

The integration of immigrant women farmers in Portugal: Reconnecting with nature through agriculture

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ABSTRACT

Migrants play a vital role in revitalizing rural regions, contributing to demographic renewal, economic diversification, and cultural enrichment. Their involvement is particularly significant in sectors such as agriculture, where labour shortages and aging populations pose ongoing challenges. By bringing new skills, perspectives, and initiatives, migrants help sustain local economies and foster innovation. This study explores the experiences of five foreign women who have relocated to the Centre of Portugal, establishing new lives centred on agriculture and aims to understand the motivations behind migration, lifestyles, and the dynamics of integration. Through in-depth interviews and photographic and video documentation, the study highlights the women's pursuit of a more sustainable, nature-connected existence, emphasizes the significance of the welcoming process and underlines the role of agriculture as a pathway to improved quality of life and social integration. It was clear that the integration process requires social inclusion, access to services, cultural exchange, and community engagement.

Keywords: foreign women farmers, region of Viseu, integration, sustainability, eco-friendly

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture holds a significant place in Portugal's economy and cultural heritage, contributing to food security, rural employment, and international trade. In 2023, the agricultural sector accounted for less than 3% of the country's Gross Value Added (GVA), which shows its continued relevance despite a downward trend since the mid-1990s (when it contributed around 4.8% to GDP), as a result of the expansion of the services sector and broader economic modernization (European Commission [EC], 2024).

According to the last 2019 Agricultural Census (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021), Portugal had 290,229 farms, of which 77,862 were in the centre region (Instituto Nacional de Estatística [INE], 2021). Over the 30-year period between 1989 and 2019, the country experienced a significant decline in its farming population, losing 51.4% of farmers nationwide. This trend was even more noticeable in the *Beira Litoral* region, which saw a 64.7% reduction, compared to a 44.3% decrease in *Beira Interior* (Trindade & Pereira, 2023). These losses came alongside with a marked decline in agricultural labour overall.

Despite these challenges, women play a substantial and growing role in Portuguese agriculture. In the centre region, statistically, 31.8% of farms are managed by women (Mendes, 2023), although one observes that their actual daily presence and contributions on farms are considerably higher than formal ownership or managerial roles suggest (Gomes et al., 2022). This highlights both the gendered dynamics of rural work and the under-recognition of women's roles in the agricultural sector.

Compared with other European countries, the cost of agricultural land in Portugal is relatively affordable, making it an attractive option for farmers seeking to invest in land or establish a farming business. In 2022, the average price of arable land in Portugal was approximately €10,263 per hectare, which is notably lower than in countries like the Netherlands (€85,431/ha) and Luxembourg (€67,857/ha). This affordability is further emphasised when compared to regions such as the Canary Islands in Spain, where arable land prices reached €120,477 per hectare in 2020 (EUROSTAT, 2021; Wasilewski et al., 2024). Additionally, Portugal possesses substantial areas of unused or underused agricultural land, presenting opportunities for new stakeholders in this sector. As of 2022,

agricultural land accounted for approximately 42.79% of Portugal's total land area (Trading Economics, 2025).

At the same time, Portugal is recognized as one of the European countries adopting a progressive approach toward organic farming, with a growing number of farmers shifting to more sustainable agricultural practices. This trend is supported by increasing government incentives, European Union (EU) funding under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and rising consumer demand for organic products. As a result, Portugal has seen a steady expansion in organic farmland, which reached approximately 4.2% of the total utilized agricultural area in 2023, reflecting the country's commitment to environmental sustainability and rural development (EC, 2023a; IFOAM, 2022). This transition not only contributes to biodiversity preservation, soil health, sustainable food systems, diverse landscapes, but also enhances the economic resilience of farming communities by opening new market opportunities.

