AgRimate

Article

Dominik Royé
Prof. Dr. Annekatrin Hoppe
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Women in Olive Farming in Spain: Why Recognition, Support and Community Matter

When we picture an olive farmer, many of us still imagine a man working in the grove, driving the tractor, operating machinery, or making decisions about the farm. Yet women have long been part of agricultural work in Spain's olive sector. They manage farms, contribute to family businesses, carry out administrative tasks, participate in harvesting and pruning, and increasingly take responsibility for production and innovation. Even though women are present in agriculture, their work and expertise can remain less visible and less supported.





Women are working in agriculture. Are we recognizing them?

Research from different parts of rural Spain suggests that this is not an isolated problem. Women in agriculture often combine farming with household and care responsibilities. Yet their contributions to farming often remain hidden behind family roles or traditional assumptions about who is considered a farmer. Studies of family farming (Gómez-Pellón, 2024), livestock production (Fernandez-Gimenez et al., 2021), and rural entrepreneurship (Driga et al., 2009) describe continuing barriers to decision-making, economic autonomy, institutional recognition and access to opportunities. At the same time, rural women face broader challenges, including limited access to basic services, isolation and difficulties in balancing work and family life, which can contribute to decisions to leave the countryside (Cobano-Delgado & Llorent-Bedmar, 2020).

Olive farming is not an exception. Our interviews with eight women working in the Spanish olive sector suggest that some of these structural challenges are experienced in very practical ways: being taken less seriously than male workers, having to prove one's competence, carrying out demanding physical work, combining farming with childcare, struggling with profitability, and lacking opportunities to exchange experiences with other women.

The encouraging part is that the women we spoke with also pointed toward possible solutions. More than simply asking for help, they described the value of recognition, practical knowledge, peer support and stronger local networks.

The question, therefore, is not whether women belong in olive farming. It is how rural communities, institutions and the agricultural sector can make it easier for women to participate, remain and thrive.



The problem is bigger than physical work.

One common assumption is that the main barrier for women in agriculture is physical strength. There is some truth in this: olive farming can involve strenuous and repetitive work, particularly during harvesting. Several of our interviewees described back, knee and leg pain, and the physical strain of operating heavy equipment. One farmer explained that she could only hold a vibrating machine for a limited amount of time because of its weight. Another described how her physical capacity changed after having children.

However, the interviews also show why it would be too narrow to define women's challenges as a question of physical ability. Technology has already changed what is possible. Tractors, mechanical harvesters and other tools can reduce some of the physical demands of farming, and several interviewees explicitly noted that technological advances make it possible for women to perform tasks that were previously more difficult.

Within AgRimate, our technical partners are taking this further by developing assistive technologies, such as an exoskeleton designed to reduce physical strain during agricultural work.

Technology may increasingly help to overcome the physical barriers to agricultural work. However, the more difficult question is how structural barriers can be addressed so that participation, recognition and decision-making become more inclusive.

This distinction is important because research has indeed repeatedly identified barriers that are social and institutional in addition to physical barriers. Fernandez-Gimenez (2021), studying women in extensive livestock farming in Spain, found that women entering a historically male-dominated sector often had to navigate exclusion and discrimination in agricultural institutions. The researchers also found that women created their own networks to address specific needs and gain support. Similarly, Gómez-Pellón (2024) found that traditional family-farming norms continue to assign men the position of owner and women the position of wife and producer, including responsibility for many visible and invisible tasks. Reigada et al. (2021) likewise describe women's contributions to family farming as central but historically subordinated.



Our interviews provide concrete examples of what such patterns can look like in an olive grove. One woman summarized her experience simply: “Women are in the shadow.” She described not always being accepted or valued as an agricultural worker and feeling that workers treated her with less authority than they would a man.



Another explained that, outside her own family farm, olive-grove owners prefer male workers because women are assumed to be physically weaker. Yet another recalled that people initially questioned why she was driving a tractor, although this has become less common as more women have entered the sector.

These experiences should not be interpreted as proof that every woman in olive farming faces discrimination in the same way. Indeed, our interviews also show important differences. Some women reported strong support from their husbands, fathers, mothers, siblings or local communities and therefore experienced fewer difficulties. One interviewee initially said that she did not see particular challenges for herself because family support was sufficient. This variation matters. Women's experiences are shaped by age, family situation, farm structure, previous education, access to networks and local social norms. Research on rural women has similarly emphasized that there is no single pathway into agricultural work and that policy and outreach need to reflect diverse lived experiences (Fernandez-Gimenez et al., 2021).

Knowledge matters. But so does connection.

Training is one important way to strengthen women's participation in agriculture. Research on sustainable farming in southern Spain identifies lack of training and lack of economic or policy support as important barriers to adopting new practices, with women in particular expressing concerns about limitations in their knowledge (Parra et al., 2022).

Our interviews reinforce this need, with women identifying practical information about machinery, pruning, harvesting, administration, marketing, documentation, and new technologies as topics they would value in a community event.

But access to information is only one part of creating the conditions in which women can participate fully in agriculture. Our interviews also point to the importance of having opportunities to connect with other women in the sector.

This is one of the clearest findings from the interviews. Several women described olive farming as socially isolating. In some cases, most communication about farming happens with husbands or family members, while opportunities to meet other women are limited. One interviewee observed that men often have more informal opportunities to connect through places such as bars, cooperatives and professional networks. Women lack this infrastructure in addition to having less free time due to care responsibilities.

The interviews also showed how these connections can become practically useful. One woman described how women she met through a workshop continued to exchange technical advice afterwards. This kind of informal exchange can complement formal training: a farmer facing a problem with pests, irrigation, machinery or marketing may be able to draw on the experience of someone who has already encountered it.

For this reason, creating stronger female networks can help to address several challenges at the same time: isolation, lack of information, limited access to role models, difficulties finding workers, uncertainty about regulations, and the feeling of having to solve every problem alone.





What could a community event achieve?

This is where the AgRimate project has an opportunity to move from identifying problems to creating a useful space for action.

A community event for women in the olive sector should bring women together to exchange experiences, discover existing initiatives and networks, and build connections that continue beyond the event along with learning about recent technological innovations.

It should address elements that respond directly to what we heard in the interviews. Demonstrations of AgRimate technology prototypes, such as the assistive exoskeleton being developed by our technical partners, could show how technology helps to reduce physical strain. Presentations of existing networks and initiatives for women farmers could help participants discover opportunities to connect with others in the sector. Finally, a workshop drawing on research on work-related stress and isolation could provide a space to discuss some of the psychosocial challenges that emerged in our interviews.

Ultimately, the value of such an event would lie in creating opportunities for exchange: sharing experiences, discovering existing resources and initiatives, exploring new technologies, and connecting with other women working in agriculture. It cannot address the structural challenges women face in agriculture, but it can provide a space for addressing these challenges and for connections to develop beyond the event itself.

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Dominik Royé

Research associate and PhD Candidate at UBER, working at the chair of Occupational Health Psychology. His work focuses on workplace diversity, with a particular interest in the experiences, working conditions and inclusion of people with migration histories and other underrepresented groups.



Prof. Dr. Annekatrin Hoppe

Chair of Occupational Health Psychology at UBER. Her research focuses on workplace health and well-being, with particular interests in workplace stress and resources, health-promoting interventions, new technologies and hybrid work, and the experiences of migrant and blue-collar workers.

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