

THE TRANSFORMATION OF UKRAINE'S AGRICULTURAL LABOUR MARKET IN THE CONTEXT OF WAR AND A DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS: AN ECONOMIC AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract. Research into the issue of rural employment in wartime is becoming particularly relevant. Equally important in the current context is the analysis of demographic trends in rural areas, the identification of the main factors contributing to the decline in the rural population, and the conduct of an economic and legal assessment of rural unemployment and the employment of women in agriculture. It is precisely these issues that are addressed in this article, the aim of which is to provide an economic and legal analysis of the labour market in agriculture. The methodological framework of this study was based on the following methods of scientific inquiry: philosophical (dialectical), general scientific (formal-logical method, analytical method, statistical method of data processing and analysis) and specialised scientific (formal-legal and comparative-legal methods). The research has established that, as in the pre-war period, the process of depopulation of rural areas is continuing in Ukraine today. The statistical analysis carried out demonstrates the catastrophic rate at which the rural population is declining. The main factors behind this continue to be: a high mortality rate and a relatively low birth rate, as well as ongoing migration, driven not only by the population's poor living conditions but also by the military operations taking place within Ukraine. To improve the demographic situation in rural areas, it is considered appropriate to develop a set of measures aimed at developing their social and engineering infrastructure, improving the provision of healthcare, education and other services to residents, and so on. This should be carried out within the framework of the state policy on rural development. It has been established that current Ukrainian agricultural legislation contains no provisions regarding the need to address demographic problems in rural areas. To address this shortcoming, it is proposed that strategies for helping rural areas emerge from the demographic crisis be included in strategic documents setting out measures for Ukraine's demographic development. It has been demonstrated that, when assessing the current agricultural labour market, it is important to take into account factors such as: the inclusion of members of private peasant households in the category of the employed population; the high level of hired labour used without proper registration; the increased demand for women to perform traditionally male-dominated jobs (tractor driver, lorry driver, etc.). The latter has significantly expanded the opportunities for them to exercise their right to employment. However, the effectiveness of such implementation must depend directly on ensuring safe working conditions, effective monitoring of compliance with labour legislation, and striking a balance between the principle of gender equality and the need to protect women's health. These considerations must be taken into account not only in current legislation but also in future legislation, in particular in the new codification of labour law.

Keywords: rural areas; demographic crisis; employment of the rural population; labour force; rural development; state agricultural policy; state rural development policy; gender equality; women's employment in agriculture.

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1. Introduction

Problems linked to the complex demographic situation and unemployment have become a familiar feature of Ukrainian villages. Thus, against the backdrop of armed aggression and the temporary occupation of part of Ukraine's territory, these issues have taken on catastrophic proportions. In particular, the Strategy for Demographic Development of Ukraine for the period up to 2040, approved by Order No. 922-p of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated September 30, 2024 (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Approval of the Strategy for the Demographic Development of Ukraine for the Period up to 2040") (hereinafter referred to as the *Strategy for Demographic Development of Ukraine*), acknowledges the existence of a demographic crisis in Ukraine, manifested by excessive premature mortality (before the age of 65), primarily among men, and an average life expectancy which, as of 2020, stood at just 70.32 years in rural areas – almost 10 years less than in the EU (80.4 years). Furthermore, as of 2021, women made up the majority of the population in these territories (Distribution of Ukraine's permanent population by gender and age as of January 1, 2021, 2021). Since 2022, this gap has only widened due to the realities of wartime, mobilisation processes, direct war-related losses and so on. All of the above could not fail to influence the development of the current agricultural labour market.

To make a realistic assessment of the current situation in this sector, the following factors must also be taken into account. Firstly, the rise in unemployment resulting from the closure of businesses operating in rural areas. Thus, in 2022 alone, the number of large enterprises fell by 20 per cent in agriculture and by 15 per cent in the food industry; medium-sized enterprises by 20 per cent and 11 per cent respectively; and small enterprises by 32 per cent and 27 per cent respectively (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Approval of the Strategy for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas in Ukraine for the Period up to 2030 and the Adoption of the Operational Plan for its Implementation in 2025–2027") (hereinafter referred to as the *Agricultural Development Strategy up to 2030*). Secondly, migration and the mobilisation of men, which have led to increased demand for occupations traditionally regarded as predominantly male (tractor drivers, lorry drivers, etc.). Thirdly, the existence of the so-called informal labour market, which is particularly prevalent in agriculture. According to official figures alone, the use of labour without formal employment contracts in rural areas stands at 53.6 per cent (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Approval of the Employment Strategy for the Population of Ukraine for the Period up to

2030 and the Adoption of the Operational Plan for its Implementation in 2026–2028"). Consequently, research into the issue of rural employment in the context of war and the demographic crisis is becoming particularly relevant.