The increasing interest in sustainable, organic, and eco-friendly agriculture is attracting more women to the sector. This approach promotes ethical farming practices that support biodiversity conservation, natural resource preservation, and the production of healthy, locally sourced food (Food and agriculture organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2011; EC, 2021). Moreover, sustainable agriculture offers opportunities for personal development, acquisition of new skills, and the application of innovative techniques, contributing to rural empowerment and gender equality (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2019; OECD, 2020). As a result, women are playing a growing role in driving the agroecological transition and fostering resilient rural communities.

The combination of underutilized land, affordable prices, and the growing emphasis on agroecological transition creates a favourable environment for newcomers to adopt sustainable farming practices and actively contribute to the revitalization of rural communities, especially in the inner and mountainous territories like Viseu. The Viseu region, characterized by its mountainous terrain and crossed by several rivers, is Portugal's most populous inland area. Its capital city, Viseu, is among the largest urban centres in central Portugal and has been recognized as the Portuguese city with the highest quality of life (DECO PROTeste, 2021). Situated on a predominantly agricultural plateau, Viseu's rich and diverse landscape is the result of centuries of agricultural and forestry practices, primarily carried out by family farmers. This deep-rooted social and cultural heritage, combined with significant biodiversity, makes the region highly attractive for initiatives and projects connected to rural development and sustainable land use.

The 2023 Migration and Asylum Report by the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA) indicates a foreign population of 1,361 people living in the Viseu (*Beira Alta*) region. Among these, there is an increasingly significant number of people engaged in agriculture (*Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos*). Although the number of foreign farmers who have settled in the Viseu region is unknown, it is possible to say that they contribute to reducing the loss of population in inland territories, particularly those related to agricultural activity.

The Agrarian School of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (IPV), Portugal, is deeply committed to community engagement and to sustainable development, through strong partnerships with local communities to promote sustainable practices. The project *Paisagens Agrícolas e Alimentares com Gerações de Mulheres Inovadoras* (PAGE) (PRR-C05-i03-I-000217), coordinated by the Agrarian School (<https://page.ajap.pt/>), seeks to value traditional knowledge, high-quality products and services, and the outstanding symbolic value of unique farming systems. The project organizes and systematizes mechanisms that foster innovation linked to women and youth, creating pathways likely to attract new stakeholders—particularly young people—into rural areas to develop agricultural and related activities. PAGE also supports integrated actions, including an innovation network and business creation support, with a special focus on tourism at both national and international levels. These efforts aim to sustain the livelihood of the agricultural population and revitalize rural territories.

Within this framework, and considering the socio-economic realities of the Viseu region, the project has adopted an intercultural dialogue perspective to explore how foreign women farmers contribute to the fulfilment of these goals. This paper aims to characterize a group of five women farmers by dwelling on their life trajectories, projects, expectations, and the challenges they encountered during their integration processes. Through this analysis, the study seeks to identify both the common factors driving their relocation and settlement, as well as the unique aspects of each individual's experience. While the small sample size ($n = 5$) limits statistical generalizability, it provides rich, contextual insights into an underexplored population, and can be taken as a basis for further research and policy development.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by a multidisciplinary research team from the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (IPV), comprising experts in foreign languages and cultures (German, French and English), digital art, agronomic engineering, design and videography. Due to the lack of an official registry of immigrant farmers in the Viseu, purposive sampling was employed through outreach and networking with local agricultural organizations to identify foreign women farmers actively engaged in farming within the region. This approach resulted in the selection of five participants of diverse nationalities.

To ensure for comprehensive and authentic narratives, semi-structured interviews were conducted employing a life story approach, which allows participants to combine their experiences in a manner that emphasizes significant events, emotions, and reflections, thereby providing a rich, contextualized understanding of their individual journeys (Brannen, 2013; Kwan et al., 2023; Salomão, 2023). This method facilitates the exploration of how individuals make sense of their lives within broader social contexts (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003; Taylor & Littleton, 2006; Wu et al., 2023).

