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The Role of Women in Assuring Quality



Empowering women in the
Medicinal and Aromatic Plants sector

REPORT

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ASSURING QUALITY

**Empowering women in the Medicinal and Aromatic
Plants (MAPs) sector**

**Global Quality and Standards Programme Albania:
Strengthening quality and standards compliance capacity for
selected value chains**

**Prepared by:
Developments Solutions Associates**



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» Executive summary

The study analyses gender dynamics within the Albanian agricultural sector, particularly focusing on Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs). It highlights the critical role of gender equality in improving plant quality and decision-making processes. The analysis also identifies key challenges and necessary steps to enhance the capabilities of both women and men with a specific emphasis on quality assurance. Drawing evidence from producers and advisory service experts, based on primary data (field surveys) the study aims to support the development of the value chain.

The analysis reveals several significant findings. Men are often perceived to have more influence in critical areas such as farm related decision-making and policy discussions within agriculture, highlighting notable differences in viewpoints. In terms of task distribution and contributions to quality assurance in agriculture, although 76.8% of respondents believe in equal opportunities for men and women, nuanced gender dynamics become evident. Men are primarily responsible for adhering to plant protocols and disease prevention, while women are typically associated with tasks such as plant care and post-harvest activities. Men are perceived as more active participants in purchasing decisions and training participation, reflecting broader societal norms that influence power dynamics in agriculture and rural areas at large.

Specific patterns are observed at specific value chain level too, such as the case of MAPs. Traditional gender norms within family-based agricultural management influence labour allocation and power dynamics, with women predominantly involved in labour oversight and men in decision-making roles. The perceived gender disparities in decision-making underscore the need for initiatives promoting gender equality and inclusivity in agricultural governance. Additionally, disparities in access to resources and services, such as banking and communication channels with buyers and suppliers, hinder women's full participation in agricultural markets and their access to essential resources for their livelihoods.

Women can and should play pivotal roles in achieving quality standards in conformity with the international

requirements. Specific support is essential for women. Those who are engaged in wild harvest activities would benefit significantly from training in best collection practices and post-harvest techniques and guidance on maintaining hygiene during harvesting. Additionally, demonstrating simple drying methods can improve product quality. Supporting MAP farmers is crucial, particularly in regions with limited cultivation expertise and labour shortages. Providing training and financial assistance for collective use of machinery can alleviate women's workload and enhance productivity. For women cultivating MAPs, training in best agriculture practices, financing to increase access to equipment and effectively utilize drying facilities is crucial to ensure quality of MAPs. Investments in basic warehouses and heating-equipped dryers are critical for rapid and efficient drying, particularly for large-scale operations. Fostering trust and promoting collective action are essential to encourage shared storage and the use of drying facilities among producer groups.

Efforts should prioritize developing advisory services tailored to women farmers' requirements, addressing barriers that hinder their involvement in conventional training programs. Recruiting and training competent women trainers and utilizing accessible communication channels are vital steps toward empowering women in rural communities.

The lower representation of women in higher administrative positions, highlights the need for targeted initiatives to support women's advancement into these roles. Albanian Quality Infrastructure (QI) Institutions in order to achieve well-balanced and rounded Policies should involve gender balanced representation of business organisations in policy initiation and implementation processes. Women play an important role in assessing conformity and quality of agrifood products entering domestic and foreign markets, as most testing laboratories employ mainly women. Overcoming gender biases that affect recognition and career advancement is essential in the Quality Infrastructure institutions. Capacity building activities should actively support and encourage laboratories and certification bodies owned and operated by women.

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» Abbreviations

AGT	AGROTEC S.p.A.
AIDA	Albanian Investments Development Agency
ALL	Albanian Lek
AMAP	Association of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants of Albania
ARDA	Agency for Rural Development and Agriculture
ARDPF	Agriculture and Rural Development Program Fund
ATTC	Agriculture Technology Control Centre
AWP	Alliance of Women Parliamentarians
CNVP	Connecting Natural Values and People
CSOs	Civil society organizations
DCM	Decision of Council of Ministers
DPM	General Directorate of Metrology
DPPHSSF	Directorate of the Policies in the Plant Health, Seed, Seedling and Fertilizer
DSA	Development Solutions Associates
EPCA	Essences Producers and Cultivators Association
ESHFF	State Entity of Seeds and Seedling
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FPUA	Forest and Pastures User Associations
GDA	General Directorate of Accreditation
GDM	General Directorate of Metrology
GDS	General Directorate of Standardization
GEEW	Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women
GEO	Gender Equality Officer
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GQSP	Global Quality and Standards Program
HH	Household heads
INSTAT	Albanian Institute of Statistics
ISHP	Public Health Institution
ISUV	Institute of Food Safety and Veterinary
KASH	Albanian Agribusiness Council
MAPs	Medicinal and Aromatic Plants

MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MoHSP	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
MoTE	Ministry of Tourism and Environment
NAES	The National Agency for Employment and Skills
NAP	National Action Plan
NAPA	National Agency for Protected Areas
NAPM	National Action Plan on Mitigation
NAVPP	National Veterinary and Plant Protection
NCGE	The National Council on Gender Equality
NFA	National Forest Agency
NSCC	The National Strategy on Climate Change
NSGE	National Strategy on Gender Equality
NTFP	Non-Timber Forestry Product
QI	Quality Infrastructure
RAAE	Regional Agencies for Agriculture Extension
RAPA	Regional Administrations for Protected Areas
SARDF	Strategy for Agriculture Rural Development and Forestry
SECO	State Secretariat for Economic Affairs
SNV	Netherlands Development Organisation
SSAR	State Supreme Audit Report
ToC	Theory of Change
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
USAID	Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank
WEF	World Economic Forum



»» INTRODUCTION

»» 1. Introduction

Rural women in Albania play a pivotal role in driving economic, social, and environmental progress. Despite their importance, they face significant challenges in balancing their multiple roles within families and communities (UNDP, 2017). Recognizing these obstacles, there has been an increasing emphasis on empowering women and reducing gender disparities in rural areas. This includes efforts to enhance access to economic opportunities, assets, and agricultural skills.

Over the past decade, rapid demographic shifts and ongoing changes in the agriculture sector have opened new opportunities for both women and men. Migration and the continued movement towards employment outside rural areas are also reshaping gender roles within specific agricultural value chains. Market accessibility and the evolving significance of remittances are influencing household decisions regarding the allocation of labour between agricultural and non-agricultural activities.

The reinforcement of men's role in generating cash income, along with the resurgence of customary norms after the decline of state institutional structures in rural areas, has reduced women's social and economic influence in household and community decision-making. Despite ongoing changes in rural regions, statistics indicate that women's contributions to economic life remain largely unnoticed and undercompensated in terms of legal status, income, or wages. For instance, although over half of the women in Albania are employed in agriculture, official data recognize only a small fraction of farms—approximately 6.5%—as being managed by women. This discrepancy often results from women's status as widows or due to male heads of households migrating (FAO, 2019).

Women and men play crucial roles in overseeing all stages of production, from using agricultural inputs to preparing packaged products, essential for developing export-oriented value chains in Albania. To meet global

quality standards, existing labour skills and knowledge are critical. Therefore, it is pivotal to involve both genders in planning, managing, and ensuring food safety and quality standards compliance throughout these value chains. However, there is limited research on their specific roles and contributions along agricultural value chains, especially understanding women's contributions, constraints, and coping strategies.

This assignment aims to conduct a thorough analysis of the Albanian agrifood sector in general and MAPs (medicinal and aromatic plants) value chain specifically, in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment (GEEW) with special focus on quality. Drawing on insights from producers and advisory service experts, the study aims to foster the growth of these value chains by developing recommendations for enhancing women's empowerment and addressing quality implications. The analysis highlights the main limitations and necessary steps to strengthen the capabilities of women and men in advancing MAPs and other agricultural sectors, with a specific emphasis on quality assurance.

In Albania, agricultural exports, particularly in the MAPs sector, face challenges related to international trade requirements for quality and phytosanitary control, including hygiene, contaminants, chemical residues, microbiological factors, and control of foreign bodies. Weak technological capacity, limited knowledge, and a partially effective Quality Infrastructure (QI) undermine the competitiveness of this sector and the sustainability of rural livelihoods in general, especially for women. Wild-harvested and cultivated MAPs are a crucial source of income for the rural population, particularly for rural women (CNVP, 2017; AGT-DSA, 2021). The total number of women directly involved exceeds 60,000 (AGT-DSA, 2021). Additionally, women's contributions to monitoring and controlling quality become especially important in the absence of advanced technologies and effective governance. Therefore, understanding the key role of women in ensuring quality and the associated challenges has a dual impact—both on maintaining product quality and on empowering women.

The study aims to address several key issues within the agricultural sector, focusing on:

- **Analysing the division of tasks and contributions between women and men in agricultural production and post-harvest activities, with a focus on MAPs, particularly in relation to improvements in product quality.**
- **Investigating women's involvement in farm and policy consultation decisions.**
- **Identifying the main challenges women face in accessing resources and services, including inputs, credit facilities, advisory services, and policy communication channels.**
- **Assessing the role of women and the essential prerequisites for improving product quality.**

The report is organized into six main sections. The second section outlines the methodology used in the study, followed by a discussion of the context of the analysis in the third section. The fourth section presents key findings from expert surveys, while the fifth section details results from surveys with farmers engaged in MAPs cultivation. The report concludes with a section summarizing the main conclusions and recommendations, suggesting specific actions for improving gender equality and ensuring better quality assurance.





»» Methodology

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study utilizes the framework developed by Kabeer (1999, 2012) for measuring women's empowerment at various levels. An empowerment framework promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights across four dimensions: economic, physical, social, and political. Economic empowerment is defined as the ability of men and women to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from growth processes that equitably distribute rewards, recognize their added value, and uphold their dignity (Eyben et al., 2008).

A gender-sensitive analysis is employed to assess individuals' access to (and exclusion from) specific activities within the value chain, as well as disparities in rewards for labour and contributions (UNIDO, 2021). The inherent gender division of tasks and responsibilities within value chains and households influences access to finance, control over income, influence over inputs and services, and participation in paid work. It also influences the capacity of women to ensure quality and high value along agrifood value chain and enjoy the associated economic benefits.

A theory of change (ToC) for gender equality and women's empowerment is used to identify changes that must happen at an earlier in order to enable empowerment. It intends to explain how changes at micro-level (e.g. household) can lead to changes at community and society level. ToC framework is based on the assumption that:

- » Economic situation of women and their contribution in socially desirable outcomes will be improved due to their skills building and capacities;
- » Power and agency of women will be strengthened due to their improved capacity to bargain power within the household and the community, strengthened social capital among women or mixed groups, increased control over resources thanks to their enhanced confidence, changed attitudes towards women due to sensitization of men about women's economic role;
- » Economic empowerment of women and gender equality will be promoted by ensuring that they have equal access to benefits and opportunities by

building linkages with community-based services and livelihood interventions (FAO, 2016a).

The conceptual framework draws on theory of change for the United Nations system-wide contributions to gender-responsive implementation of the SDGs13 and, in line with the UNIDO mandate, targets four of the eight change areas contained in the United Nations system-wide theory of change, namely:

- » Women are economically empowered, have income security and decent work.
- » Women lead, participate in and are represented equally within gender-responsive governance systems.
- » Knowledge is generated, managed and transferred to enhance the integration of gender equality and women and girls' empowerment across the SDGs.
- » Internal United Nations system changes enable gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

The UNIDO approach on theory of change for gender equality and the empowerment of women highlights the importance of addressing quality-related challenges and targeting interventions at every single stage of the value chain (UNIDO, 2020) by considering gender equality and empowerment. UNIDO (2022) focuses on three dimensions: i. Promoting equal access to resources and training opportunities by giving opportunities for skills development. ii. Ensuring that QI-related policy and legislative environments are not conducive to discrimination against women. iii. Enhancing the leverage of women in gaining power and control over their own lives is achieved through the promotion of gender-balance within the work environment.

2.2. Study approach and sample

The study employs mixed research methods, including:

- ➔ **Desk research**, which involves reviewing secondary statistical data and various strategic documents.
- ➔ **Primary data collection** using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as semi-structured interviews and structured surveys with farmers and experts, to gain valuable insights into gender equality within the value chain and the implications of standards.

2.2.1. Desk research

The gender-disaggregated data were sourced from the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT). However, gender-specific indicators at the sector level remain limited. There is currently no access to disaggregated gender-based data at the central or local level specifically related to MAPs cultivation. This gap is met by primary research (survey) as shown in the following subsection.

2.2.2. Surveys

Considering the gap in secondary data/information, a primary data collection process took place through purposive surveys with farmers and agriculture experts. During the period of November-December 2023 structured surveys were carried with extension agents and MAPs farmers. Furthermore, prior, during and after the structured surveys implementation, over two dozen semi-structured interviews were carried out with farmers, exporters and experts.