The **purpose** of this academic article is to conduct an economic and legal analysis of the labour market in agriculture. The main **objectives** of this study are: to investigate demographic trends in rural areas; to identify the key factors influencing the decline in the rural population; and to conduct an economic and legal assessment of rural unemployment and the employment of women in agriculture.

2. Analysis of Recent Researches and Publications

An analysis of academic research in the field of economic and legal issues relating to the functioning of the agricultural labour market, and the challenges of ensuring employment for the population in rural areas against the backdrop of a demographic crisis, shows that in recent years this research has focused on several key aspects. First and foremost, these are demographic challenges and the transformation of social and labour relations in the agricultural labour market under martial law. The work by N. Dehtiar examines the impact of military operations on social and labour relations, in particular through the internal migration of the rural population and the mobilisation of the rural working-age population. The author pays particular attention to the issue of social protection for vulnerable groups and the reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure in de-occupied rural areas (Dehtiar, 2025). The study of rural employment in Ukraine, conducted by N. Patyka and N. Germaniuk, is valuable from both a theoretical and a practical perspective in terms of identifying the factors influencing employment levels. Having monitored the employment of the rural population over a long period (from 2002 to 2023), they identified trends and the main factors influencing employment levels. The following key negative factors were highlighted: disruptions to fundamental labour market factors, a shortage of jobs, the contraction of the agricultural labour sector, changes in the structure of agricultural production, insufficient occupational mobility among the rural population, low wages, a decline in the size of the economically active rural population, and distortions in its age structure (Patyka, Germaniuk, 2024). It is also worth noting studies comparing different forms of employment in agriculture during the pre-war and wartime periods and identifying ways to revitalise the rural labour market after the war (Varchenko et al., 2025). Noteworthy are the proposals for the development, at national and regional levels, of a targeted, comprehensive strategy for the development of rural employment in the regions

of Ukraine, aimed at improving the efficiency of human capital utilisation (Ivashkiv, Chekalovska, 2023). As regards research in the field of law, the legal issues surrounding the employment of the rural population and the functioning of the agricultural labour market have, in fact, been largely overlooked by domestic academics in recent years. Researchers are currently focusing primarily on general issues relating to the regulatory and legal framework for the reproduction of the agricultural workforce (Stakhovych, 2021), issues relating to the retention of agricultural workers and guarantees of their labour rights (Latysheva, Pleskun, 2024), and the role of business entities (in particular agricultural holdings) in ensuring employment for the population of rural areas under martial law (Hafurova, Mikhnevych, Novak, 2025). In contrast, international researchers present the findings of more specialised studies: assessments of female and male employment in the agricultural sector, justifying the need for targeted policies to increase women's participation in this field (Costa, et al., 2026); issues relating to the 'feminisation of agriculture' – the increasing role of women in this sector and the interconnection between these processes and food security (Kawarazuka et al., 2022). At the same time, there is a lack of comprehensive economic and legal research on the issues of rural employment in the current climate, taking into account the risks of war, demographic challenges in rural areas, trends in the development of the agricultural labour market, and approaches to regulating and ensuring these matters at the regulatory level.

3. Methodology

The following scientific methods were employed in the course of the research: philosophical (dialectical), general scientific (formal-logical method, analytical method, statistical method of data processing and analysis) and specialised scientific (formal-legal and comparative-legal methods). The use of the dialectical method made it possible to investigate the main trends in the development of Ukraine's agricultural labour market in the context of war and a demographic crisis. The formal-logical method was used in formulating the conclusions of this study, as well as to assess the factors that influenced the functioning of the aforementioned labour market. The analytical method was applied to review the research literature and identify gaps in the legislation governing the employment of women in agriculture. The content of legal provisions in the field of Ukraine's demographic policy, as well as in the field of rural employment, was clarified using the formal-legal method. The comparative legal method has made it possible to establish that, unlike Ukrainian agricultural legislation, the EU has specific legislative acts aimed at addressing the demographic challenges facing rural areas. Using

statistical methods for data processing and analysis, it was possible to track changes in the population living in rural areas from 1990 to 2022, as well as mortality and birth rates (1990–2021).