The interview protocol consisted of six open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of each

Table 1. Participant summary

Participant	Nationality	Previous profession	Current farming activities	Location (Viseu region)	Key motivation for migration
IC	Belgian	Teacher / Civil servant	Goat cheese, yoghurt, honey, bakery, olives	Nelas	Sustainable living, agroecology
FVD	Dutch	Arts manager / Environmental educator	Ecotourism, self-sufficiency farming	Dão River	Sustainability, community living
TSS	English	NGO worker (mental health, domestic violence)	Developing sustainable farm, cooperative	Penalva do Castelo	Family well-being, quality of life
CH	French	Wine & horse trainer	Viticulture, cattle breeding, equine training	Farminhão, Viseu	Heritage preservation, agroecology
KZ	German	Agriculture / Naturopath	Organic vegetables, vegan lifestyle	São Pedro do Sul	Organic living, health focus

participant's biography, motivations, adaptation processes, and cultural perspectives:

1. Could you please summarise your life journey?
2. What were the reasons that brought you to Portugal?
3. Have your experiences in Portugal lived up to your expectations? Could you specify your activities and goals?
4. What are the biggest obstacles you've encountered in adapting to the Portuguese reality?
5. What do you consider to be the biggest differences between your home country and Portugal?
6. What are the characteristics of your home country in terms of food? What do you prefer about Portugal regarding food?

Interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the interviewees (German, French, or English) to ensure comfort and authenticity in responses. Additionally, photographic and video documentation support was used together with the interviews to enrich the qualitative data and provide visual context to the narratives (<https://dialogospace.ipv.pt/>).

The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Transcripts were first reviewed in detail by multiple researchers to ensure intersubjective validation of themes. Throughout the analysis, an iterative and reflexive approach was maintained to ensure that emerging themes accurately represented participants' perspectives and the context in which the data was collected. No software was used; coding was done manually due to the small dataset and the narrative complexity of each case.

RESULTS

Life Journeys of Five Immigrant Women Farmers

The five participants migrated to Portugal several years ago and represent diverse nationalities, specifically Belgian, Dutch, English, French and German (Table 1). Each participant relocated with a partner who shares their agricultural interests and lifestyle aspirations (Figure 1). To ensure anonymity, the initials of each one's name are used to designate each of them.

Participant **IC** is a French-speaking Belgian who previously resided in Brussels and Geneva. Prior to relocating, she worked

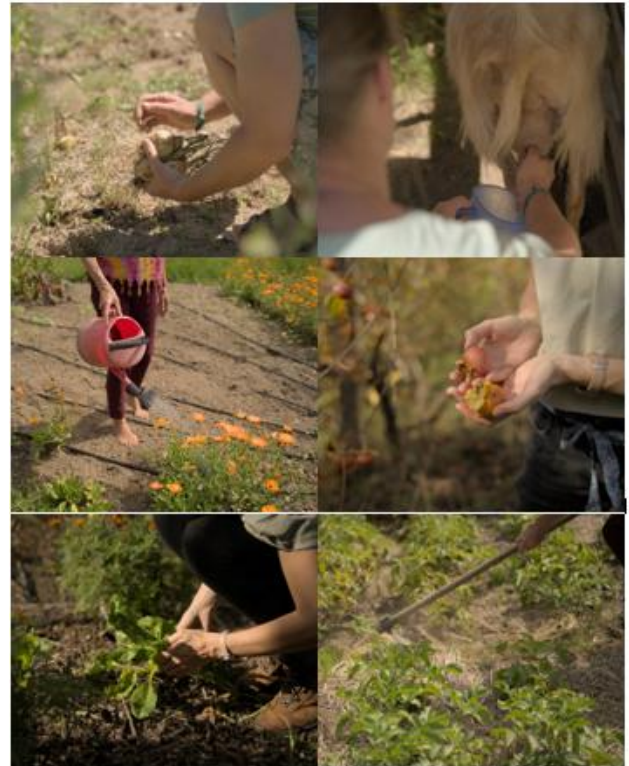


Figure 1. From vegetables to animals, by their own hand, these women farmers aim to produce their own food and adopt a sustainable lifestyle (Source: Field study)

as a geography teacher and civil servant. Currently settled in a rural area near Nelas, Portugal, she and her partner renovated a farmhouse surrounded by fields and woodlands, with a breath-taking view of *Serra da Estrela* mountain. Passionate about hiking and sustainable living, they engage in various agroecological activities including the production of goat cheese, yoghurt, ice cream, and honey, as well as bread making. They also grow a range of vegetables and fruits—particularly olives—for domestic/home consumption and maintain a small flock of chickens. Additionally, IC has established a Belgian confectionery business, retailing products at local fairs. Their future plans include cultivating medicinal plants for pharmaceutical and cosmetic applications and producing specialized seeds.