Agriculture expert survey

The survey with agriculture experts aimed to gather opinions from Agricultural Extension experts. It collected insights on the current allocation between women and men, their respective levels of effort and contribution to quality, and other related issues. Additionally, following the approach of Shahu et al. (2023), the study explored gender differences in awareness of climate change.

The survey compiled responses from 74 Albanian agricultural extension experts throughout the country. The socio-demographic profile of the sample analysed is summarized in the table below. Approximately 39% of respondents are aged 51–60 years, with an average experience of 21 years (see Table 1). The majority of respondents (71% of the sample) are agronomists by profession, and men constitute 73% of the sample.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample in the experts' survey

Key indicators	Value
Respondents' age distribution	
-40	24.3%
41-50	10.8%
51-60	39.2%
More than 61	25.7%
Respondents' gender distribution	
Male	73.0%
Female	27.0%
Total	100%
Experience (average no. of years)	20.9

Source: DSA (2023) Expert survey

Survey with farmers involved in MAPs

The structured survey with farmers involved in the MAPs sector examined various aspects of power dynamics and contributions on the farm, similar to GIZ (2021). This survey was crucial for identifying inequalities related to access to knowledge, inputs, markets, and social networks, as well as equity in decision-making processes. The same survey was used to collect data on

climate change adaptation, which will be analysed in a separate report.

The sample consists of 200 farmers in the Municipality of Malësi e Madhe, a renowned region for MAPs cultivation and export – more than 4/5 of the total national cultivation takes place in this region. Table 2 presents the socio-demographic profile of the survey sample.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample in the MAPs farms survey

Key indicators	Value
Respondents' age distribution	
-40	16%
41-50	20%
51-60	36%
More than 61	28 %
Respondents' gender distribution	
Male	89%
Female	11%
Total	100%
Main employment of household (HH) head	
Employed in public sector	16%
Employed in private sector	7%
Self-employed in non-agricultural sector	5%
Self-employed in farming sector	72%
Highest education level (HH) of head of household	
Mandatory education (up to 9 years)	51%
High school	36%
University degree (Non-agricultural education)	13%
Experience and household members working on farm (average)	
Experience (average number of years)	12.1
Household members working in the farm (average no. of members)	2.2

Source: DSA (2023) MAPs farm survey

3. Context analysis

3.1. Women economic empowerment

Albania has made significant strides in addressing gender inequality, evident in various global indexes and reports. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2023, Albania ranks 17th out of 146 countries, alongside Spain and the Philippines, with a score of 0.791, reflecting positive momentum compared to previous years (WEF, 2023).

In 2020, Albania scored 60.4 points on the Gender Equality Index, which was seven points lower than the EU-28 average for the same year. Despite this gap, Albania's score in the domain of power (60.9) exceeds the EU average, driven by increased female participation in political and economic decision-making processes. Similar progress in gender equality is observed in other indices, such as the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law Global Index 2023, ranking Albania with a 91.3 which is lower than Serbia and Kosovo but higher than the rest of Western Balkans (WB, 2024).

Over the past decade, the Albanian government has taken significant steps to promote gender equality and empower women. An evaluation of the National Strategy

for Gender Equality and its Action Plan 2016-2020 indicates that 80% of the strategy has been implemented (UNDP, 2023). The report highlights achievements in enhancing women's empowerment, advancing gender equality, and reducing gender-based and domestic violence. Key accomplishments include aligning the legal framework with EU standards, developing national and local policies for women's empowerment, and integrating gender-responsive budgeting in public finance.

While progress is evident, challenges remain, particularly in economic empowerment indicators. Economic inclusion and participation in the labour market are areas where improvement is needed to ensure gender parity in all aspects of Albanian society. Despite progress in gender equality indicators, gender inequality persists in Albania's labour market. Generally, there is a slight gender gap in terms of unemployment rates and wages, with rates at 4% and 6.6%, respectively (INSTAT (2023)). Women tend to experience lower unemployment rates at lower education levels but higher rates at medium education levels compared to men. In 2021 and 2022, this trend reversed at higher education levels, where men had slightly higher rates than women. Overall, the data indicates that the gender gap diminishes at higher education levels, albeit with fluctuations observed over the years (see Table 3).

Table 3. Unemployment rate by level of education and sex, in percentage during 2019-2022

Gender	Education level	2019	2020	2021	2022
Male	Low	9.7	9.5	10.7	10.8
	Medium	13.8	13.6	12.9	10.7
	High	10.5	10.6	8.8	9.7
Female	Low	7.6	9.5	10.4	8.9
	Medium	15.5	13.7	13.8	15.4
	High	13.6	14.1	11.9	11.2

Source: INSTAT (2023)

According to the labour force survey, women are less likely to participate in the labour market, with an activity rate of approximately 60%, which is 10 percentage points lower than that of males. Table 4 illustrates gender inequality in terms of labour market participation, particularly among individuals with a medium level of education.

Table 4. Labour market participation rate by gender and level of education, during 2019-2022

Gender	Education level	2019	2020	2021	2022
Male	Low	61.6	58.9	57.5	59.5
	Medium	72.4	72.1	73.6	73.9
	High	75.1	75.4	78.3	78.7
Female	Low	46.3	44.9	46.2	48.7
	Medium	49.7	49.2	49.2	55.6
	High	76.2	76.9	74.2	76.7

Source: INSTAT (2023)

Table 5 below presents data on the proportion of young people who are neither employed nor in education or training, categorized by sex (female, male) and age group (15-24, 25-29) for the years 2019 to 2022. The percentage of young females who are neither employed nor in education or training is higher compared to males, across both low and high education categories. Of particular concern is the proportion of females with university education who are out of the labour market.

Table 5. Share of young people neither in employment and nor in education and training by sex, level of education and age group

Gender	Age	Education level	2019	2020	2021	2022
Male	15-24	Low	22.0	23.5	24.0	20.6
		Medium	25.1	24.7	23.3	25.3
		High	32.5	33.9	34.6	36.3
	25-29	Low	28.9	30.7	28.2	24.5
		Medium	29.1	29.2	27.2	29.2
		High	28.7	30.0	32.0	30.2
Female	15-24	Low	19.3	17.7	17.1	17.0
		Medium	31.3	34.9	28.0	25.8
		High	30.2	33.0	24.8	27.0
	25-29	Low	20.2	19.1	20.4	19.5
		Medium	28.7	32.4	27.1	26.3
		High	22.8	23.1	20.1	21.2

Source: INSTAT (2023)

One primary reason for women's economic inactivity is their engagement in unpaid activities. For instance, the female-to-male ratio of average time spent on unpaid domestic and care work in a 24-hour period is 4.4, which is twice the ratio found in North Macedonia (2.78) (WB, 2023). This often results in fewer women benefiting from social security schemes compared to men, leading to increased poverty and dependence as they age.

Although these proportions have decreased over the years, they remained higher for women than men each year. Differences also appear regarding own-account workers. In 2022, 33% of employed men and 20% of employed women were self-employed. Entrepreneurial capacity is also unevenly distributed, with a higher proportion of men being employers compared to women. For example, in 2022, 6% of men were employers, compared to only 1.6% of women.

Table 6 shows a higher proportion of employed women contributing as family workers compared to men.

Table 6. Selected indicators of participation to labour market by sex during the period 2019-2022

Indicator	2019		2020		2021		2022	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Proportion of self-employed	39.6%	23.1%	39.3%	25.8%	39.0%	23.3%	33.1%	20.4%
Proportion of contributing family workers	15.8%	27.9%	15.0%	26.1%	12.9%	25.0%	13.2%	23.5%
Proportion of are employers	4.6%	1.1%	5.2%	1.3%	6.0%	1.4%	6.0%	1.6%

Source: INSTAT (2023)

3.2. Women engagement in agriculture

Significant gender disparities in economic empowerment are evident in the agriculture sector. A notable number of women (and men) are employed in agriculture, where jobs are predominantly in the form of on-farm (unpaid) self-employment and/or poorly remunerated jobs.

According to INSTAT (2023), in 2022, 40.1% of employed women worked in agriculture, while the figure was 28.7% for men (see Table 7). Another sector with a substantial share of employed women is market services (where trade and accommodation are included) employing slightly over 22.5% of women and 30.9% of men. The gender pay gap in these sectors is 7.6% and 2.5%, respectively (INSTAT, 2023).

Table 7. Distribution of employed population by sex and economic sector, in percentage during the period 2019-2022

Sector	2019		2020		2021		2022	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agriculture	32.3%	41.6%	31.8%	41.4%	28.8%	40.0%	28.7%	40.1%
Manufacturing	7.9%	14.8%	8.8%	14.1%	9.4%	13.5%	8.8%	14.7%
Construction	12.2%	0.6%	12.2%	0.6%	14.2%	0.5%	13.5%	0.6%
Mining etc.	3.2%	0.8%	3.3%	1.1%	4.0%	0.9%	4.3%	0.9%
Market Services	31.7%	21.6%	31.7%	21.6%	30.1%	22.3%	30.9%	22.5%
Non-market Services	12.8%	20.7%	12.2%	21.2%	13.6%	22.9%	13.8%	21.2%

Source: INSTAT (2023)

Access to entrepreneurship in agriculture remains limited, whereas there is greater representation of women in accommodation and food services. In rural areas, the number of non-agricultural enterprises headed by women is very low. Table 8 illustrates that across all size categories (1-4, 5-9, 10-49, 50+), there are consistently more enterprises owned by men than by women. This difference is most pronounced in the 1-4 size category, where men-owned enterprises

significantly outnumber those owned by women.

Over the years, there has been a general decline in the number of enterprises for both men and women across all size categories. It is worth noting that there has been some increase in the number of women-owned enterprises over time, although at a slower rate compared to men-owned enterprises.

Table 8. Active enterprises in agriculture, forestry and fishing as well as accommodation and food services during the period 2010-2022

No. of employees	Gender	2010	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Agriculture, forestry and fishing								
1-4	Male	1489	1328	861	909	975	984	1003
	Female	100	159	132	161	212	204	230
5-9	Male	51	83	65	68	66	77	65
	Female	6	11	11	17	19	13	16
10-49	Male	41	54	54	55	66	53	55
	Female	..	4	9	11	8	13	8
50+	Male	10	12	13	11	11	8	6
	Female
Accommodation and food service activities								
1-4	Male	10706	14670	12379	11140	10922	10519	10812
	Female	4123	6295	5076	4679	4650	4402	4440
5-9	Male	544	1279	1482	1317	1033	1135	1104
	Female	154	411	441	441	324	329	346
10-49	Male	108	396	581	618	582	538	530
	Female	23	107	175	176	153	147	168
50+	Male	14	20	38	52	37	38	41
	Female	..	8	13	17	12	13	11

Source: INSTAT (2023)

Note. The enterprise (as a statistical unit) does not include registered farmers.

Women in the agri-food value chain often occupy roles in lower-value nodes such as pre-harvest and post-harvest activities, food processing, and household chores. Conversely, men typically dominate sales roles (FAO, 2016b). Limited access to cash and external

networks further marginalizes women's participation in market sales. For example, in Albania, only 6.7% of females receive payments for agricultural products, livestock, or crops, compared to 15% of males (see Table 9).

Table 9. Share of women farmers received payments for the sale of agricultural products, livestock, or crops in percentage.

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Albania		2021	6.73	15.1
North Macedonia		2021	3.79	8.87
Montenegro		2017	8.56	10.89
Serbia		2021	6.85	10.65
Kosovo		2021	6.17	10.64

Definition: The percentage of respondents who report personally receiving payments from any source for the sale of agricultural products, crops, produce, or livestock in the past year, female (% age 15+).

Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal, Global Findex database





3.3. Women inclusion in agroforestry and MAPs in Albania

Wild MAPs alongside other Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), including beekeeping and other income-generating activities based on harvesting, collection, and aquaculture, are crucial sources of income for the rural population. According to CNVP (2017), over 60% of rural women are involved in forestry activities, including the collection of NTFPs. Previous studies have indicated MAPs farming and processing are predominantly driven by men, with a large number of women occupying lower-level positions (FAO, 2018; GIZ, 2021; AGT-DSA, 2021). Men are often perceived as the primary earners due to their involvement in the commercialization of MAPs products (UNWOMEN et al., 2016; UNDP, 2022).

Each small processor typically engages 150-200 suppliers of wild and cultivated MAPs. More than 120 women work part-time in post-harvest activities in warehouses for each small processor, amounting at over 300 women employed on a part-time basis. With around 30 processors directly collecting MAPs from farmers, harvesters, and local collectors, and intermediating for more than 300 others, the total number of directly engaged women exceeds 60,000 (AGT-DSA, 2021).

