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Policy Brief

The Role of Women in Assuring Quality



Empowering women in the Medicinal and Aromatic Plants sector

POLICY BRIEF

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**

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Developments Solutions Associates**



»» BACKGROUND

Rural women in Albania play a pivotal role in driving economic, social, and environmental progress. They also play a significant role in ensuring quality in the agrifood sector in line with domestic and international market requirements thus contributing to sector's competitiveness. Despite their importance, they face significant challenges in balancing their multiple roles within families and communities. 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 which dominated rural areas during planned economy, have reduced women's social and economic influence in household and community decision-making. Despite ongoing changes in rural regions, women's contributions to economic life remain largely unrecognized and undercompensated in terms of legal status, income, and wages. For example, although over half of the women in Albania are employed in agriculture, only a small fraction of farms are officially recognized as being managed by women.

Access to factors of production (mainly assets, financial

capital and knowledge transfer) is crucial for women's progress in self-employment. However, data reveals significant disparities that hinder women's ability to fully engage in productive activities and capitalize on opportunities for economic empowerment. Indeed, in more than 4/5 of the cases, properties are registered in the name of men. There is still a gender gap on access to finance and budgetary support – subsidies are predominantly benefited by men. On the other hand, 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.

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 labor 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 policy brief is based on an extensive analysis aimed at thoroughly examining the Albanian agrifood sector in general, and the MAPs (medicinal and aromatic plants) value chain specifically, in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment (GEEW), with a special focus on quality. In Albania, agricultural exports, particularly in the MAPs sector, face challenges due to international trade requirements related to quality and phytosanitary controls, including hygiene, contaminants, chemical residues, microbiological factors, and foreign body control.

Weaknesses in technological capacity, limited knowledge, and a partially effective Quality Infrastructure (QI) undermine the competitiveness of this sector and the sustainability of rural livelihoods, particularly for women. Wild-harvested and cultivated MAPs are crucial sources of income for the rural population, especially for rural women. The total number of women directly engaged in this sector exceeds 60,000.

Women's contributions to monitoring and controlling quality become particularly 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, improving both product quality and women's empowerment. 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.

The study employs mixed research methods, including desk research involving secondary statistical data and various strategic documents review and primary data collection using combined qualitative and quantitative approaches such as semi-structured interviews and structured surveys with experts and MAPs farmers to gain valuable insights into gender equality within the value chain and quality implications.





**Gender and
quality in the
MAPs sector**

Gender and quality in the MAPs sector

Equality in decision making in the MAPs cultivation

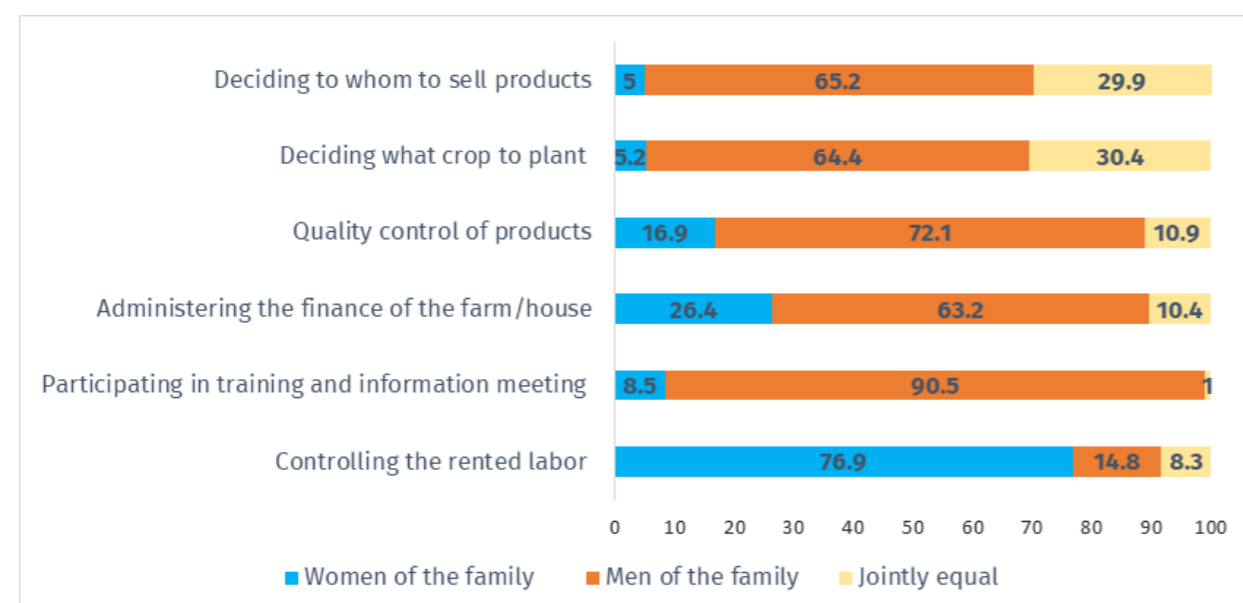
The survey of MAPs producers/farmers provides insights into perceived roles and responsibilities within family structures concerning various aspects of agricultural management. Figure 1 highlights that in quality control of products, men are predominantly seen as responsible (72.1%). Similarly, decision-making 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 smaller 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.