4. Results and Discussions

The Law of Ukraine "On Priority of Rural Social Development and the Agro-Industrial Complex in the National Economy" of October 17, 1990, in Article 14 stipulates that the state must ensure the implementation of a demographic policy aimed at shifting migration patterns in favour of rural areas, and at creating socio-economic conditions to increase the birth rate and promote the comprehensive development of families through the introduction of a system of benefits (The Law of Ukraine "On Priority of Rural Social Development and the Agro-Industrial Complex in the National Economy"). Unfortunately, despite the adoption of a number of legislative and regulatory acts in the pre-war period which directly or indirectly addressed these issues (in particular, the Strategy for Demographic Development up to 2015, approved by Resolution No. 879 of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated June 24, 2006 (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Approval of the Demographic Development Strategy for the Period up to 2015"), the State Targeted Programme for the Development of Ukrainian Rural Areas for the period up to 2015, approved by Resolution No. 1158 of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated September 19, 2007 (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Approval of the State Target Programme for the Development of Ukrainian Rural Areas for the Period up to 2015") (hereinafter referred to as the *State Targeted Programme*), etc.), the situation in this area remains difficult. According to official figures from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, between 1990 and 2022, Ukraine's total population fell by 10,671,165 people. **In rural areas** – by 4,495,673 people, as shown in Table 1.

As regards Ukraine's population following the start of the full-scale Russian invasion, there are currently no official statistics available due to the impossibility of applying pre-war counting methods. As experts point out, until 2022, the State Statistics Service of Ukraine relied on the 2001 All-Ukrainian Population Census, supplementing it with data on birth rates, death rates and migration. However, following the outbreak of the war, a significant gap in the data emerged, particularly regarding the emigration of Ukrainians abroad. Consequently, it is now necessary to estimate Ukraine's de facto population from scratch (Bilous, 2025). In order to provide a clearer picture of the demographic situation, it is believed to be worthwhile to cite alternative data from the Worldometer Ukraine statistics portal. According to these figures, the

Table 1

Population of Ukraine (number of people)

Year	Rural areas	Urban area	Total
1990	16969300	34869200	51838500
1991	16859200	35085200	51944400
1992	16759700	35296900	52056600
1993	16773100	35471000	52244100
1994	16713700	35400700	52114400
1995	16609600	35118800	51728400
1996	16529200	34767900	51297100
1997	16430900	34387500	50818400
1998	16322600	34048200	50370800
1999	16216000	33702100	49918100
2000	16091200	33338600	49429800
2001	15971500	32951700	48923200
2002	15882731	32574371	48457102
2003	15675112	32328351	48003463
2004	15475968	32146466	47622434
2005	15271497	32009320	47280817
2006	15051815	31877710	46929525
2007	14868679	31777367	46646046
2008	14703907	31668757	46372664
2009	14556511	31587203	46143714
2010	14438152	31524795	45962947
2011	14336885	31441649	45778534
2012	14252763	31380874	45633637
2013	14174408	31378639	45553047
2014	14089626	31336623	45426249
2015	13256185	29673113	42929298
2016	13175564	29584952	42760516
2017	13102229	29482313	42584542
2018	13015408	29370995	42386403
2019	12896505	29256696	42153201
2020	12763070	29139346	41902416
2021	12628818	28959536	41588354
2022	12473627	28396708	41167335

Source: compiled by the authors of the article based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine. Available at: <https://stat.gov.ua/uk/explore/r?md5=22fb4077f27cf51088adc40eb6e2caec>

rural population stood at 9,056,757 people in 2025, whilst the urban population stood at 29,923,619. In 2026, these figures were 9,690,993 and 29,844,856 respectively (Population of Ukraine, 2026). Another source – the Strategy for Demographic Development of Ukraine – cites slightly different figures. According to this document, the population in rural areas stood at 12.5 million in 2021 and at 9.3 million in 2024 (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Approval of the Strategy for the Demographic Development of Ukraine for the Period up to 2040"). A comparison of these figures shows that, in recent years, the rural population has fallen by approximately 3 million people. And although, given the difficulties already mentioned in estimating the actual population of Ukraine – including by type of area – these results are purely indicative,

they nevertheless confirm the existing problem of depopulation in rural areas. Moreover, in the opinion of the authors, the rate of decline in the rural population from 2021 to 2024 inclusive (an average of 800,000 per year) is catastrophic. By way of comparison, from 1990 to 2020 inclusive (according to Table 1), the annual decline was approximately 136,000 people, which is almost five times lower.