A report by IDRA/ISETN (2018) estimated that women contribute 86% of family labour compared to men and are hired 120% more often than men for labour-intensive tasks. Their contribution varies by type of activity (cultivation versus harvest of wild MAPs) and the presence of hired labour (see Box 1).

Box 1. Women involvement in the MAPs cultivation

In terms of harvesting, women contribution is high. Women collect wild MAPs alongside men, using simple bags and sickles for cutting or tearing the plants. Income from collection varies according to prices, the type of product harvested, distances and quantity, which depends on the number of persons per family. Harvesters might generate between EUR 2,000 and 6,000 per year.

Cultivation enhances opportunities for women to work and generate income in more comfortable conditions compared to the collection of wild MAPs. The industry's shift from wild plant harvesting to cultivation has strengthened women's roles in production. Engaging in MAP cultivation enables women to manage their home responsibilities simultaneously, as most work occurs on plots close to the house (GIZ, 2021).

In small cultivation farms, women are more engaged in labour-intensive activities such as weeding, harvesting, and post-harvesting processes compared to men. In large farms, their roles focus on tasks requiring bending and concentration, such as planting, hoeing, and harvesting, while men are more inclined to handle tasks requiring strength, such as stone removal, transplanting, and transport. Additionally, women often supervise and monitor the work of other women on large farms. In some cases, women administrators are employed to manage rented labour, which is significant. Groups or brigades of women workers are often managed by contracted parties who oversee recruitment and transport

(GIZ, 2021). Given their involvement, especially in post-harvest and processing stages where much of the labour is rented, it is evident that women's contribution to rented labour is higher. See Table 10 for an illustrative description of the roles of women and men in each phase of preparing the product for sale.

Planting is done during spring, with most propagation carried out using farmers' own plants, while a smaller portion purchase seedling. Propagation involves combined efforts: men usually carry the saplings, while women plant them. Labour is needed for both maintenance and harvesting, as the presence of dense stones on the surface prevents mechanization, making the process labour-intensive.

At the farm level, post-harvesting tasks are managed by women, who clean the plants and lay them out to dry on simple blankets placed under the sun on terraces, porches, or under roofs. Women involvement is also very significant in farm processing or warehouse-based processing. In warehouses, women are responsible for drying the product taken from bags, cleaning the dried product, cleaning the ground output, and packaging it in paper or chemical-free bags. Men handle moving heavy bags and operating transporting and loading machines. Cutting and grinding are led by men who are knowledgeable about equipment use and repair, while women assist by managing product waste and selection. Packaging and labelling are done by women, with inventory often managed jointly with the management team.

Table 10. A schematic description of women and men role in phases of dried MAPs production and sale processes in family farms

Production	Processes														
									Harvest	Loading and transport	Drying	Cleaning	Sorting	Packaging	Sale
Wild MAPs															
Dominant role									W	M	W	W	W	W	M
Cultivated MAPs	Input and service purchase	Land preparation	Sampling	Planting	Hoeing	Weeding	Thinning	Harvest	Loading and transport	Drying	Cleaning	Sorting	Cutting, grinding and packaging	Sale	
Dominant role	M	M	M	W	W	W	M	W	M	W	W	W	W	M	

Source: Authors own elaboration

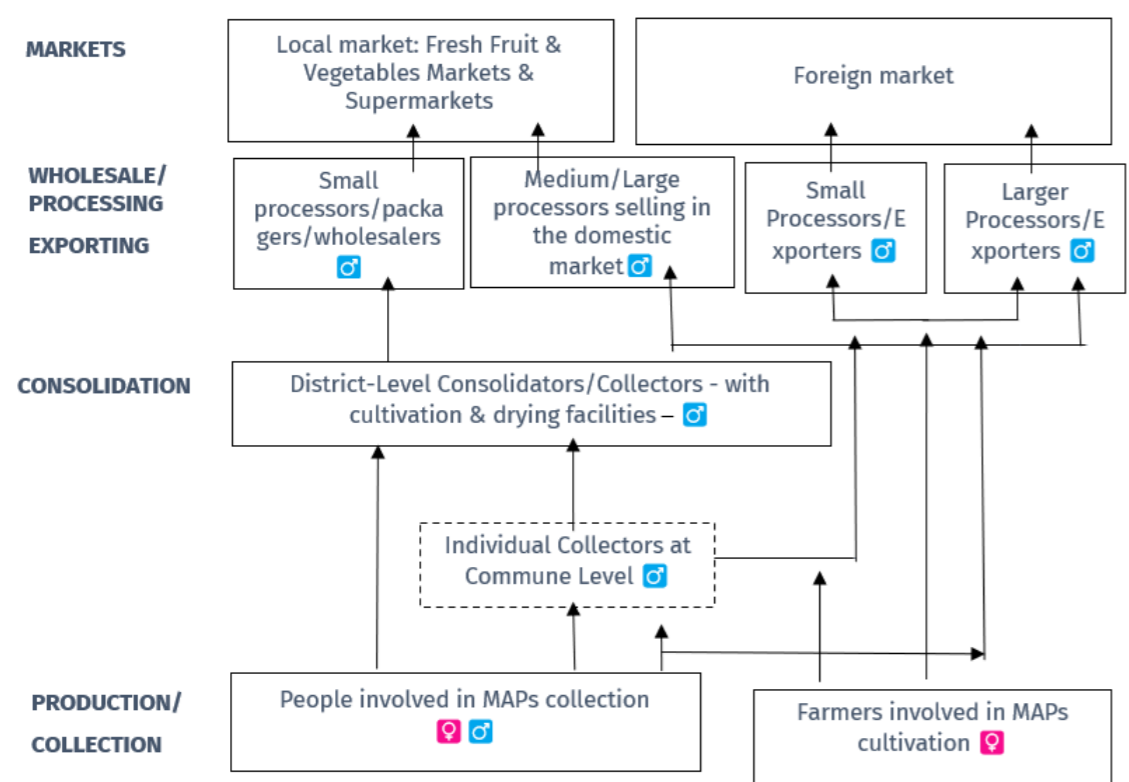
Note: Here are included only activities related to the production and sale. Management of technology equipment in grinding and distillation and monitoring related to labour and other activities are not included.

3.4. Women role in quality assurance

The quality requirements on MAPs in the international markets are becoming more stringent, placing pressure on Albanian exporters to increase investment and implement traceability and monitoring and control systems (UNIDO, 2023a). The quality requirements from foreign buyers, fierce competition among Albanian exporters and the strengthening of quality control by certification bodies have been some of the drivers that have motivated many exporters to work on the adoption of organic farming and collection of MAPs (FAO, 2018). Several studies (FAO, 2018; GIZ, 2021; AGT-DSA, 2021) have emphasised the role of women in processes related to quality assurance. Their role has increased with the accelerating migration which has created an imbalanced demographic composition in the rural areas. Despite their crucial role and contribution to various quality related agrifood production processes, their role in overall management remains marginal in most cases, as most farms and agrifood trade and processing enterprises are managed by men. Also, market transaction (sales of products and purchase of inputs) and inter-action with service providers are mostly handled by men.

Collectors of spontaneously grown MAPs and cultivators sell the product to local level collectors or directly to processors/exporters. Local collectors regulate cultivated supplies and maintain consistent supply relationships with buyers (processors/exporters) without exclusively committing their relation to one single person. Large processors/exporters manage their export channels by gathering procurement offers through contracts. They also establish direct connections with local collectors and cultivate close relationships with farmers. Exporters convey market signals (product type, characteristics and prices) to harvesters and cultivators and provide support for cultivation (seeds and seedlings), technological services and advisory services on quality standards. In these relations women are not present as primary contacts (UNIDO, 2023a). The reason is the culture of communication in rural areas is an obstacle for giving to women a voice on transactions. As will be presented in Section 4 (survey findings) a minority of transactions with end users and communication with suppliers is made by women. The following diagram illustrates the engagement of women and men in each stage/link of the value chain.

Figure 1. Women's position in the MAPs value chain



Note. ♀ - female-dominated ♂ - male-dominated ♀♂ - joint participation of females and males
Source: GIZ, 2021

The main issues with quality today typically stem from post-harvest practices, such as improper drying (products should not be dried in open spaces exposed to sunlight, as this can lead to quality deterioration and potential microbiological contamination) and the use of agrochemicals to control pests. As noted by UNIDO (2023a), implementing and maintaining traceability is very challenging. For instance, each MAPs exporter typically has over 1,500 farmer suppliers, many of whom, especially in the case of wild MAPs, provide relatively small quantities of produce. Additionally, there are numerous exchanges between collection points and exporters, raising further concerns about quality assurance.

To mitigate risks, exporters often aggregate products by dividing them into small lots and categorizing the output based on the micro-region of origin (typically groups of villages corresponding to 15-20 farmers). Quality assurance is also hindered by the market behaviour of other stakeholders. Significant competition at the horizontal level reduces efforts to maintain quality standards. The absence of contract farming further limits exporters' ability to exert pressure on suppliers. Punitive measures are often ineffective, as suppliers can easily switch to another consolidator or exporter. If laboratory analyses reveal poor product quality, bulk-packaged products may need to be unpacked, sorted, and cleaned, resulting in additional labor costs, loss of quantity, and increased energy expenses.

Table 11. Description of women role in quality assurance: The sage processing example

Stage	Relevant processes	Women contribution in quality assurance
Collection / harvesting practices are crucial for wild MAPs (to ensure quality and sustainability). Proper harvesting techniques, such as harvesting at the right time of day or season, can help preserve the quality of the plants.	Following best collection/harvesting practices leaves and flowers of the wild MAPs are collected and transported to the storehouses. E.g. sage leaves are typically harvested when the plant is in full bloom, as this is when the essential oils are most concentrated. Harvesting is usually done in the morning when the dew has dried but before the heat of the day causes the oils to evaporate.	Considering the rural migration women and elders remain the main workforce carrying wild harvest nowadays. In the case of collection women care is crucial for conservation in-situ (in their natural habitat) of genetic resources and for adequate harvesting. The local knowledge is traditionally shared. Proper harvesting techniques, such as handpicking the leaves and avoiding damage, can help maintain the quality.
Agriculture best practices for harvesting and cultivation is crucial for quality	Following proper agricultural practices can help ensure that the plants are grown in optimal conditions, with the right nutrients, water, and environmental factors to promote their growth and quality.	In the case of cultivation, planting, weeding, and pest management is frequently done by women.
Cleaning and sorting	Different processes are done according to MAPs type (flowers, fruits and other parts are treated differently from leaves). E.g. on sage after harvesting, the leaves are cleaned to remove any dirt, debris, or insects that may be present.	Women tend to pay special, careful attention to this process removing stems, grinding the leaves, and packaging the final product. Their attention to detail during processing and packaging helps maintain the quality of the sage and prevents contamination or deterioration. Quality control measures, such as sorting out damaged or inferior plant material, checking for impurities, and ensuring that products meet quality standards.

Stage	Relevant processes	Women contribution in quality assurance
Drying and storage: Proper drying methods help retain the essential oils and active compounds in the plants.	The leaves are spread out in a single layer in a well-ventilated area away from direct sunlight. They are left to dry for several days until they are completely dehydrated and crisp. Storing MAPs in appropriate conditions, such as in airtight containers, away from light and moisture, can help maintain their quality over time.	Women are frequently more present to these processes
Processing as dried or distillation	Further processing is done. E.g. on sage, once the leaves are dried, they can be processed further by removing the stems and grinding the leaves into a finer consistency, if desired. Distillation or extraction, can help extract the active compounds from the plants without degrading them.	Women carry out labour-intensive sorting and cleaning lines of MAPs
Quality control: Implementing quality control measures, such as testing for purity, potency, and contaminants, can help ensure that the final product meets quality standards.	Samples of products are sent by the exporters in certified laboratories	High inclusion in conformity assessment institutions staff but not in leadership (see section 3.6.2). A more in-depth assessment can be carried out at QI institutions level.

Source: Authors contribution based on FAO (2018), AGT-DSA (2021) and UNIDO (2023a) (studies which were carried out previously by the same authors of this report)

As highlighted earlier, women role in assuring quality is limited from the access to decision-making, finance support and capacity building. According to interviews with experts and exporters, there are several factors hampering women role in quality assurance. Considering that drying facilities have a direct impact on product quality (as they reduce humidity, bacterial contamination and increase conformity), the absence of small dryers at farm household level has increased the concerns for quality among large consolidators. In addition, inadequate practices of drying (leaving products in the sunlight and not in shade and controlled environment leads to the deterioration of quality and microbiological contamination) has increased the obstacles for achieving conformity. Information on quality standards is accessible mainly through the

buyers and the certification bodies, and as highlighted earlier in the report, mostly men engage with such market actors and service providers.