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. A minority believe in equal sharing of this responsibility (10.4%), 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 1) – one reason is that women are more frequently hired than men for some processes.

Figure 1. 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% of respondents attributing this role to them. Women's inability to travel to distant areas outside villages makes them vulnerable in public sphere roles. The lack of transport coverage and logistic infrastructure in some in rural areas, hinders the strengthening of

women's role and their overall position in the rural society.

Access to technologies and information is a limitation to 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/exporters. Inadequate practices of dring (resulting in deterioration of quality and potentially in microbiological contamination) has increased the obstacles for achieving conformity. Information on quality standards is accessible mainly through the buyers and the certification bodies – mainly men interact with market actors and service providers, thus women have marginal role and limited direct access to information from such important channels.

Information at the export level is also limited. There are cases where exporters cannot defend themselves due to a lack of know-how and information about market requirements. To address quality issues, exporters and large processors are attempting vertical integration and trying to coordinate actions along the supply chain. However, women are not widely included in these efforts due to barriers to representation.

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 for

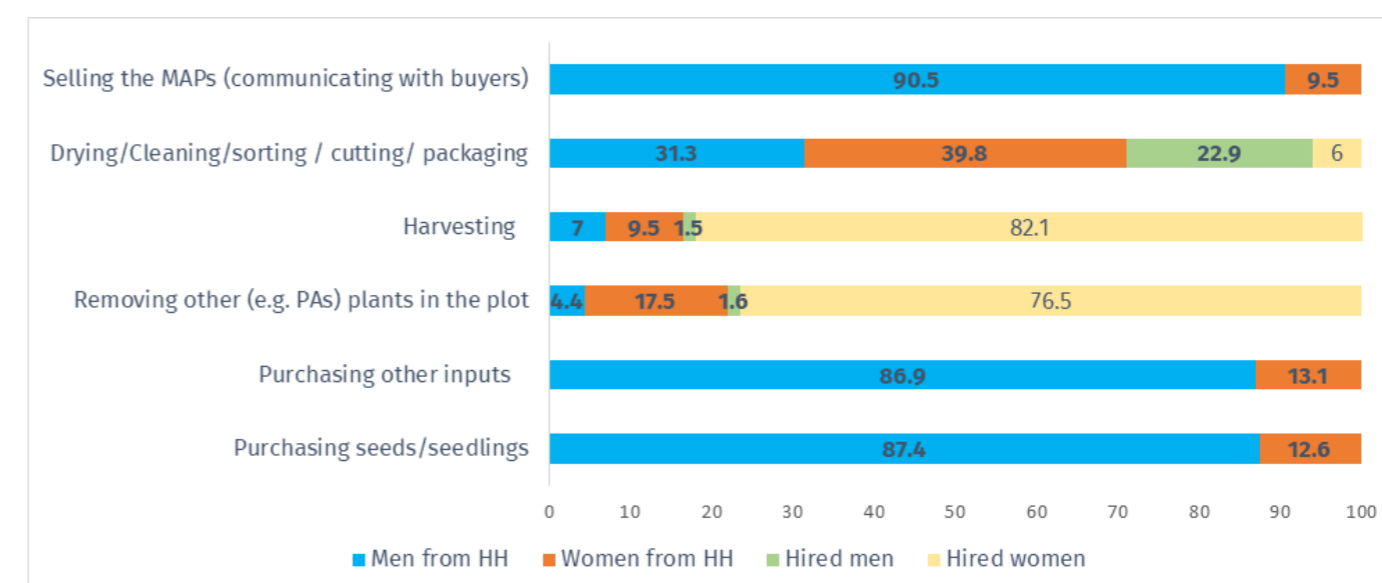
undertaking actions for their empowerment. Figure 2 provides valuable insights into how agricultural tasks are distributed among different gender groups within households, including households and hired men and women.

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.

Both men and women from the household actively similarly engage in post-harvest activities, including drying, cleaning, sorting, cutting, and packaging of agricultural produce. Women exhibit higher involvement in tasks such as removing other plants (17.5%) and harvesting (9.5%) compared to men (4.4% and 7%, respectively), while hired women workers significantly contribute to these field activities, particularly in removing other plants (76.5%) and harvesting (82.1%), highlighting their substantial role in field operations.

Men from the household primarily undertake the responsibility of selling agricultural produce and communicating with buyers, representing 90.5% involvement (Figure 2).

Figure 2. 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. The significant involvement of hired women in field activities and their contributions to post-harvest processing highlight their crucial role in quality assurance.

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.

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 (ATTC) will mostly be acquired by male farmers. Solutions related to quality and safety, applied technology for traceability, inventory management, use of propagation materials, soil and water management, and post-harvest processes, even if provided through private operators will not be accessed directly by women, since they are not usually engaged in managing the relations with the input suppliers. Inequalities in accessing information create additional setbacks in quality assurance.