FVD, born in the Netherlands, began her education in the arts in Rotterdam before obtaining a degree in social and cultural studies. She worked for several years as a manager and organizer in the public art sector. Subsequently, she moved to

California, where she was engaged in environmental education at a botanical garden near San Francisco. Since 1989, her family has owned an old mill located on the banks of the *Dão* River in Portugal. Together with her husband, she decided to relocate to Portugal to develop an ecotourism project. Their primary goal was to learn how to live sustainably by cultivating their own food and integrating within the local community, striving towards self-sufficiency.

TSS grew up in rural England and trained in Performing Arts before working with charitable organizations supporting women affected by domestic violence and individuals with mental health challenges. Seeking a quieter lifestyle, she married in Monchique and developed a strong affinity for the Portuguese countryside. She and her husband continued working in England until the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in job loss. They subsequently moved to Portugal with their infant child, initially settling in the Algarve where they had family connections. Finding the region dry and expensive, they opted to relocate further north. Currently residing near Penalva do Castelo, they purchased a large tract of previously cultivated land featuring diverse flora, including shrubs and trees, which exceeded their expectations. Their intention is to develop a sustainable farm and preserve this land as a heritage for their son.

CH, a French farmer and rural entrepreneur originally from Alsace, has worked in various regions of France, as well as in England and Portugal. Beginning at the age of 16, she was involved in her family's wine business and developed an interest in house renovation. Passionate about agriculture and heritage, she and her husband decided to establish a farm in the *Dão* region of Portugal. They acquired an old farmstead near Viseu comprising multiple plots with varying soil types, from dry to wetter areas. Their main agricultural activities include viticulture, breeding *Arouquesa* cattle, and equine work. As far as the latter is concerned, CH has specialized in training young horses for riding and subsequently sells them.

KZ, born in Berlin, Germany, follows a vegan lifestyle. After an initial career in agriculture, she transitioned to employment outside farming due to challenges faced in the sector. Later, after a period of unemployment, she chose self-employment as a naturopath. Motivated by the desire to cultivate her own vegetables, she moved to Portugal with her family and purchased a house near São Pedro do Sul, surrounded by a substantial plot of land suitable for agricultural activities.

Motivations for Relocation

The five interviewees pointed out strong connections to nature, rural living, and sustainability as primary motivators for moving to Portugal. Access to land, favourable climate, and ecological diversity were cited as primary driving factors. For example, FVD and CH were drawn by the potential to establish eco-projects or heritage farms, while TSS and IC emphasized family well-being and agroecological values. KZ, influenced by her naturopathic background, sought an environment conducive to organic living and plant-based food production. The presence of supportive partners was also a key factor in facilitating relocation and settlement.

These motivations align with broader phenomena described as “amenity migration”—where lifestyle

enhancement, environmental concern, and personal fulfilment intersect.

Expectations and Current Activities

All participants reported that their experiences in Portugal generally met or exceeded their expectations. All participants transitioned into small-scale, diversified farming, often blending traditional and innovative methods. IC and her partner actively practise agroecological farming, producing a variety of dairy products, vegetables, and confectionery goods. FVD manages an ecotourism project focused on self-sufficiency and seasonal food consumption. TSS aims to establish a farm shop or cooperative and currently cultivates local produce while valuing access to traditional Mediterranean diets. CH operates a diversified farm with viticulture, cattle breeding, and equestrian activities, with plans to expand vegetable production for both personal and community use. KZ produces organic vegetables and other health-related products, emphasizing a lifestyle connected to nature. Their farming activities reflect a shared ethos of sustainability and autonomy, rooted in hands-on engagement with the land.

