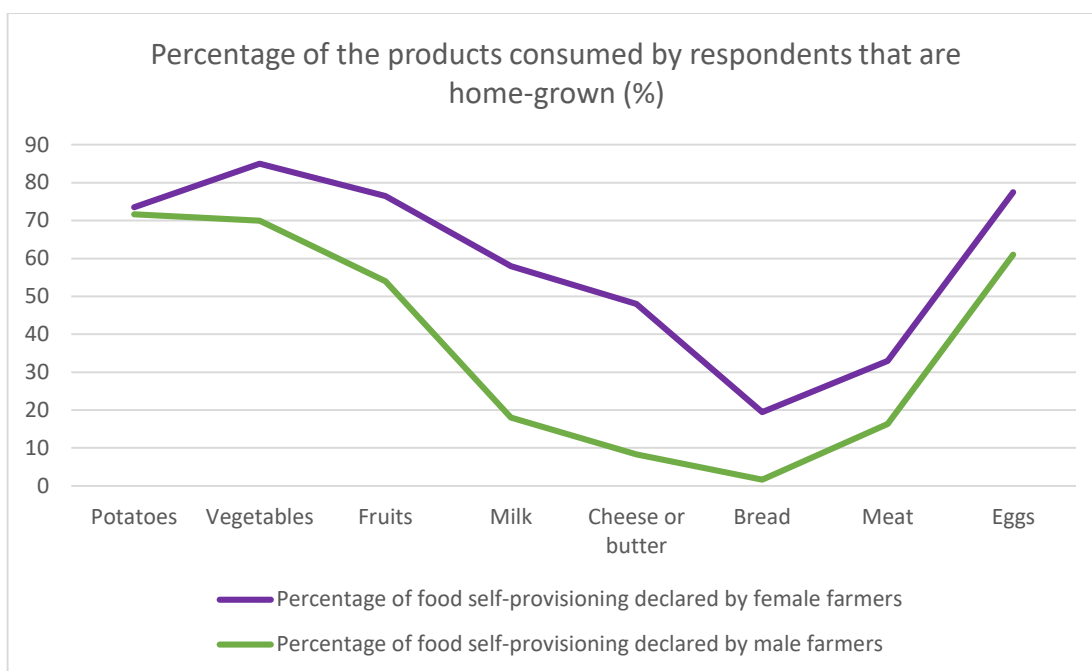


Figure 3. Farmers' food self-provisioning: a gender-specific activity. Source: author, 2026

4.3 The role of women farmers in shaping Lithuanian rural landscapes

The role of women in Lithuania's agricultural sector involves their multifaceted contributions to maintaining and diversifying rural landscapes, as their agricultural practices blend reproductive and productive activities.

At the micro-scale, women farmers sustain traditional landscapes that serve multiple roles: providing food, supporting healing, and offering leisure. This helps maintain the vernacular and everyday landscapes of rural Lithuanian villages by fostering locally and nationally specific animal and plant production. These practices allow people to sustain themselves, care for their well-being, and improve the aesthetic of their place. We have documented various Lithuanian plants cultivated by women that are essential to shaping local landscapes: apple trees, cherry trees for food (notably in the Joniškis district) (see Figure 4), as well as lime trees and chamomile, which are used for herbal teas or medicinal purposes. Here, our study aligns with other research on food self-provisioning (Pungas, 2020; Stępień et al., 2022): women farmers' FSP helps maintain traditional food landscapes that are adapted to the local environment and family needs.



Figure 4. Orchard with cherry and apple trees for domestic consumption near the farm Source: author, 2024, Joniškis district

Orchards and vegetable gardens surround farms, marking their boundaries and distinguishing them from one another within villages.

