

PRESS RELEASE

COCO PROJECT

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WOMEN IN PASTORALISM

Who carries out the work of coexistence?

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2026 is the UN International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists. The majority of family farms rely on women's labour to keep pastoralism alive, so this is a good time to look at women's contributions to coexistence. Across Europe's upland pastures, women are central to how livestock and wildlife share landscapes, yet their contribution is rarely visible in research or policy. The CoCo project is now looking more closely at their roles.

CoCo researchers spoke with 31 women working in livestock farming in two very different wildlife contexts: 20 women across 15 farms in the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park (PNALM) in Italy, and 11 women farmers and shepherdesses in the Couserans in the French Pyrenees. In the PNALM, wolves and bears have been present for generations, and coexistence has been actively sustained over time through local practices, institutions and adaptation. In the Couserans, bears were reintroduced from 1996 onward and coexistence is more strongly contested. Interviews and participant observation took place between November 2025 and January 2026.

Women's views of coexistence reflect each area's history with wildlife. In both places, women are shaping pastoral traditions for the future, through cheesemaking, tourism and the training of guardian dogs in the PNALM, and through a return to seasonal shepherding in the Couserans.

Work that is often overlooked

Many costs of living alongside wildlife fall on farms as a whole, but some fall mainly on women. Much of the everyday work of raising guardian dogs in the PNALM and shepherding livestock in the summer pastures in the Couserans, through to handling paperwork for compensation and health regulations is carried out by women. Women also hold detailed knowledge of wildlife impacts, for example on milk and cheese quality.

"Women are doing much of the daily work that keeps coexistence going, from protecting herds to keeping the paperwork in order," says Agnese Marino, CoCo researcher and study co-author. "If research and policy don't look at who does that work, they miss a large part of the picture."

Power, networks and voice

Across both sites, women are largely responsible for farm diversification, cheese production, administration and animal care, while men more often take on heavy manual labour, and livestock herding in the PNALM. These divisions are often justified by physical strength, but they are also being challenged, for example through women's involvement in shepherding in the Couserans. Women's recognition, decision-making power and ownership of farms still lag well behind their contribution, and several women mentioned that public debates on wildlife often leave little room for moderate, practical positions.

In the PNALM local networks of family and neighbours help women with Livestock herding, while newcomers often rely on links with experts and conservation organisations beyond their area. These extended networks support innovation and the exchange of local knowledge to support damage prevention, but they can also set women apart from their own communities.

Rethinking how research counts women

Research on coexistence has largely overlooked women. Sampling from livestock registries or household heads tends to leave out women, seasonal shepherds and family members without formal title. The study behind these findings calls for research that reaches beyond formal title holders, collects sex-disaggregated data on labour, compensation and prevention, and uses qualitative methods such as life histories and repeated interviews to capture work that one-off surveys miss.

The full findings are part of CoCo's work on gender and diversity and will feed into the project's Roadmap to Coexistence. Stay updated on project news and resources at <https://cocoproject.eu/>.

About the CoCo Project

CoCo is a Horizon Europe-funded research project working to develop sustainable solutions for human-wildlife coexistence across European pastoral landscapes. The project brings together diverse stakeholders to co-create knowledge and tools that support both thriving pastoral communities and healthy carnivore populations.