Challenges in Integration

Language barriers emerged as the most significant obstacle, particularly for TSS, who reported difficulty progressing due to limited Portuguese proficiency. CH identified administrative and bureaucratic complexities as major challenges during integration. In contrast, IC and KZ reported relatively smooth transitions, highlighting the welcoming nature of local communities and supportive interpersonal relationships. No participant reported gender-related discrimination in agricultural activities.

Perceived Differences and Integration Challenges

Participants identified several cultural and environmental differences. IC noted that Portuguese traditions remain vibrant compared to her previous residences. FVD observed a stronger link between people and the land in Portugal, with more consistent access to seasonal produce. TSS emphasized the friendlier social environment and higher quality of life, alongside easier access to fresh local food. CH remarked on a perceived decline in pride for local agricultural products among Portuguese people, contrasting with her own commitment to preserving regional heritage. KZ valued the slower pace of life and greater harmony with nature despite lower economic standards compared to Germany.

Each woman migrated with a partner who supported or co-led their agricultural ventures. This provided emotional and economic stability during transition. Most had prior experience in sustainability, agriculture, or related social/environmental sectors (e.g., IC as a civil servant, FVD in botanical education, TSS in mental health NGOs). Such backgrounds enabled informed decisions about relocation and farming approaches.

While most women described positive integration experiences, common challenges included dealing with bureaucratic requirements and language barriers. TSS reported difficulty accessing services due to a poor mastery of Portuguese. CH experienced frustration with administrative

Table 2. Thematic coding summary

Theme	Sub-themes	Illustrative example
Motivations for relocation	Nature connection, sustainability, family well-being	"We wanted to live closer to nature and raise our child in a healthy environment." (TSS)
Integration challenges	Language barriers, bureaucracy, market access	"The paperwork was overwhelming, especially without fluent Portuguese." (CH)
Farming practices	Agroecology, diversification, artisanal products	"We cultivate our own vegetables and make goat cheese, yoghurt and bread." (IC)
Cultural & food differences	Mediterranean diet, biodiversity, culinary gaps	"I love the seasonal produce but miss the variety of vegetarian options." (FVD)
Community & belonging	Welcoming local networks, cultural exchange	"The neighbours were very supportive, helping us adapt." (KZ)

processes. However, IC and KZ found their local communities welcoming and supportive. None reported experiencing gender-based discrimination in agricultural contexts.

Cultural and Food System Differences

Interviewees highlighted food cultural distinctions between Portugal and their home countries. IC noted a cultural tendency in Portugal for larger meals, but less frequent consumption of vegetables. FVD missed some vegetarian culinary diversity but appreciated the richness of Portuguese seasonal foods. TSS expressed a preference for the Mediterranean diet and seafood, along with the importance of food provenance. CH valued wild mushrooms and local products but stressed the need to strengthen local food identity. KZ focused on organic food production aligned with her vegan lifestyle, emphasizing health and sustainability. Food habits were key in shaping cultural adaptation and daily routines.

Across the five cases, several common themes emerged. In terms of **motivations**, all participants highlighted the added value of reconnecting with nature, pursuing sustainable lifestyles, and ensuring family well-being, though some (e.g., CH, FVD) also linked these goals to heritage preservation and ecotourism. Regarding **barriers**, language difficulties and bureaucratic requirements were the most consistently reported challenges, with TSS and CH showing to have been particularly affected by the aforementioned issues. Economic pressures, such as difficulties accessing certain seeds and market niches, were also mentioned, though to varying degrees. Finally, in terms of **resilience strategies**, all women leveraged personal and family support networks, diversified their farming activities, and drew bridges to connect with local communities. Their strategies show a mix of adaptation (e.g., learning Portuguese gradually, relying on neighbours for guidance) and innovation (e.g., creating artisanal products, introducing new farming techniques). Taken together, these cross-case patterns highlight a shared capacity to combine personal values with practical adaptation towards the fulfilment of the process of integration.