At the local or municipal level, women farmers continue to practice traditional farming methods on small farms, helping to preserve Lithuania's distinctive landscapes characterised by traditional mixed farming. Our fieldwork shows this through their management of farms awaiting succession while maintaining farming activities. This form of farming is characterised by small farm size and minimal agricultural activity, often without any investment or development. These farmers, often elderly and retired, typically maintain a few hectares of fodder crops, keep a few cows to keep them operational, and earn supplementary income. This type of farming is often fragile and precarious. We primarily observed this phenomenon in the Molėtai district, where the agricultural land is not very fertile, and farming activity is extensive. Women observed participating in this farming type (6 out of 20 female farm managers interviewed) are often older farmers who have worked on small family farms and are now awaiting succession. For instance, in the Molėtai district, Giedrė⁹, a 79-year-old female farmer, works alongside her 45-year-old daughter-in-law (Eglė) on their 17-ha farm. A few years ago, she lost her husband and son. Since then, she and Eglė have taken over the farm. During the interview, Giedrė speaks; Eglė remains quiet and lets her mother-in-law answer. When asked about the farm's future, including succession or the possibility of selling it, Giedrė said, "My grandson will take over the farm when

⁹ To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, all names have been changed.

he finishes his studies. He will decide what to do with it; that will be his decision.” She does not want to sell or invest in her land herself. Although she currently owns the land, she views herself and Eglė as unqualified to determine the farm’s future, as her grandson will inherit the farmland after her, either upon her death or when he chooses to take over. Thus, women farmers preserve traditional family farming and rural landscapes by contributing to small-scale farming and operating farms that would otherwise remain inactive in extensive rural areas, where agriculture is threatened by decline. This type of farming maintains a traditional, largely unmechanized, extensive form of agriculture, along with its associated landscapes.

Conversely, several women are crucial in advancing agricultural practices and diversifying agriculture across the three districts studied. Several women farmers interviewed are developing new productions at a local scale that are still uncommon in Lithuania. These women farmers are often new entrants into farming; they may or may not have prior informal agricultural experience, and often have original life trajectories (experiences in other regions, cities, or abroad)¹⁰. When they come from the district where they settle, they often work in the city or abroad for several years in another sector. Settling into agriculture is, therefore, a career change. This is the case, for example, of Ugnė, a 40-year-old farmer who has been settled with her husband in the Molėtai district for the past 4 years. They decided to take over the farm and move to the countryside after the COVID-19 pandemic. Like her husband, she maintained her job in Vilnius, working in administration. While he started producing blueberries (which have grown significantly around Vilnius recently), she developed a Charolais cattle farm, a rare breed in the region. She took over the herd (a few cows) from her husband's mother, and among them was a Charolais crossbreed, which gave her the idea to learn more about the breed. After researching online, she started breeding these cows to sell the meat. She benefited from CAP subsidies for young farmers and is fully aware of the procedures and subsidies available under the EU. This desire to introduce new practices is also evident in the Šalčininkai district, where Oksana, a 55-year-old woman from Belarus who has lived in Lithuania for about 15 years, is developing several agricultural diversification initiatives on her 10-hectare farm. After training in cheese production in France, funded by CAP aid for small and new farm entrants, she began producing goat's milk and cheese in a region where cattle farming is predominant (see Figure 5). She also wants to produce lavender and develop eco-tourism activities in conjunction with her agricultural production.

¹⁰ Out of the 50 people interviewed, 48 were born in Lithuania. Among them, 33 were born in the municipality where they work as farmers, while two female farmers were born abroad—one in Latvia and the other in Belarus.



Figure 5. Oksana farm and goats. Source: ©Author, 2024, Šalčininkai district

These women account for only 4 of the 20 women interviewed, but they are very familiar with European agricultural aid processes and draw on experiences from other European countries. They contribute to the growth of new types of agriculture in Lithuania, promoting diversification and, consequently, the development of new landscapes across rural areas. They also tend to disseminate knowledge and practices at the district scale. Oksana, mentioned earlier, also gave one of her goats to a retired female teacher living a few kilometers from the farm. This retired teacher, who has an important food self-provisioning activity and a plot of just under one hectare, wanted to make goat's milk for her grandson, who is allergic to cow's milk. When she found out that Oksana kept goats, she got in touch with her straight away. This example illustrates the connection between professional farming and food provisioning, highlighting how informal dissemination processes can be established.