At export level also the information is limited. There are cases where exporters are not able to defend themselves due to limited know-how and information on market requirements. In order to control issues in regards to quality, exporters and large processors are trying to carry vertical integration and try to coordinate actions along the chain. However, in these efforts women are not largely included due to barriers in representation. In absence of technologies, hand control is very important. For instance, Albanian exporters have limited possibility to control PAs during post-harvest, especially when the product undergoes the sorting and cutting process (AGT-

DSA, 2021). Sterilisation capacities and investments are limited due to high costs (sterilisation lines cost may hundreds of thousands of EURO (depending on type, size etc.)).

3.5. Women access to factors of entrepreneurship

Access to factors of production is crucial for women's progress in self-employment, particularly in sectors like agriculture where land ownership and education play pivotal roles. Data reveals significant disparities that hinder women's ability to fully engage in productive activities and capitalize on opportunities for economic empowerment.

- » **Property rights:** According to the UNWOMEN (2023) ownership of immovable properties of the type including construction plots, agricultural land, forests and pastures forms a ratio of 18.5 per cent in the name of women to 81.5 per cent in the name of men. No separate figures are provided for agriculture land plots ownership. However, it is known, since in the first decades of the post-communist land reform that only 8 percent of women had the name in the Act of Acquiring Land on Possession (CEDAW, 2016).
- » **Education:** In Albania, there are more highly

educated women than men but there are significant differences by type of education. Women are less present in university education in agricultural field of studies. The share of men receiving university education in agriculture, forestry and fishery sciences is double that of women (5.2% versus 2.3%) (INSTAT, 2023). While access to capacity building related to technologies is limited for women due to a lower participation in training events and weaker contacts with input providers.

- » **Advisory services:** Opportunities for women to access advisory services are more limited than those of men who are also farm managers, however some improvements have been observed. The share of women farmers contacted by the agriculture advisory services has increased from 10% to 15% (UNDP, 2023). The number of women farmers receiving support through the structures of the Public Advisory Service has increased by 11% annually.
- » **Access to subsidy programmes:** There is still a gender gap on access toward budgetary support. During the period 2020-2021 approximately 17% of the beneficiaries benefited from Agriculture and Rural Development Program Fund (ARDPF) are women (see Table 12).

Table 12. Access to ARDPF subsidies during the period 2016-2022

Year	Number of beneficiaries	Value (Mln ALL)	Share of female beneficiaries	Share of granted support
2016	2,617	616,185	16.43	16.31
2017	1,151	159,288	19.20	19.14
2018	3,940	642,405	11.22	13.07
2019	3,949	673,936	14.00	14.05
2020	5,496	1,133,517	17.52	19.18
2021	6,748	1,379,510	17.23	17.65
2022	4,909	1,133,280	17.68	18.69

Source: MARD, 2022

» **Access to capital:** The number of borrowers in commercial banks is slightly dominated by men (Table 13). However, during the period 2017-2020, the number of women borrowers, although lower than that of men has been increasing. The number of account holders in commercial banks is approximately

339,000, of whom 43% are women. This gap increased since 2016. There are no disaggregated data for rural areas: however, it is estimated that, due to financial illiteracy and male-dominant relations and other cultural constraints, women's access to financial institutions is considerably weaker than that of men.

Table 13. Access to bank accounts by type and gender in percentage during the period 2019-2022

Status	Gender	2019	2020	2021	2022
Household sector depositors	Male	57	57	57	56
	Female	43	43	43	44
Household sector deposit accounts	Male	57	56	57	56
	Female	43	44	43	44
Household sector borrowers	Male	57	57	57	57
	Female	43	43	43	43
Household sector loan accounts	Male	57	57	57	57
	Female	43	43	43	43

Source: INSTAT (2023)

3.6. Policy, legal and institutional context

3.6.1. Policy and legal framework related to women and agroforestry

In this section, we evaluate the development of gender policies and the inclusion of gender components within the policy framework governing agroforestry and related domains, including MAPs and other agricultural activities. A National Strategy on Gender Equality (NSGE) for the period 2016-2020 was structured around four strategic goals, with activities outlined in an action plan specifying the timing and frequency of implementation. According to UNWOMEN (2023), funding for the NSGE 2016-2020, totalling EUR 27 million, is derived from the state budget, local government budgets, donor contributions, and non-budgetary institutions.

Gender is included in sector policies. A review of the strategic documents, as summarised also in Table 14, reveals the following findings on women inclusion:

» **In the field of agriculture:** The strategic documents, namely the Rural Development Programme 2021-2027 (MARD, 2022); the Strategy for Agriculture Rural Development and Forestry (SARDF) 2021-2027 and the relevant National Action Plan, and the "National strategy for irrigation, and drainage 2019 – 2031 and

action plan" have clear gender sensitive measures and monitoring indicators (MARD, 2022).

» **In relation to biodiversity:** Document on policies for forestry sector in Albania (2018) gender equality is mentioned. While there is no gender sensitive text in the Strategic Policies for Protection of Biodiversity Albania (UNDP, 2023).

» **In the field of climate change:** The National Strategy on Climate Change (NSCC) and its two annexes, the National Action Plan on Mitigation (NAPM) and the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) as well as the National Integrated Energy and Climate strategy (by DCM 466, date 3.07.2019) have no separate objectives, activities, targets or monitoring indicators which address gender differences. There is no presence of gender sensitive, and gender disaggregated data on the rationale of this policy document. These documents have no future effect in addressing gender inequalities or overcoming gender related barriers.

The findings from the review and former reports (CoPlan, 2021) reveal that despite mentioning gender equality in general, the level of detail and specific measures for gender integration remains inconsistent. While there is recognition of the importance of women's roles there is room for improvement in translating this recognition into comprehensive gender-responsive policies.



Table 14. Mainstreaming of gender on policy documents related to agriculture, forests, energy and climate change

Topic	Strategy	Gender references	Relevance
Agriculture and Rural Development	Rural Development Programme 2021-2027	Page 16, 38, 39, 41, 58, 121, 124, 137, 171, 186, 197, 201	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Description of women contribution on agriculture and rural development; > Promotion of equality between women and men; > Measure 'Implementation of Local Development Strategies – Leader Approach' will ensure women participation in decision making and LEADER approach implementation; > Measure 'Farm Diversification and Business Development' will support women employment, entrepreneurship etc. > Measure 'Establishment and Protection of Forests', Sub-measure 11.5: "Improving the resilience and environmental value of forest ecosystems "will give priority to women applicants; > Actions to inform women.
	Strategy for Agriculture Rural Development and Forestry 2021-2027	Measure 6	Intensity of investments grants on physical assets for agriculture processing and marketing should be higher for women farmers, youth, producer organisations, mountainous areas, women, production organizations, for increasing compliance toward EU standards, organic agriculture and other investments for environment and climate (change).
		Measure 9	Grants for young farmers: Beneficiaries are females and males (less than 40 years old), who are heads of the farms requiring trainings and special skills. Priority are the sectors with the highest value, and organic agriculture as well as the male and female youth graduated in agricultural Faculties.
		Measure 13	Start-up grants investments in fix assets and marketing facilities. Only for youth and women entrepreneurs under 40 years old.
		Measure 19	Service contracts and financial support for provision of advisory services for farmers should target women, young farmers, measures for agri-environment and climate change, and establishment of operational groups.
Forestry and Biodiversity	Document on policies for forestry sector in Albania (2018)	Page 17 Page 33 and similarly pointe in page 37	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Legal framework lacks the provision of equal rights in terms of gender. > The measure for implementing the Policy Declaration 2. Forests are common property, where rights and obligations are regulated by the state, in a fair ratio between the benefits and obligations of society as a whole, giving priority to rural development, local communities and vulnerable layers of society. Measure 2.3. Recognition of the rights of use for the communities' own needs, respecting the principle of gender equality, also recognizing the responsibilities for conservation and care in accordance with policies for rural development and marginalized communities
	Strategic Policies for Protection of Biodiversity Albania (UNDP, 2023).	No reference	NA

Topic	Strategy	Gender references	Relevance
Water management	MARD, "National strategy for irrigation, and drainage 2019 – 2031 and action plan", pg.19	Pg. 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > As per the national strategy and action plan for achieving gender equality in Albania, which means that women who experience any discrimination against women regarding participation in the leadership of a Water Users' Organizations (WUO) or in other roles in irrigated agriculture have recourse to petition the Government to redress such issues. However, local social pressures will discourage women from making such petitions.
	Law no. 111/2012 "On the Integrated Management of Water Resources" amended	No reference	NA

Source: Own author elaboration

There are few relevant laws related to the domains under review which are designed to promote to regulate gender equality as well as have an indirect effect on the equal inclusion of women and men. For example, in the agroforestry aspect, The Law 9817, "On agriculture and rural development" (2007) Act no 3 mention that the implementation of agricultural policies and the development of rural areas is intended to ... creating equal opportunities for men and women. The Law 57/2020 "On Forests" regulates gender equal involvement in the access to services quality aiming at proper protection, improvement and regeneration of forest space. This law has clear gender indications, apart from the Article 12, point 4, which does not even guarantee gender neutrality. There are masculine words used in the point 4 as following..." The right of use over forests means the possibility of the person to use the part of it to the national forest fund given to use and to enjoy the output derived from it, in the level he needs for himself and his family, in exchange of his work in

carrying out improvement services of that forest, as well as without compromising the sustainable development of the forest.

There is limited room to observe gender mainstreaming in the main laws related to quality and safety assurance. The language is gender neutral in the legal base related with the quality infrastructure institutions (Law No.116 / 2014 dated 11.09.2014 "On Accreditation of Conformity Assessing Means in the Republic of Albania", Law No. 9870, dated 04.02.2008 "On Standardization", Law No. 126, dated 15.10.2020 "On metrology", as well as by-laws in its implementation) and other laws related to food (Law no. 9863, dated 28.01.2008 "On Food", as amended, Law No. 105 / 2016, "On Plant Protection", Law No 71/2020 "On some changes and amendments to Law No 10465/2011", DCM No 683/2020 "On the establishment, organization and functioning of the National Authority of Veterinary and Plant Protection").

3.6.2. Gender mainstreaming in institutions

On regards to gender equality there are various entities created at central level. Since 2017, **the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP)** has a leading role in the National Council for Gender Equality and the Sector of Policies and Strategies for Social Inclusion and Gender Equality, as part of the General Directorate of Policies and Development of Health and Social Protection. The National Council on Gender Equality (NCGE) is the highest advisory organ on issues of gender equality and ensuring gender mainstreaming in all fields, especially in political, social, economic and cultural fields. Central and local state institutions shall have the legal obligation to collaborate with the respective minister. Each Ministry at central and Municipality at local levels have a legal obligation to cooperate with the relevant minister in charge of gender equality through an appointed gender equality officer (GEO). In additional other focal points, which are not full time dedicated to GEE as regulated by the Law on Gender Equality.

At the **Albanian Parliament**, a Subcommittee “On Gender Equality and Prevention of Violence against Women” was established and acts near the Standing Committee on Labour, Social Affairs and Health. An Alliance of Women Parliamentarians (AWP), is established also to promote gender equality in the Parliament and advocating for the inclusion of a gender perspective in laws.

At the central level **the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD)** is responsible for the design and implementation of orientation, support and incentive policies for agricultural and farming production, as well as dealing with the coordinated development of agriculture. Agencies which are under MARD designation, are Agricultural and Rural Development Agency (ARDA), Agriculture Technology Transfer Centres (ATTCs), as well as Regional Agencies for Agriculture Extension (RAAE), are responsible for implementing the policies related to agriculture and rural development. ARDA is created as a payment agency to implement the agricultural and rural development policies measures. RAAE and the ATTCs are responsible for training of agricultural specialists, farmers and other interested parties. ATTCs are also responsible for research and technology adaptation. There are various divisions within MARD that are responsible for strengthening the quality infrastructure. Structures within MARD related to quality infrastructure policies include the General Directorate of Food Safety, Veterinary, Plant Protection and Fishery, The Directorate of the Policies in the Plant Health, Seed, Seedling

and Fertilizer (DPPHSSF). The food safety and quality assurance functions are implemented through the National Food Authority (NFA), National Veterinary and Plant Protection (NAVPP) and Food Safety and Veterinary Institute (FSVI).

Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MoTE) is responsible for the development of policies and legislation related to pastures and their management. The ministry also covers a technical role as regards the management and extension service related to forests. The recently established National Forest Agency (NFA) is responsible for the good governance of forests, their preservation and development, sustainable and multifunctional use of forest resources, as natural resources with national importance. National Agency for Protected Areas (NAPA) is responsible for the management of the protected areas and natural resources within their boundaries. Locally, the NAPA is organized into 12 Regional Administrations for Protected Areas (RAPA), responsible for the management of the protected areas within the respective region.