DISCUSSION

This study shows how lifestyle-oriented migration intersects with sustainable agriculture in rural Portugal. Portugal is recognised for its sustainable agriculture model, emphasising organic and eco-friendly practices, which attracts individuals interested in responsible farming. Although agriculture remains a fundamental sector for regional

development, it has been neglected in certain parts of Portugal.

For the five foreign women farmers interviewed—of Belgian, Dutch, English, French, and German origins, all settled in the Viseu region—agriculture presented promising opportunities for both personal development and improved quality of life, while fostering intercultural dialogue. The women's experiences reveal a complex interplay of personal values, environmental engagement, and community integration. As summarised in the cross-case thematic patterns, participants share common motivations related to sustainability goals and quality of life. Moreover, they face structural barriers such as language and bureaucracy, and resort to resilience strategies that combine adaptation with innovation. These patterns reinforce broader findings in the literature on amenity migration and migrant contributions to rural regeneration (Hjerpe et al., 2020; Michele et al., 2023).

Table 2 synthesizes the thematic codes emerging from the interviews, illustrating how motivations, challenges, farming practices, cultural differences, and community belonging interrelate.

The motivations behind these women's migration to engage in farming activities are varied but share common elements. Access to land and natural resources, including water availability, favourable climate, and fertile soil, emerged as critical factors enabling the initiation and development of their agricultural projects. A shared passion for nature and farming also underpinned their decisions. These women expressed that direct engagement with the land, tending to crop and animals, provides them with a profound sense of personal fulfilment and environmental connection. They take pride in producing diverse natural products and establishing short supply chains in collaboration with other food sector professionals.

Migration decisions were influenced by a desire to live closer to nature and escape urban pressures. Studies such as those by Halfacree (2020) and Dauphinais et al. (2021) emphasise the "amenity migration" phenomenon, where individuals move to rural areas seeking quality of life improvements, environmental engagement, and personal fulfilment. This mirrors the push-pull factors discussed by Benson and O'Reilly (2016), who identify nature and community values as key attractors for migrants in rural Europe.

These motivations are translated into agricultural practices that combine self-sufficiency with community-mindedness. Agricultural work allows these women to contribute positively to their environments by promoting

sustainable food production, preserving local ecosystems, and advancing organic farming practices. Their objectives align with reducing environmental impacts such as pollution, resource depletion, and ecosystem degradation through eco-responsible agriculture and conscious consumption.

Compared with Portuguese-born women farmers, whose connection with agriculture is a result of family inheritance and long-standing cultural ties (Dinis, 2025; Gomes et al., 2022), the migrant women, whose way of life one purports to analyse within this paper, represent a more voluntarily and lifestyle-driven engagement with farming. This suggests that their contributions may differ not only in practice but also in the symbolic meaning attached to agriculture—more as a deliberate choice for sustainability and well-being than as an inherited duty.

Indeed, participants were shown to be truly willing to shape their rural livelihoods, using prior knowledge and supportive partnerships to undertake the transition. Their active participation in agroecological farming contributes to the revitalisation of rural landscapes and diversification of local economies. Their contributions include the introduction of artisanal products, alternative food systems, and the preservation of biodiversity. Also, an intention to engage further in community development initiatives or solidarity farming projects is among their desires.

Quality of life factors—including safety, natural surroundings, scenic landscapes, rich social interactions, an affordable cost of living as compared to other European countries, and a pleasant climate—are decisive advantages. Farming is also a means to secure greater food sovereignty for their families and communities, providing economic and social stability. The women reported feeling welcomed and supported by local communities, which facilitated their integration and encouraged their permanence in the region.