These new practices are transforming rural landscapes, making them more diverse locally. They now reflect the circulation of various crops and livestock breeds from both local and international sources. Thus, as the examples above demonstrate, women farmers are adopting activities inspired by Western European models (Charolais cattle, French goat's cheese, lavender, etc.)

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article emphasises both the similarities and the unique characteristics of Lithuanian women farmers compared to those in other Central and Eastern European countries.

Despite the high number of women in Lithuanian agriculture compared to other European countries (Dabkienė, 2025), they predominantly work on small farms with lower incomes. On large farms, they are frequently assigned the lowest-paid activities and often work informally to

assist the farm manager. Although several recent studies show that there is no legal inequality in access to aid and no sense of inequality among certain categories of farmers (young farmers and farmers entrepreneurs) (Balezentis et al., 2021; Dabkiene et al., 2025), in practice, the female farmers interviewed, who mostly work on small farms, utilise aid less than their male counterparts, who are mainly involved in medium-sized and large farms. This discrepancy arises from women's limited time and the fact that the available support does not adequately address their farming activities and needs. Additionally, women generally do not aim to expand their farms, or at least not as much as men do. They often perceive it as more challenging for women to buy new land, whether this perception is accurate or not. They also feel overwhelmed by their current workload and prefer not to take on more to avoid increasing it further. Conversely, as noted in two studies by Balezentis and colleagues (Balezentis et al., 2021; Dabkiene et al., 2025), some female farmers (especially those from different regions, towns, or abroad) are adopting new practices and developing new forms of agriculture.

Building on Mincyte's research (Mincyte, 2009b), our study emphasises the importance of qualitative methods and considers informal practices and manual labour at the intersection of reproductive and productive work. This approach is essential to understanding the real role of women in agriculture, especially in small-scale family farms. As Mincyte demonstrated in the 2000s regarding Lithuanian dairy farms in peri-urban areas (Mincyte, 2012), this article highlights the key role women farmers play in food self-provisioning in rural areas. Furthermore, agricultural work remains highly gender-segregated, with women often performing manual, low-skilled and undervalued tasks, a pattern also observed in Latvia (Blumberg, 2022).

The article's analysis indicates that women farmers operate at various levels and have an impact beyond their own farms, impacting rural landscapes. Particularly in the highlands (Moletai and Šalčininkai districts), women help preserve traditional mixed-farming landscapes in villages facing agricultural decline.

This article highlights women farmers' role in the Lithuanian farming sector and rural areas, contributing to research on rural farming practices in CEE and aligning with previous studies (Decker, 2019; Jehlička et al., 2020b; Sovová et al., 2025). It shows the vital role women play in small-scale farming in the CEE, demonstrating that these practices continue despite agricultural industrialisation and the rising vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, in Lithuania, this small-scale agriculture, specific to the post-socialist and CEE context, is currently experiencing transformation. First, these small-scale farms have also grown, along with other farm types. Small-scale farming, with active female involvement, now typically spans farms of 10 to 20 hectares, a change from the 2000s and other CEE countries (Czekaj et al., 2020; Maciulyte, 2025; Vitunskienė et al., 2020). Smaller plots (3 or 5ha) are no longer present in the three chosen case studies, especially in the Joniškis district, where farming is most intensive. Then, despite ongoing inequalities, qualitative analysis shows that some women farmers are using support programs, such as CAP subsidies and aid for young farmers, to train themselves or explore new agricultural practices. As a result, several interviewees have adopted Western European agricultural models and practices. These findings show that, whilst women are involved in family

farming on small-scale farms and maintain subsistence activities and traditional landscapes, they can also contribute to the Europeanisation of farming practices and the diversification of landscapes. This supports the findings of Blumberg and Mincyte regarding the Europeanisation of alternative food networks in Lithuania (Blumberg and Mincyte, 2020). This process, along with the adaptation of EU policies for local food networks at the national level, sometimes results in changes to women's work and agricultural practices, leading to more diversified landscapes.

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