

# Have you considered all potential successors?

There's significant scope to increase the number of women farmers, writes **Kevin Hanrahan**, Head of the Teagasc Rural Economy & Development Programme



**T**oday's Irish and European agriculture sector faces a generational renewal challenge. As Figure 1 illustrates, close to one-third of farm managers in Ireland and the European Union (EU27) are 65 years of age or older and less than 15% of farmers in Ireland and across Europe are younger than 40 years of age.

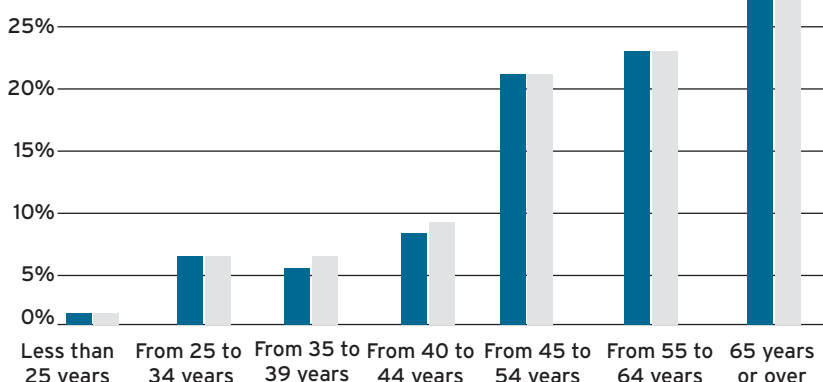
Generational renewal on Irish and European farms is important both for the continued sustainability of existing family farms but also for the wider sustainability and vibrancy of rural areas. The vast majority of today's farm holders acquired their farms from their parents. Current farm management and ownership reflects farm succession and inheritance decisions made by farm families in the past.

Successfully addressing the generational renewal challenge will involve changes in the decisions by Irish families around farm succession and inheritance that are supported by public policy and agricultural advisory services.

Farm family attitudes to female farm succession and public policy and societal support for female farm succession may be important aspects of successfully addressing the farm generational renewal challenge in Ireland.

Census of Agriculture data from 2020 shows that less than half of Irish farms (46%) had a succession plan in place. Of those farm families with a succession plan, the vast majority (82%) had identified a male

**Figure 1: Irish and European Farm Managers by Age**



successor. Only 16% of farms with a succession plan had identified a female successor (Figure 2).

The predominance of males among identified successors reflects well established cultural norms and people's understanding of male and female gender roles in farming. The continued dominance of males among today's identified successors, if reflected in actual farm succession and inheritance outcomes, would do little to alter the gender composition of Irish farm managers.

In 2020 only 11% of Irish farm managers are female. The very low share of female farm managers in Ireland is similar to that observed in other northwestern European counties such as Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark. Central European and southern European countries generally had significantly higher shares of female managers of farms.

The continued dominance of males among identified successors may increasingly be a barrier to the successful generational renewal of Irish farms.

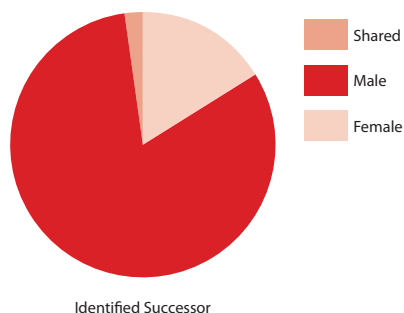
Irish farm households, like households in Ireland more generally, are declining in size.

In 2023 the average size of farm household in the Teagasc NFS was 2.9 persons, whereas in the year 2000 the average farm household had 3.6 members. With fewer children in modern Irish farm families, the pool of potential farm successors has narrowed and will continue to narrow in the future.

Redefining gender roles in agriculture, empowering women to be farm managers, as well as workers on farms, will be an important part of addressing the generational renewal problem in Ireland and preserving the Irish family farm model.

**Figure 2: Gender of Identified Successor of Farm Families with a succession plan**

(CSO Census of Agriculture 2020)



**Figure 3: Share of Farms with Female Manager in selected EU member states**