The Ministry of Finance has the mission to achieve economic stability through the efficient, effective and transparent management of public finances. It is responsible also for the budget design and allocation between sectors including here the application of Gender related Budgeting.

The Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation is responsible for the integrated economic policies in the primary sectors of the economy, and to guarantee the rights to vocational education and training, safe and decent employment, and social insurance. The National Agency for Employment and Skills (NAES) is a public budgetary service, legal person, subordinate to the minister responsible for employment and skills development. NAES comprises all employment services, self-employment, and vocational education and training administrative and provision institutions, and it is an integral part of the system of the ministry responsible for employment and skills development. It operates through Regional and Local Employment Offices, Regional Public Vocational Training Directorates, as well as Public Vocational Education Schools. It is also the responsible institution at the top policy level to coordinate the quality infrastructure institutions which are the following: i) The General Directorate of Metrology (GDM); ii) The General Directorate of Standardization (GDS); iii) The General Directorate of Accreditation (GDA),

iv) the General Directorate of Industrial Property and, v) The Albanian Investments Development Agency (AIDA).

Municipalities are responsible for forest policy and law implementation namely i. the Municipality master plan, which directly impact establishment, preservation or breaking of ecological connectivity and ii. Forestry and Pasture Management Plan are prepared in Albanian municipalities in order to make a sustainable use of the forestry and pastures resources.

The Forest and Pastures User Associations (FPUA) are established within every municipality to help with the management of forest and pasture and to assist the municipalities in guaranteeing the governance and management of forest areas within their administrative boundaries.

Sector associations: **Albanian Agribusiness Council (KASH)** is the largest agribusiness sector association. It encompassed all sectors of agribusiness and is a member of other entities such as the Economic Consultative Council. There are two MAPs sector associations, namely: i) the Essences Producers and Cultivators Association (EPCA) and, ii) the Association of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants of Albania (AMAP).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and gender advocates in Albania are quite active, at both central and local level, engaged in advocacy campaigns, networking and building alliances in areas of gender equality. About 63% of CSOs operate at national level, while 35% at local level. Most capital-based (Tirana) CSOs have been

involved in policy- and law-making in recent years. In contrast, most locally-based CSOs have not had the opportunity to participate and contribute in similar processes.

Donor Aid Agencies: Many donors namely USAID, SNV, GIZ and Danida has given special attention to women empowerment. For instance, capacity building and small grants has been provided for the application of sustainable practices of wild MAPs collection and the substitution of collection of endangered MAPs species with cultivated ones. At present, UNIDO, UNDP and GIZ is still implementing a support project for MAP sector. In the institutions related to quality infrastructure, there are few gender indicators related to conformity assessment level (see box 2). Future studies on gender mainstreaming of the entire QIs may identify opportunities and actions to attain women empowerment in this regard.

The presence of women on policymaking is limited. At MARD the overall level of trained personnel (men and women) is 57% and, for trained women personnel, is 48%. The majority of newly recruited personnel are women (60% versus 40% men). The gender ratio of Civil Society Institutions employees is 31% men to 69% women (Partners Albania, 2023). Gender and women’s rights issues represent about 50% of the activity area of CSOs in Albania (ibid). Only a dozen of CSOs and networks of CSOs are working to promote gender equality in the field of agriculture and forestry, while little is known for CSOs focused on culture for quality.

Box 2. Gender composition on conformity assessment: cultivation

Laboratory personnel, specifically microbiologists and chemists, are by far dominated by women, constituting 70% of the workforce. Women make up 2/3 of technical managers, highlighting their critical role in overseeing technical operations and ensuring the accuracy and reliability of laboratory results. Additionally, women constitute 45% of quality managers, indicating their significant contribution to maintaining quality standards and ensuring compliance with ISO/IEC 17025. However, women are underrepresented in leading roles, with only 21% of administrators being female. Only one director in 16 directories is women at public institutions laboratories of (including Institute of Food Safety and Veterinary (ISUV), National Food Authority (NFA), Agriculture Technologies Transfer Centres (ATTCs), State Entity of Seeds and Seedling (ESHFF), Public Health Institution (ISHP), General Directorate of Metrology (DPM) including their regional branches).

Source: UNIDO (2023b)



»» **Survey findings**

4. Survey findings

This section presents the results of the survey carried with 74 agriculture experts located in various areas of Albania and 200 farmers cultivating MAPs and/or harvesting wild MAPs, in the region of Shkoder, specifically in the Municipality of Malësia e Madhe (sample details were described in the methodology section).

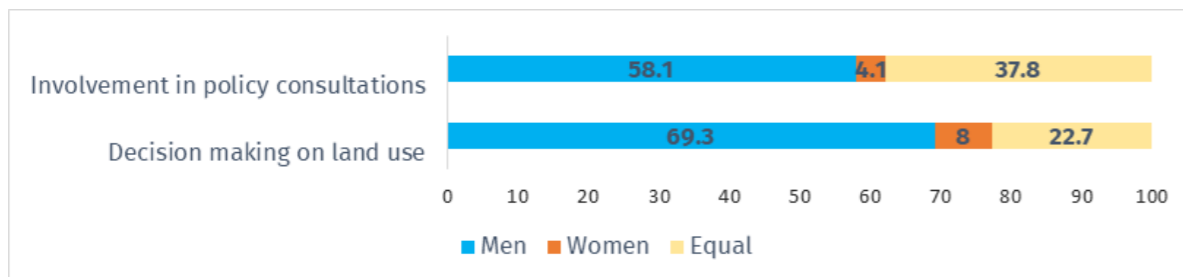
4.1. Equality in decision making in agriculture

In agricultural governance, ensuring the equitable participation of both genders in decision-making processes is vital for sustainable development and inclusive growth in rural areas, as well as for the industrial advancement of the agriculture sector. Figure 2 illustrates prevailing perceptions of gender imbalances in decision-making and policy consultations within the agricultural sector.

Examining decision-making on land use in relation to agricultural activities, the data reveals a significant perception gap. A striking 69.3% of respondents (experts) perceive men as having greater involvement in this domain, while only 8% attribute such influence to women and 22.7% perceive an equal distribution of decision-making opportunities between genders. This disparity highlights a systemic bias favouring men over women in land use decision-making processes.

Another important aspect is policy consultations. A significant majority of respondents, totalling 58.1%, perceive men as having greater involvement in policy discussions, while only 4.1% attribute such involvement to women. Additionally, 37.8% of respondents perceive an equal level of participation between genders (Figure 2). This imbalance underscores a prevalent marginalization of women in policy consultation forums, hindering their voices from being adequately heard and considered.

Figure 2. Expert opinions on the gender equality to access policy consultation and advisory services



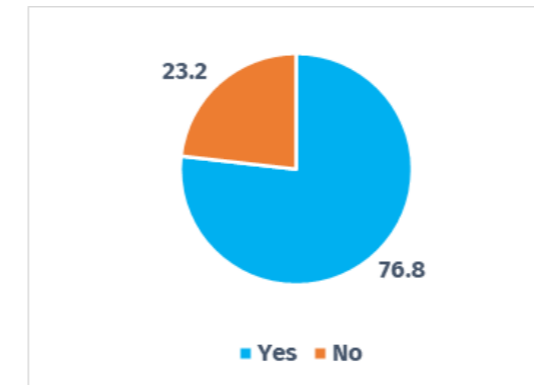
Note: Answer to the question: For which of the below factors women or man have more access?
Source: DSA (2023) Expert survey

4.2. Share of tasks and contribution in quality assurance in agriculture

A separate research question in the survey addressed perceptions of whether women and men have equal

opportunities to enhance agricultural production quality. The majority of surveyed experts, 76.8%, indicated that they view women and men have the same opportunities to improve plant quality (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Expert opinions on the equality of women and men in safeguarding quality in crops



Note: Answer to the question: Do you think that women and men have the same opportunities to improve plants quality?
Source: DSA (2023) Expert survey

Understanding equality in terms of tasks and workload is crucial in agricultural practices. Tasks related to water use, plant care, plant nutrition, post-harvest services, and adherence to plant protocols significantly impact product quality and safety, particularly concerning standards related to chemical residues.

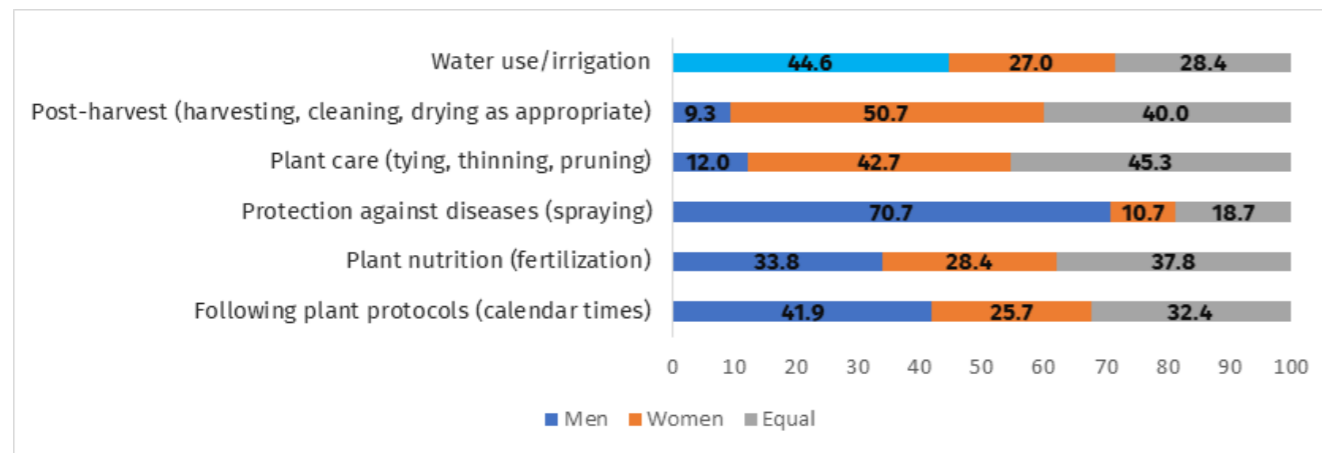
Figure 4 depicts perceptions regarding the roles of men, women, and equal contributions across various aspects of plant management, revealing nuanced gender dynamics in agricultural practices. It also shows equality in terms of contributions to quality assurance. Starting with adherence to plant protocols, respondents predominantly perceive men as responsible, with 41.9% attributing this role to them, followed by equal contributions at 32.4%, and women at 25.7%. This indicates a perception favouring men as primarily ensuring quality.

In the realm of plant nutrition, perceptions are more balanced, with equal contributions perceived highest at 37.8%, followed by men at 33.8%, and women at

28.4%. This suggests a more equitable perception of gender roles in ensuring plant nutrition, with shared responsibilities acknowledged. However, for disease protection through spraying 70.7% of respondents attribute this task to men. Conversely, in plant care tasks like tying, thinning, and pruning, women are perceived as predominant contributors at 42.7%, while 45.3% of respondents view equal contribution.

In post-harvest activities such as harvesting, cleaning, and drying, women are again perceived as primary contributors at 50.7%, followed by equal contributions at 40%, and men at 9.3%. This mirrors trends observed in plant care, reinforcing the association of women with meticulous attention to detail in agricultural practices. Lastly, in water use and irrigation, men are perceived to contribute the most at 44.6%, followed by equal contributions at 28.4%, and women at 27%. This indicates a relatively balanced perception of gender roles in water management, with a slight edge towards men (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Expert opinions on the gender division of tasks in crop production activities



Note: Answer to the question: Who contributes more to the processes related to plant quality?