The positive integration experiences reported, particularly the importance of community welcome and preserved rural traditions, are consistent with findings in rural sociology and migration studies. According to Stockdale (2006), social capital and local support networks are crucial for the successful settlement of newcomers in rural areas. While integration was generally positive, structural barriers such as language and bureaucracy constrained some participants' engagement. Indeed, as indicated in studies by Ciribuco et al. (2024), integration varies depending on language skills and bureaucratic challenges, echoing the obstacles identified in this study. Importantly, the lack of reported discrimination reflects relatively inclusive community contexts in this study.

Challenges reported by the participants predominantly involved administrative burdens and bureaucratic complexities, along with difficulties accessing certain seeds, plants, and culinary experiences uncommon in Portugal. Language barriers and administrative difficulties are well-documented obstacles in rural migrant integration (Bauloz et al., 2019; Michele et al., 2023). These challenges often limit migrants' economic participation and social inclusion, highlighting a need for targeted policy interventions, as supported by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD, 2022). Noteworthy is the fact that none of the women reported any kind of discriminatory practice based on

nationality, gender, or language, highlighting a relatively inclusive rural environment.

While Portuguese family farmers also struggle with bureaucracy and low market prices (Costa et al., 2023; European Investment Bank, 2020), the findings suggest that immigrant women face an additional liability due to language barriers. Such constraints are similar to what is reported by studies in other European countries, both for newcomers (Cappati & Alonso-Fradejas, 2024) and rural workers (Navarro-Gambín & Jansen, 2024). This may mean that immigrant farmers spend more energy handling institutional requirements than local peers, which may potentially deprive immigrants of time useful for other activities such as farm innovation or market engagement.

The sample of foreign women farmers is too small to draw generalised conclusions. However, the study's findings indicate that the presence of foreign women farmers with this profile (that have the desire, combined with family support and income, for changing one's life to reconnect with nature and pursue a healthier lifestyle), enriches the local agricultural landscape by introducing diverse farming practices and fostering intercultural dialogue. Their settlement is driven by a blend of personal aspirations for sustainable living and practical opportunities provided by the region's natural and social resources. These elements contribute to revitalizing rural areas and sustaining agricultural communities, resonating with existing literature that draws attention to the role of women and immigrants in rural development and agroecological transitions (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003; Mendes, 2023; Trindade & Pereira, 2023). The active role of migrant women in agroecology, artisanal production, and rural entrepreneurship reflects emerging trends documented by research such as Michele et al. (2023), who highlights the contribution of migrants to the diversification and innovation of rural economies. Similarly, Dawson and Sharp (2021) emphasise how migrant farmers bring novel skills and practices, fostering sustainable rural livelihoods.

The study highlights both cultural differences and similarities that shape the integration process. Participants appreciate Portugal's rich biodiversity and seasonal food availability, although some express a longing for more culinary diversity or perceive a decline in local agricultural pride. The appreciation of biodiversity and seasonal food cycles, alongside cultural differences in food and agricultural practices, aligns with the literature on cultural adaptation in rural migration contexts (e.g., Woods, 2022). The ambivalence regarding culinary diversity reflects findings by Arcadu et al. (2025), who discuss the negotiation of cultural identity through food in migration processes. These experiences resonate with findings from other European contexts (Chase, 2025; Woods, 2022). However, in contrast to other countries, where colder climates or higher land costs limit farming opportunities, the Portuguese context—with its milder climate and affordable land—favours land ownership and farming. This advantage may have contributed to the positive integration trajectories reported in this study.

While this study provides insights into the experiences of a specific profile—foreign women engaged in agroecological farming in central Portugal—it does not include comparative data from other relevant groups such as Portuguese-born

female farmers or immigrant men. As such, it does not capture the full diversity of farming experiences across genders and nationalities. Future research should explore these comparisons to better understand the intersectional dynamics shaping access to land, farming practices, community integration, and support systems. Including a broader range of farming identities would offer a more nuanced view of inclusion, exclusion, and innovation within rural agricultural systems.