»» **The way
forward**

» The way forward

The analysis of women's roles in agriculture highlights significant gender dynamics, perceptions, and disparities. These findings emphasize the need to address gender inequalities in labour allocation and recognize women's critical roles in improving product quality and export competitiveness.

Men often dominate decision-making processes in agriculture. Initiatives to promote gender inclusivity and representation in decision-making forums and policy development are essential. Creating environments that empower women's voices can unlock the sector's 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 products. 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.

Gender inequalities in contributions to product quality are crucial for value chain development in agricultural products, including MAPs. Market challenges, weakened terms of trade, and quality gaps necessitate strategic industry orientation. Cultivating MAPs requires flexibility to adapt to price and income volatility, making diversification and specialization vital. Women's contributions are essential for this transformation.

There are several recommendations and actions should be taken for enabling a better environment and unlocking potentials for women role in equality improvement. Actions should aim to enhance capacities to improve QIs but also indirectly influence the achievement of cross-cutting goals, namely gender-balanced inclusion. Main actions are ranked as the 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. 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: 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. 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.

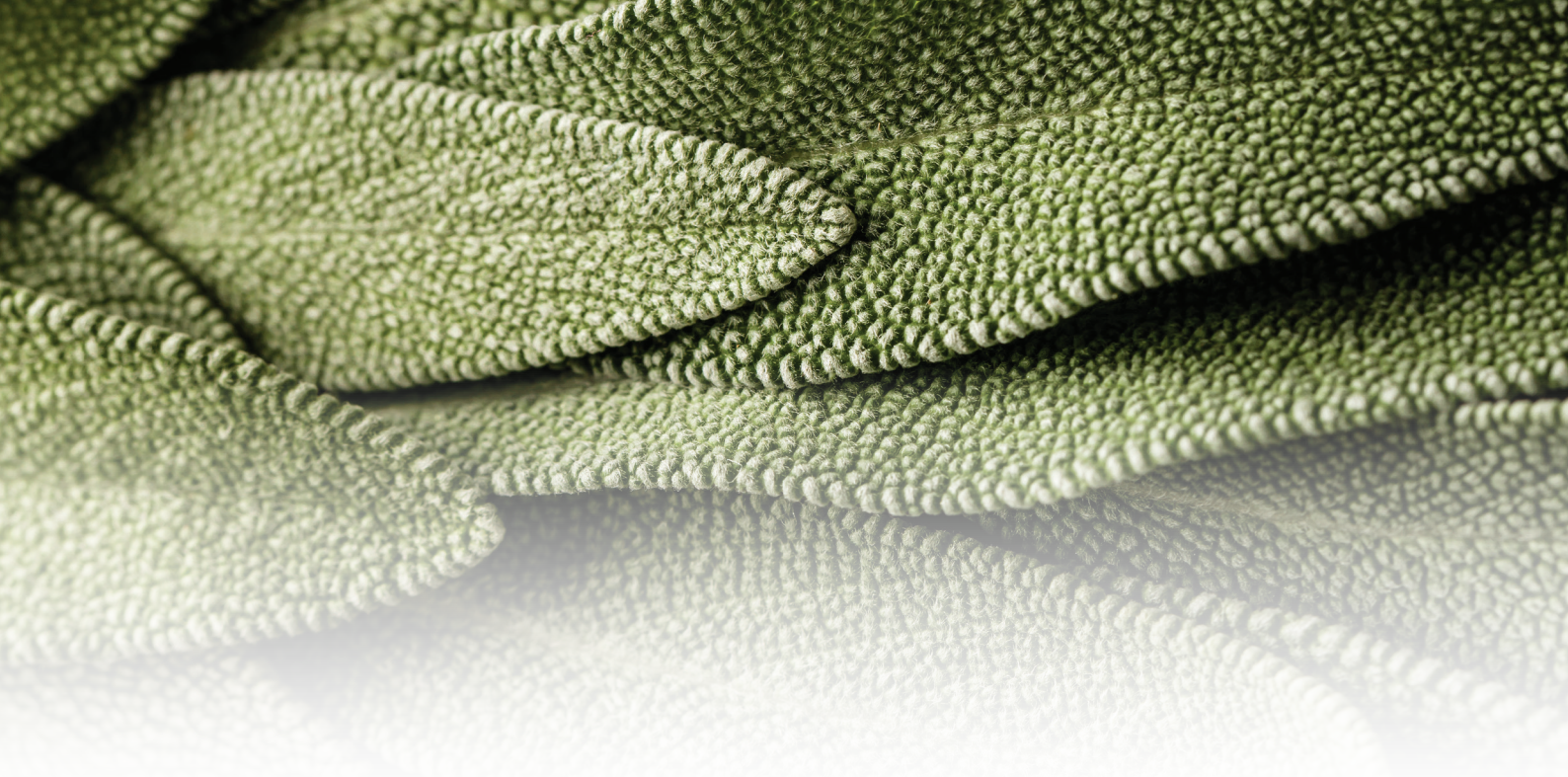




Final Remarks

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.

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 Malesi 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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