Source: DSA (2023) Expert survey

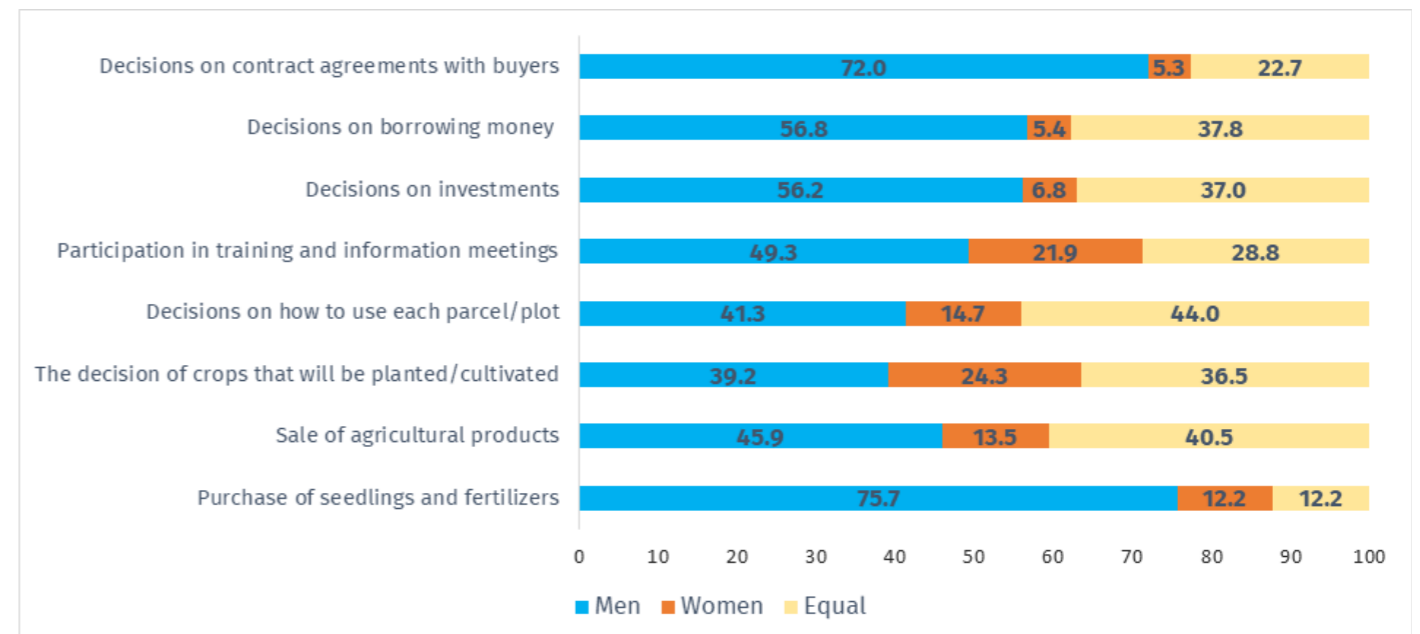
4.3. Power in decisions and participation in agriculture

In order to explore women engagement into the quality assurance, is important first to understand their equal participation in decision-making processes. Figure 5 provides a revealing snapshot of perceived gender disparities in various agricultural decision-making processes. It presents a range of perceptions concerning the roles and responsibilities of men and women across different aspects of agricultural management, highlighting entrenched gender norms within the sector. Starting with the procurement of seedlings and fertilizers, the data shows a significant perception gap. A striking 75.7% of respondents attribute this responsibility primarily to men. This disparity underscores systemic bias favouring men in procurement decisions, reflecting traditional gender roles and power dynamics within agricultural supply chains. Similarly, in the sale of agricultural products, perceptions lean towards men.

Regarding land use decisions, men are perceived as

primarily responsible (41.3%), followed by women (14.7%), with 44% perceiving an equal distribution of responsibility. This reflects broader societal norms influencing land management decisions. Decision-making regarding crop selection follows a similar pattern, with men predominantly perceived as responsible (39.2%). Participation in training and information meetings shows men as more active participants (49.3%) compared to women (21.9%), with 28.8% perceiving an equal distribution of participation. These highlights challenges women face in accessing agricultural extension services and training. In financial decisions such as investments and borrowing, men are perceived as primarily responsible (56.2% and 56.8% respectively), while women are seen to have significantly lower involvement. A smaller proportion perceives an equal distribution of responsibility, pointing to a need for greater gender inclusivity in financial decision-making within agriculture. Regarding contract agreements with buyers, 72% perceive men as primarily responsible. A moderate proportion perceives an equal distribution, suggesting potential for more equitable contracting practices (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Farm decisions by gender



Note: Answer to the question: What agriculture (not livestock) tasks/activities are performed more by gender (men or women) in your area?

Source: DSA (2023) Expert survey

Overall, the findings underscore the enduring influence of gender norms on agricultural decision-making, with men often occupying roles of greater involvement and responsibility. Addressing these disparities requires

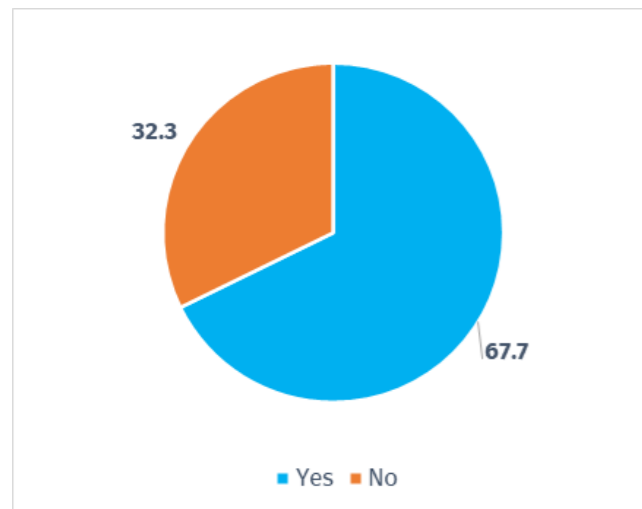
creating environments where women have equal opportunities to participate and lead in agricultural decision-making processes.

4.4. Access to resources and services

One of the most important components of power is access to resources. Resources allow to economic agents, including women, to reinvest in priority areas, like quality. It is important to explore if women have access to resources, assuming that they are prone to make such investments if they had access to resources.

While a significant portion of respondents believe in gender equality in terms of resource access, there is still a notable minority that perceives inequalities (Figure 6). More than 67% of the experts stated that access to resources between women and men is not equal. Further analysis or context may be necessary to understand the reasons behind these perceptions and to address any existing disparities.

Figure 6. Expert opinions on the gender equality on access to resources in the agriculture sector



Note: Answer to the question: Do you think that women and men have equal access to resources?
Source: DSA (2023) Expert survey

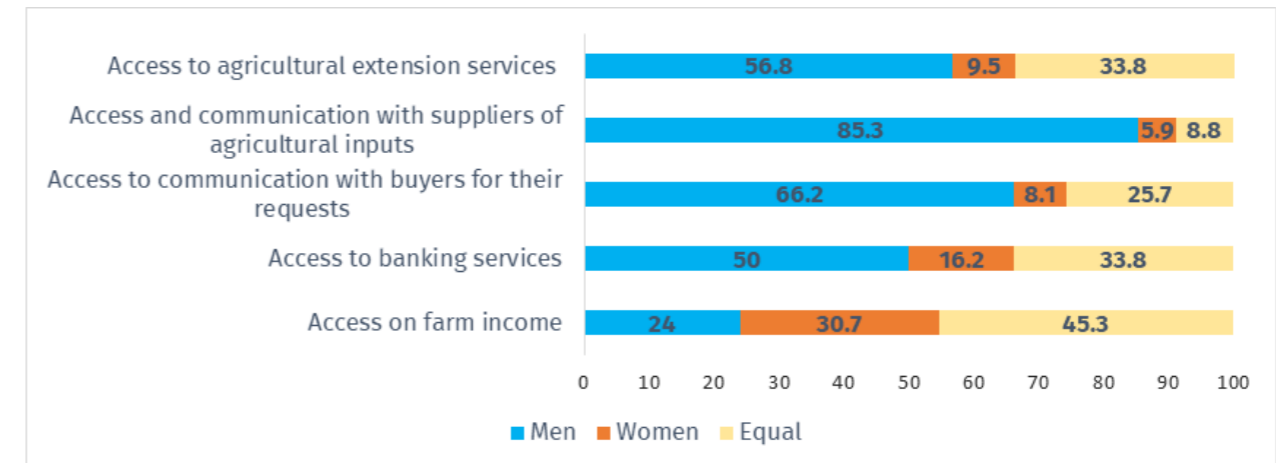
Additional valuable insights are crucial for understanding perceived gender discrepancies in access to essential factors within agriculture. Figure 7 outlines perceptions regarding men's and women's access to critical resources and services, highlighting disparities within agricultural communities. Starting with access to farm income, the data suggests a balanced perception: 24% of respondents perceive greater access for men, 30.7% for women, and 45.3% for equal access. This indicates a perception of comparable access levels between genders, reflecting some degree of equity in accessing farm income.

Similarly, in accessing communication channels with buyers, a majority (66.2%) perceive men as having greater access, while only 8.1% believe women have higher access, and 25.7% perceive equal access. Considering that quality assurance is achieved based on market signals and buyers feedback, figures show that women are not directly involved in this communication. Missing market signals regarding quality may bring additional changes for fine-tuning the production processes. In addition, this disparity underscores gender differences in communication with buyers, potentially limiting women's ability to effectively market their produce.

Significant gender disparities are evident in access to banking services. Half of the respondents (50%) perceive men as having greater access, while only 16.2% believe women have higher access, with 33.8% perceiving equal access. The gap reveals women disadvantages in accessing new technology information or other issues related to plant treatment.

Moreover, there is a pronounced gender bias in accessing communication with suppliers of agricultural inputs. A vast majority (85.3%) of respondents attribute higher access to men. This emphasizes a significant gender gap in accessing crucial agricultural inputs, with men predominantly utilizing communication channels with suppliers (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Access to networks and incomes by gender in the agriculture sector



Note: Answer to the question: For which of the below factors women or men have more access?
Source: DSA (2023) Expert survey

Education and capacity building related to quality assurance are crucial instruments for reforming the culture of quality. Women are disadvantaged in accessing advisory services. This means that any innovative solutions brought forward by state agricultural extension services and Agriculture Technology Transfer Centres will mostly be acquired by male farmers. Solutions

related to quality and safety, applied technology for traceability, use of propagation materials, soil and water management, and post-harvest processes will not be accessed directly by women. Inequalities in accessing information will create additional setbacks in quality assurance.



»» **Study findings
in the MAPs
sector**

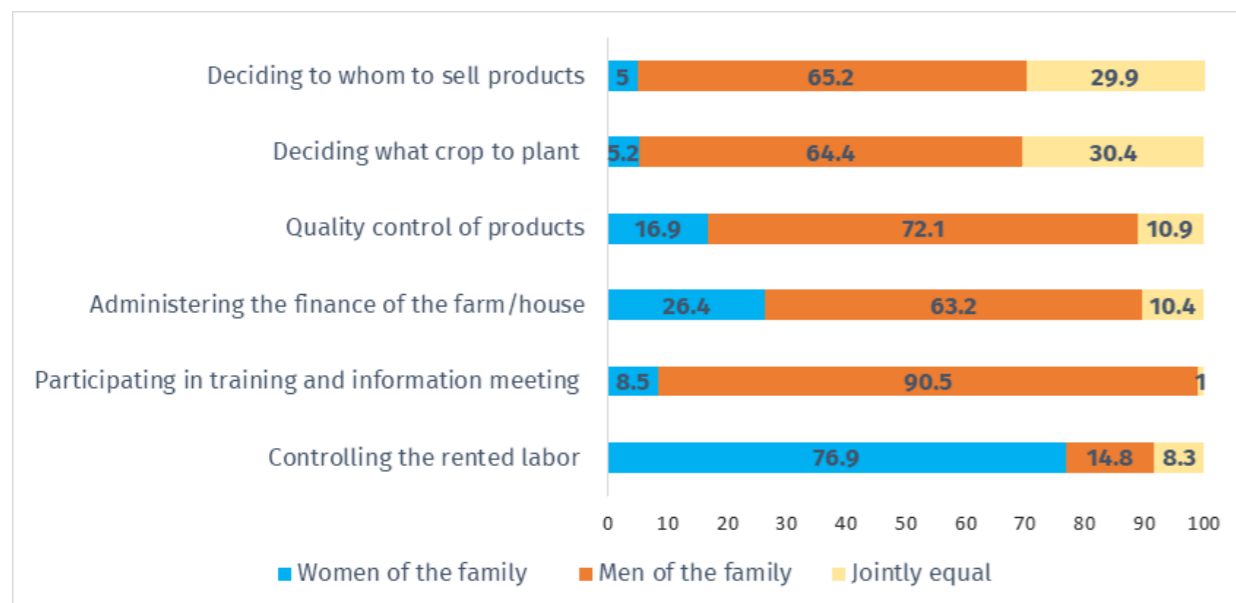
5. Study findings in the MAPs sector

5.1. Equality in decision making in the MAPs cultivation

The survey of MAPs producers/farmers provides insights into perceived roles and responsibilities within family structures concerning various aspects of agricultural management. Figure 8 highlights that in quality control of products, men are predominantly seen as responsible (72.1%).

Similarly, decision-making regarding crop planting and product sales follows a comparable trend, with men predominantly perceived as responsible in both areas. For deciding which crop to plant, 64.4% attribute responsibility to men, and for deciding whom to sell products to, 65.2% attribute responsibility to men. A small proportion believes in equal sharing of these decisions between women and men. The data suggest that women role in monitoring and guaranteeing the quality of the product is not usually left to women. The reasons may come due to the primary role of men in managing the relations with buyers.