This study, being about migrant women's role in rural revitalization, resonates with the broader recognition of migration as a driver of rural regeneration (OECD, 2021; Michele et al., 2023). Migrant farmers' contribution to sustainable agriculture and community renewal is increasingly acknowledged in European rural development policies (EC, 2024a, 2024b). Overall, the combination of agricultural opportunities, promotion of healthy food systems, and sustainable practices oriented toward environmental protection are key motivators for relocation to Portugal, reflecting a strong commitment to long-term settlement in the region. This aligns with broader European trends showing increased engagement of women in sustainable agriculture, contributing to rural regeneration and food sovereignty (EC, 2021; FAO, 2022).

The contrast between these foreign women farmers and both Portuguese-born counterparts and male migrants deserves further exploration. It is possible, for instance, that migrant women's concern with agroecology and artisanal production differs from that of male migrant farmers, who may prioritise more commercial or large-scale farming approaches. Also, perspectives from rural workers may differ from the perspective of newly settled farmers. Forthcoming comparative studies could confirm whether these dimensions are consistent across other regions of Portugal and Europe and contribute to identify barriers, opportunities and policies for better inclusion trajectories at both levels: Farmers' and rural workers'.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that foreign women farmers in central Portugal are primarily motivated by a desire to live closer to nature, pursue sustainable livelihoods, and secure family well-being. Their active engagement in agroecology, artisanal production, and small-scale entrepreneurship contributes not only to household resilience but also to the revitalization of rural areas.

Despite encountering obstacles such as language barriers and bureaucratic complexity, participants report positive experiences of integration, highlighting the welcoming nature of local communities, the persistence of rural traditions, and the high quality of life the region provides. These findings underline the dual role of migrant women as agents of rural socio-economic renewal and caretakers of sustainable farming practices.

The experiences detailed in this paper stress the need for tailored policies and integration measures that address administrative and linguistic barriers, while recognizing and supporting the unique contributions of migrant women to agroecology and rural regeneration. This requires involving local and non-local communities in the co-design of programmes to ensure cultural relevance, social inclusion and responsiveness. Second, there is a need for improved training and support for migrant farmers and rural workers, by addressing linguistic and cultural barriers, but also agricultural specificities, both at technical and logistical/ bureaucratic levels. Third, policies should promote greater inter-agency collaboration to streamline services and reduce barriers and consider the need of continuous monitoring and feedback mechanisms to ensure that initiatives remain adaptive and in line with the needs of populations.

Such policies should comply with existing institutional policies and frameworks. For instance, in Portugal, it would be important if (AIMA)¹ were to expand the offer of target language learning opportunities and cultural orientation programmes adapted to rural settings, thus reducing barriers which were identified by participants. At the agricultural policy level, CAP measures² such as support for young farmers, small-scale investments, and eco-schemes should be tailored to include migrant women as explicit beneficiaries, particularly in inner territories where depopulation is more severe. At the municipal level, programmes led by local authorities and intermunicipal communities could provide place-based integration support, including simplified access to bureaucratic services, technical advice about farming, and platforms for intercultural community engagement. An outstanding example of the important role that municipalities can have in this integration process is the initiative 'Fundão Embraces'³. Such measures would not only address the challenges reported by participants but also maximize the potential of migrant women farmers to contribute to rural regeneration and sustainable land use in Portugal.

Although based on a small sample, the study provides context-sensitive insights with wider European relevance. By illustrating how lifestyle-driven migration intersects with sustainable agriculture, it points to the transformative potential of migrant women farmers in building inclusive and resilient rural communities.

Future research should further explore mechanisms to overcome integration barriers and evaluate the long-term impacts of migrant women's agricultural activities on regional development and emphasise the importance of tailored integration policies and support mechanisms to enhance the contributions of migrant farmers, especially women in more vulnerable situations, compared to active Portuguese women farmers, in sustainable rural development.

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¹ <https://aima.gov.pt/pt>

² <https://pepacc.pt/>

³ <https://fundaoacolhe.pt/en>

SF, & JP: writing – review & editing. All authors agreed with the results and conclusions.

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AI statement: The authors stated that AI-based tools were used only for language editing, while all scientific content and conclusions are the author's own responsibility.

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