The main factors behind the decline in the rural population have traditionally been high mortality rates and relatively low birth rates. Thus, the overall mortality rate per 1,000 people in rural areas for the period 1990–2021 peaked in 2005 at 20.5. Although a slight decrease in this figure was observed in the following years, there has been an upward trend since 2019 (from 17.2 in 2019 to 19.7 in 2021) (Figure 1). At the same time, the birth rate in rural areas is low. According

to official data (up to 2021), the birth rate showed a downward trend from 1990 to 2001, followed by an actual increase in this indicator, albeit with varying trends, until 2012 (when the birth rate stood at 12.6). However, since 2013, the fertility rate has fallen to as low as 7.9 (in 2021), which is the lowest figure since 1990 (Figure 2).

Consequently, the number of deaths continues to exceed the number of births, and the rural population is therefore steadily declining.

The demographic situation in rural areas is also adversely affected by ongoing migration processes, driven by a number of factors, including: unsatisfactory living conditions; an underdeveloped range of social and community services; low levels of pensions and wages; a lack of leisure facilities, particularly for young people; and the poor quality of healthcare, education and other services. With the start of the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion, there was an exodus of Ukrainians abroad on an unprecedented

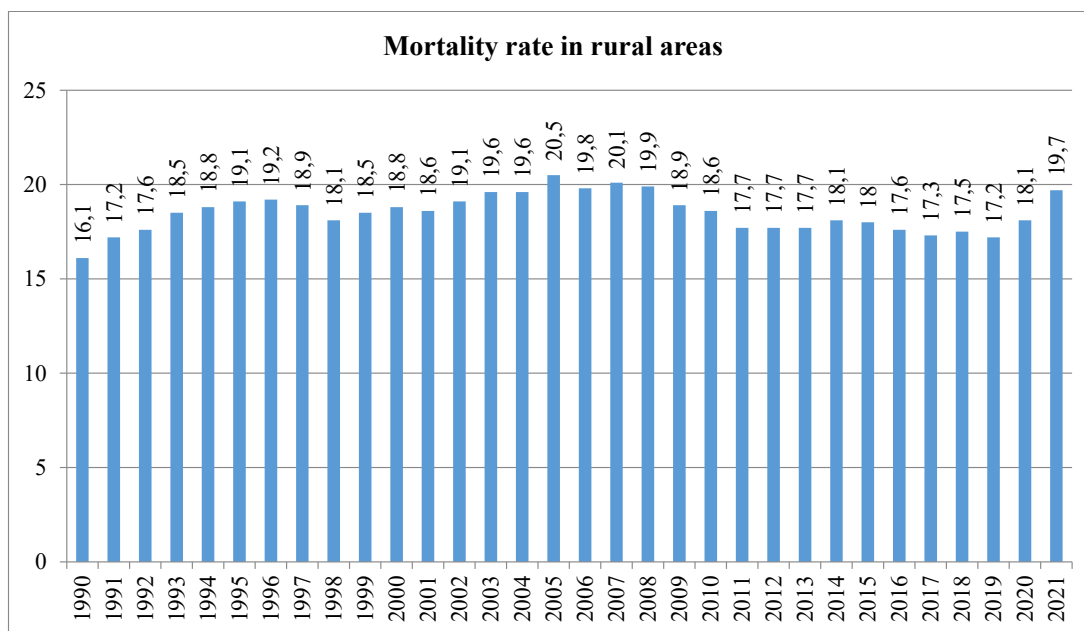


Figure 1. Overall mortality rate in rural areas (per 1,000 people of the resident population)

Source: https://stat.gov.ua/uk/explorer?urn=SSSU%3ADF_POPULATION_MORTALITY%28~%29&filter=PNMI_46