Figure 8. Farm decisions by gender in the MAP sector



Note: Answer to the statement: Who is more responsible for the following tasks?
Source: DSA (2023) MAPs farm survey

Participation in training and information meetings is predominantly perceived as the responsibility of men, with 90.5% of respondents attributing this role to them. Women's inability to travel to distant areas outside villages makes them vulnerable in public sphere roles. According to audit data (SSAR, 2024), in some Local Government Units, public transport is not accessible except in urban administrative units. The lack of transport coverage and logistic infrastructure, especially in rural administrative units, hinders the strengthening of women's position in society and their access to the labour market.

Likewise, the administration of farm/house finances is overwhelmingly attributed to men, with 63.2% of respondents perceiving them as primarily responsible, while only 26.4% attribute this role to women and 10.4% view same sharing of this responsibility, underscoring traditional gender norms in financial management within agricultural households.

In stark contrast, regarding the control of rented labour, the survey reveals a significant perception gap, with 76.9% of respondents attributing this responsibility primarily to women within the family (Figure 8) – one reason is that women are more frequently hired as workers compared to men for some processes.

5.2. Share of tasks and contribution in quality assurance in MAPs

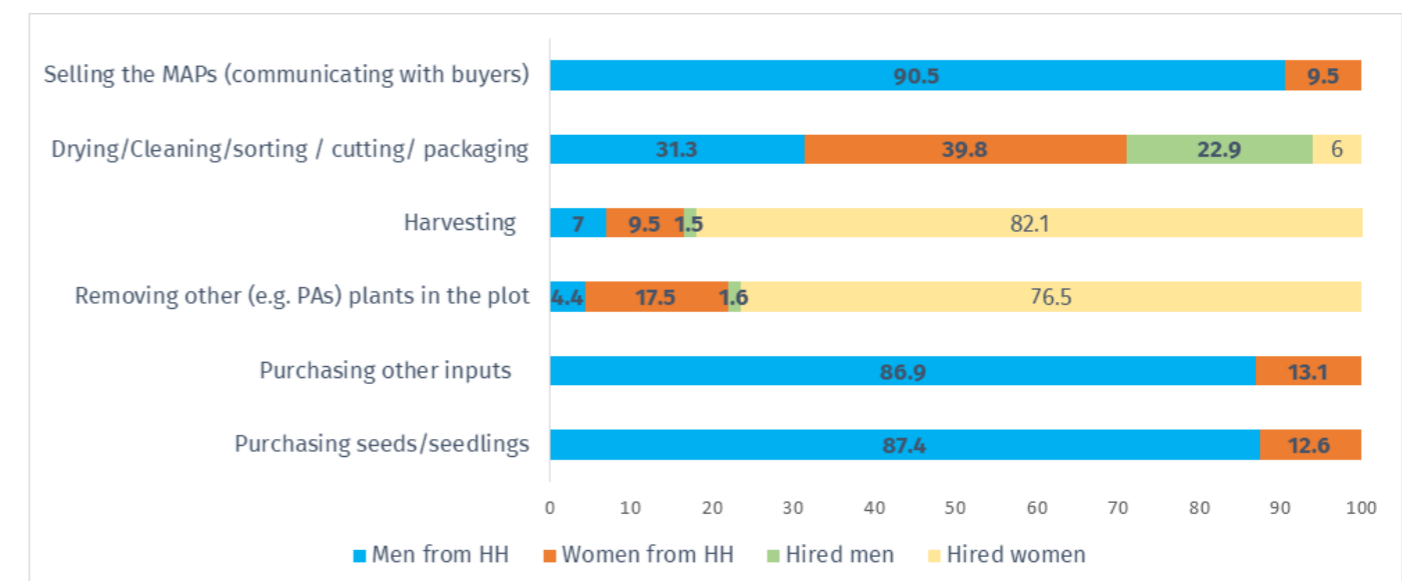
Understanding trends in task allocation and quality contributions in the cultivation of MAPs is crucial. Figure 9 provides valuable insights into how agricultural tasks are distributed among different gender groups within households (HH), including men, women, hired male workers, and hired female workers.

The majority of purchasing tasks, such as acquiring seeds/seedlings and other inputs, are primarily handled by men from the household, with 87.4% and 86.9% involvement, respectively. Notably, there is negligible involvement of hired male workers or hired female workers in these purchasing tasks.

Women exhibit higher involvement in tasks such as removing other plants and harvesting compared to men – the role of hired women working in large farms is even more crucial, while the role of hired (as well as household) male is negligible, in line with previous studies (GIZ, 2021).

Both men and women from the household actively engage in post-harvest activities at similar level, including drying, cleaning, sorting, cutting, and packaging of agricultural produce. Women demonstrate slightly higher participation (39.8%) compared to men (31.3%) in these activities. Men from the household primarily undertake the responsibility of selling agricultural produce and communicating with buyers, representing 90.5% involvement (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Type of MAPs production activities divided by gender



Note: Answer to the question: Who is mostly carrying out the following tasks?
Source: DSA 2023 MAPs farm survey

Overall, the data underscores clear gender disparities in agricultural task allocation within households. Men are predominantly engaged in purchasing inputs and selling produce, while women play a more substantial role in field activities like removing plants and harvesting.

This is very similar to the study of Johansson (2021). The significant involvement of hired women working in farms mostly in plant care activities and their contributions to post-harvest processing highlight their crucial role in agricultural labour.

5.3. Equality in access to services in the MAPs sector

Access to services is also important to understand the power of women to contribute to quality. As UNIDO (2022) asserts the positive economic outcomes agriculture activities and trade for women can only be realized if barriers holding them back are lifted so they can engage under fair conditions. Figure 10 offers valuable insights into the distribution of ownership or registration across various financial accounts and services within family structures. It reveals nuanced patterns of financial management and ownership, shedding light on the dynamics shaping economic decision-making within households.

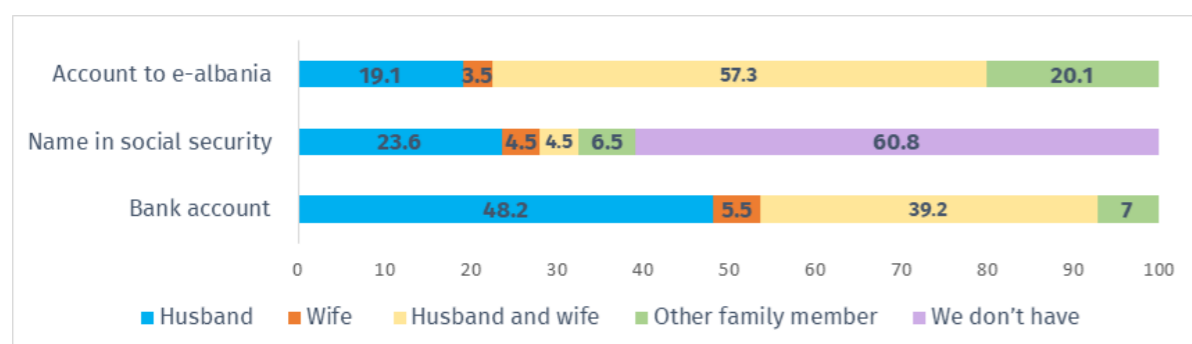
Starting with bank accounts, the data illustrates that joint ownership between husbands and wives is predominant, accounting for 39.2% of accounts. However, a significant proportion of

accounts (48.2%) are solely in the husband's name, underscoring traditional gender norms where men often hold primary control over financial assets. Conversely, accounts solely in the wife's name are relatively minimal (5.5%), suggesting a lesser degree of financial autonomy for women in some contexts.

Regarding social security registrations, a notable majority (23.6%) are assigned to men, reflecting broader societal norms where men are often perceived as the primary breadwinners and decision-makers within families.

Turning to accounts linked to e-Albania, joint usage between husbands and wives emerges as the predominant pattern, representing 57.3% of accounts. However, accounts solely in the husband's name (19.1%) still hold a significant share, reflecting persistent gender norms regarding financial control. Accounts solely in the wife's name are minimal (3.5%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Representation and access of farm members to services by gender



Note: Answer to the question: Do you or your family have/own the following?

Source: DSA 2023 MAPs farm survey





»» **Conclusions and recommendations**

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The analysis of women's roles in agriculture reveals a complex landscape of gender dynamics, perceptions, and disparities within the sector. These findings underscore the critical importance of recognizing and addressing gender disparities in labour allocation, as well as highlighting the role of women in enhancing product quality and bolstering export competitiveness. Men often wield greater influence in decision-making. Initiatives promoting gender inclusivity and representation in decision-making forums and policy development processes are essential. Creating environments that enable equitable participation and empower women's voices can unlock the agricultural sector's full potential for sustainable and inclusive development.

Gender inequalities in contributions to product quality are a critical aspect of value chain development in MAPs and other agricultural value chains. While survey findings suggest that quality monitoring is a task of men, the services provided for guaranteeing the quality is in majority covered by women.

In order to support women economic empowerment and to strengthen the value chain competitiveness on the other hand ones should consider the current contrast and enhance women role in quality monitoring. Due to weakened terms of trade and large quality gaps, a strategic industry orientation is essential to create adaptive conditions at the upstream level. The lack of flexibility in adjusting to cultivating MAPs (multi-annual crops) has made farming susceptible to price and income volatility. Diversification and specialization are the most suitable approaches given current trends (AGT-DSA, 2021). Such transformation requires hand in hand also the contribution of women.

The intervention strategy should be holistic, recognizing that rural women are not a homogeneous group in terms of their skills, knowledge, capacity, and access to resources. Women in Malësi e Madhe, for instance, have different needs compared to those collecting and cultivating Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) in other regions of Albania. The differences in knowledge, market interactions, and market types—where women from Malësi e Madhe work primarily for exporters, while

those from other areas target the domestic market—demand tailored institutional responses to address their unique challenges comprehensively.

The ongoing migration of skilled young rural women exacerbates the situation, leaving behind a demographic of older, often less qualified women who face significant difficulties in adopting new technologies and meeting product quality standards. Technology transfer and financing are particularly challenging in regions where MAPs cultivation is not concentrated.

To create a more supportive environment and unlock the potential of women in advancing gender equality, several recommendations and actions must be undertaken. Interventions should aim to foster a culture of quality across all levels of the value chain, including among consumers. This approach should be implemented in a stepwise manner, prioritizing actions based on the time required for their implementation. Efforts should focus not only on enhancing capacities to improve quality indicators (QIs) but also on indirectly supporting the achievement of cross-cutting goals, particularly gender-balanced inclusion. The main actions are prioritized as follows.

→ Improving women access to natural resources and capital

Challenges: Access to factors of production is crucial for women's progress in self-employment, particularly in direction to quality. Data reveals significant disparities in terms of access to land and capital (agriculture support). The inequalities reduce the women's ability to fully engage in productive activities and capitalize on opportunities for economic empowerment.

Recommendations: To promote gender equality and enhance the participation of women in agriculture, it is crucial to implement policies and programs that guarantee women's equal ownership or user rights to pastures and agricultural plots. In the context of medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs), ensuring secure user rights to pastures based on a transparent and accountable municipal forest and pasture management plan would encourage harvesters to adhere to sustainability principles.

Creating financial literacy programs specifically for women in rural areas is another vital step for securing women access to capital. These programs would help

improve women's access to financial institutions and empower them to manage their finances effectively. Furthermore, establishing special loan programs or financial products designed to meet the unique needs of women in agriculture would provide them with the necessary resources to expand their operations and contribute more significantly to the agricultural sector. Measures must be implemented to ensure equal access to subsidy programs for both men and women in agriculture. This includes developing targeted initiatives to raise women's awareness of available subsidy programs and encouraging their utilization. In addition, minimum criteria and premium scoring system should be advocated for women for increasing their access to the Agriculture and Rural Development Fund (as it was the case in the past for IPARD II programming).

→ Strengthening women access to information and knowhow

Challenges: While a significant majority of respondents acknowledge equal opportunities for men and women to enhance plant quality, women are weakly involved on purchase of seeds and communication with seedlings and other input suppliers. Women access to advisory services is limited due to stringent societal norms and stereotypes within agricultural communities.

Recommendations: Advisory services should be developed to reform the traditional approach of providing men with training, information, and access to inputs and services. The approach should address the main challenge: women's daily workloads usually prevent them from being absent from home for residential training, and even attending short courses can create insurmountable problems in arranging substitute care for children or the home. The training and demonstration schedule should be expanded by organizing separate programs (trainings, demonstrations, exposure visits) focused on issues where women could be more active, such as general farm management, organization of groups/cooperatives, food processing, and home economics (e.g., handicrafts, family planning, child development, cooking, etc.). Qualified women agricultural officers should be deployed for field visits and training in villages, which requires both the recruitment and capacity building of female agriculture

extension specialists. Other accessible means of communication should be used, such as videos, TV, and radio. Short videos and tutorials adaptable to smartphones should be tested for educational materials in agriculture, information on prices, climate forecasts, and direct sale tools.

→ Strengthening women role in wild MAPs collection

Challenges: Harvesting wild MAPs remains commonplace, especially in areas where endemic species thrive but also where human resources are depleted due to massive migration. The weakening labour force and population aging call for immediate action to raise the value of the collected product. Improper post-harvest practices, particularly inadequate transport from collection sites to drying areas, and improper storage and drying practices and facilities, frequently result in considerable post-harvest losses and a decline in product quality. These issues can lead to contamination, such as high levels of pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs), further exacerbating the challenges faced in wild MAPs collection. In this context, the role of women in controlling product quality is very important.

Recommendations: For women harvesters, there is a pressing need for training on good collection practices and post-harvest techniques, as well as coaching to improve their skills in using simple dryers and implementing hygienic harvesting methods. Public extension services and specialized agencies, such as the ATTC of Shkoder, possess the necessary expertise to include women in training and coaching sessions. Capacity-building interventions should address the constraints that hinder women's participation in these events. This includes overcoming barriers such as limited access to training opportunities and field demonstrations, which can impede their ability to fully engage and benefit from capacity-building programs. By taking these constraints into account, we can better support women harvesters in enhancing their practices and improving their overall effectiveness in the field. More insight is needed about gender empowerment in conjunction to QI.

→ Strengthening women role in MAPs cultivation

Challenges: Operators frequently face challenges in cultivation due to inadequate agriculture practices, weak post-harvest infrastructure and insufficient knowledge. Furthermore, there is a need for testing and adapting to other plants, as the limited product portfolio increases cultivators' vulnerability.

Recommendations: Efforts should focus on raising awareness about the use of specially designed tools which can facilitate women labour intensive processes, such as ergonomic sickles, hoes, and packaging tool as well as other implements essential for MAPs cultivation operations. To alleviate the burden on women, recommended interventions include providing training for the group use of machinery for land preparation, weeding, and harvesting. Technological cards should be transferred to women to ensure food safety and traceability of their products is imperative. This should be delivered alongside the design of channels of communication and regular dissemination of specific information about new technologies, hygiene standards, marketing standards and quality products in line with EU requirements. Training in post-harvest techniques and coaching to enhance women skills in using simple dryers and adopting hygienic harvesting methods.

Financial support should be provided to increase access to mechanized tools for land preparation. Additionally, small drying facilities should be provided based on the use of renewable energy, with solar drying preferred in southern Albania.

→ Strengthening women role in MAPs post-harvest and processing

Challenges: Various issues related to product control and processing can negatively impact quality and safety standards. Significant drawbacks arise from weaknesses in the production, post-harvest, and processing stages, as well as from the limited involvement of women in these processes.

Recommendations: Looking ahead, the government and other stakeholders, including aid development agencies, should prioritize financial support for establishing simple warehouses and small greenhouse-like structures through group investment grants coupled

with advisory services. These grants should specifically target providing equipment and machinery for use by small groups. Driers equipped with heating facilities are essential for the quick and effective drying of products. One major challenge observed among producer groups is their reluctance to utilize shared storage capacities.

Addressing this issue requires concerted efforts to build trust and foster collective action among producers to maximize the use of shared storage spaces and drying facilities. Additionally, providing small distillation units along with capacity-building initiatives is crucial to enhance their ability to produce various essential oil distillates for small pharmaceutical units. Furthermore, there is a need for packaging and drying facilities to enable women to produce herbal teas for direct consumption, further advancing their economic empowerment strategy. Training and awareness raising should be carried in order to break gender bias in exporters and large companies on relation to women engagement in using processing lines. Demonstrating that women can be engaged in processes that use complex technological equipment, make routine repairs of equipment, and become involved in investments plans would contribute to avoid gender segregation but also increase the competencies of women in quality assurance. Enhancing product quality requires high-capacity cleaning, cutting, sorting, and grinding machines. There is also an emerging need for sterilization facilities to address challenges related to product contamination and pyrrolizidine alkaloids.

To highlight the role of women in enhancing product quality and bolstering export competitiveness, interventions should aim to change the culture of quality within export-led companies. Women's views must be considered in the safety and quality of products, which can be achieved by increasing their capacities rather than merely altering managerial culture. Women should be trained in using protocols for controlling contaminants, pesticide residues, and plant health by using small laboratory kits. To break gender bias, training on the use and repair of technology equipment should be provided to women, preparing them for integration into technology use and mastery of new equipment types.

→ Strengthening women role in market and sales

Challenges: Women's access to market relations, direct contact with input and equipment providers, and end-

users is very weak. Without direct feedback from sales and direct information from input-technology providers, women miss out on critical information and are not updated with new market requirements.

Recommendations: Empowering women to enhance their value in the domestic market involves strengthening their position and facilitating their involvement in direct sales, including sorted MAPs, herbal teas, and distilled products packaged for end consumers. Developing a robust product strategy and enhancing market orientation are critical challenges.

Key needs for improving market orientation include better market intelligence, advanced product development, and fostering vertical coordination within the value chain. According to AGT-DSA (2021), there are three potential product groups where the market requires further support: expanding organic production, specializing in essential oil production, and focusing on the domestic market for end-products such as tea lines.

→ Strengthening women role in overall quality assurance in the sector governance

Challenges: Quality requirements are becoming more stringent, placing pressure on Albanian exporters to increase investment and implement traceability and monitoring and control systems. The role of women on quality assurance is very important but it is not sufficient to guarantee products quality in exports

Recommendations: EAs UNIDO (2022) emphasise in order to create a quality culture, that effectively supports gender equality in quality assurance, training and awareness raising activities should be inclusive and designed to leave no one behind. The training sessions and quality promotion activities should systematically include female entrepreneurs, female brigade chiefs in large farms and employees, in order to stimulate a change of mindset in relation to quality assurance. Contract farming and value chain financing services have been successful in improving product quality and mitigating risk among chain actors despite the competitive nature of the sector (FAO, 2018). Cooperation between stakeholders is crucial to shift power relations, social norms, and gender stereotypes that limit the economic contributions of both women and men. A larger share of women should participate in the two current associations existing in MAPs sector, namely EPCA and AMAP. Awareness raising should be provided

to exporters on certification schemes, including components related to social responsibility. There are very few standards that focus specifically on gender indicators. Nevertheless, a deeper understanding of the connection between gender empowerment and QI is necessary.

→ Strengthening women role in Quality Infrastructure

Challenges: Women involved in the conformity assessment have limited access to advanced training, face resource limitations and gender biases in career advancement.

Recommendations: More opportunities for advanced training and professional development are needed. Ensuring access to necessary resources, such as modern equipment and consumables, is crucial for maintaining high-quality standards. Overcoming gender biases that affect recognition and career advancement is essential. The lower representation of women in higher administrative positions, such as general directors, highlights the need for targeted initiatives to support women's advancement into these roles.

Enhancing women's contributions to high-quality products in export-oriented value chains is crucial. Therefore, Albanian Quality Infrastructure Institutions in order to achieve well-balanced and rounded Quality Policies should involve gender balanced representation of business organisations in policy initiation and implementation processes. For instance, as emphasised in UNIDO (2023), it is important for encouraging gender mainstreaming and gender parity, and by inviting female subject matter experts to participate. General Directory of Standards should strengthen active participation of stakeholders from MAPs using gender equality principles in the Technical Committees of the General Directory of Standards in order to increase their contribution in drafting, approval and adoption of Standards related to this sector. Similarly, General Directory of Accreditation should train a pool of technical assessors of both gender with relevant experience to service the MAPs sector (testing, calibration, certification and inspection), and mentoring to the point of being declared competent. In addition, to quality infrastructure entities, gender lenses should be used also in supporting testing and inspection entities. Capacity building activities should actively support and encourages laboratories and certification bodies owned and operated by women.

Final remarks

In conclusion, the complex landscape of gender dynamics within the agricultural sector, revealed various limitations emphasizing the significant impact of societal norms and perceptions on women's participation and empowerment. Addressing gender disparities and promoting equality in agriculture requires comprehensive interventions to challenge biases, foster inclusivity in decision-making, and ensure fair access to resources and opportunities for everyone. Although the study identified main actions on value chain level, a more emphasis should be given also to the women empowerment at QIs. A study on gender roles within the entire QI is necessary for exploring the opportunities and actions to attain women empowerment in this regard.

The intervention should be holistic since rural women do not represent a homogeneous group in terms of their skills, knowledge, capacity and access to assets. Women in Malësi e Madhe have different needs compared to women collecting and cultivating MAPs in other areas of Albania. The ongoing migration of skilled young rural women is exposing the remaining less qualified mid- and older-age women to various difficulties in terms of absorbing new technology and meeting quality standards for their products. The technology transfer and financing become challenging in areas where MAPs cultivation is not clustered, requiring strategic efforts to adapt to local conditions and requirements.



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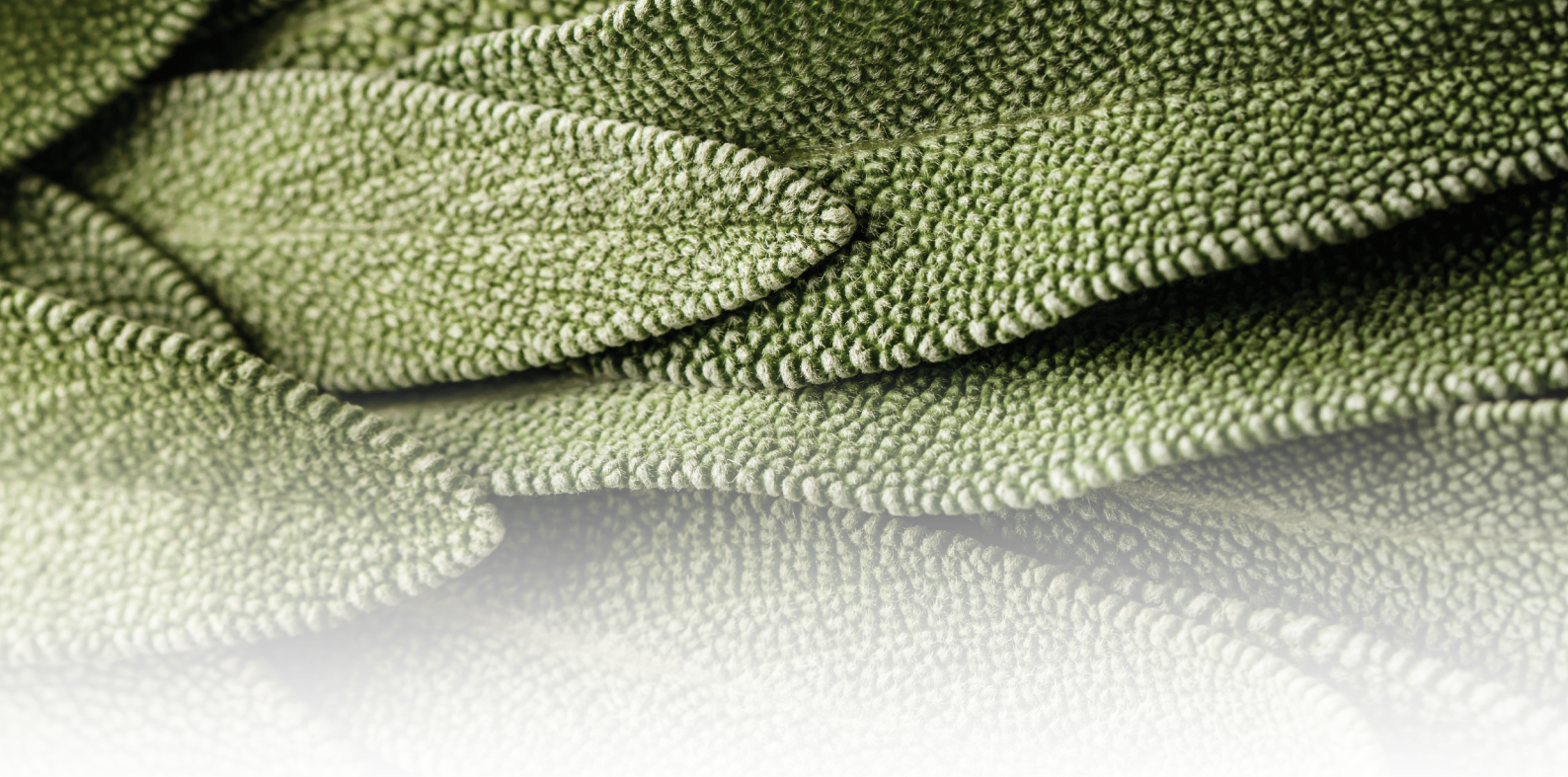
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