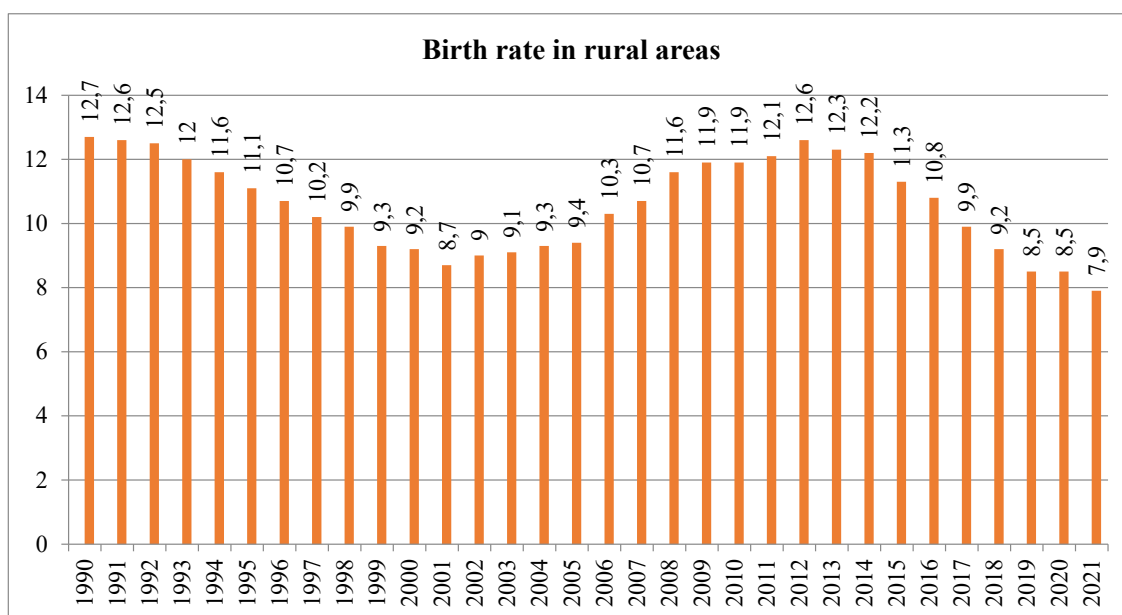


Figure 2. Total birth rate in rural areas (per 1,000 of the resident population)

Source: https://stat.gov.ua/uk/explorer?urn=SSSU%3ADF_POPULATION_BIRTH%28~%29&filter=PNMI_32

scale. For example, according to Eurostat data as of January 2026, the number of Ukrainians who had been granted temporary protection in the EU stood at 4,307,325 (Beneficiaries of temporary protection at the end of the month by citizenship, age and sex – monthly data, 2026). At present, there is no data on the number of people living in rural areas who were forced to leave the country or relocate due to the war. However, the List of territories in which hostilities are (were) taking place or which are temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation, approved by Order No. 376 of the Ministry of Communities and Territories of Ukraine dated February 28, 2025 (The Order of the Ministry of Communities and Territories of Ukraine "On the Approval of the List of Territories in Which Military Operations Are (Were) Taking Place or Which Are Temporarily Occupied by the Russian Federation") (last updated on 18 March 2026), 2,982 villages and 458 settlements are included, which demonstrates the enormous scale of the war's impact on the lives of Ukrainian villagers.

To improve the demographic situation in rural areas, it is necessary to develop a set of measures aimed at addressing problems, in particular those relating to the development of their social and engineering infrastructure, and improving the provision of healthcare, education and other services to residents, etc. This should be carried out within the framework of the relevant state policy. It should be noted that the Law of Ukraine "On Major Fundamentals of the State Agrarian Policy for the period until 2015" of October 18, 2005 identified (The Law of Ukraine "On Major Fundamentals of the State Agrarian Policy for the period until 2015"), as one of the main areas of comprehensive rural development and the improvement of social protection and the standard of living of rural residents, the restoration, creation and state-guaranteed establishment of a system of state regulation of demographic processes in rural development (Article 1(5)). Unfortunately, in view of the data presented in Table 1, it can be concluded that there is no effective state regulatory mechanism in place to prevent a demographic crisis in rural areas.

Particular attention should be paid to an analysis of the latest trends in the development of agricultural legislation in this area. After all, the Law of Ukraine "On Major Fundamentals of the State Agrarian Policy for the period until 2015" (The Law of Ukraine "On Major Fundamentals of the State Agrarian Policy for the period until 2015") has a clearly defined timeframe, which gives grounds to argue that its provisions are, at the very least, no longer relevant. Furthermore, as of October 8, 2025 (following the adoption of the revised version of the Law of Ukraine of June 24, 2004 "On State Support for Agriculture in Ukraine") (The Law of Ukraine "On State Support for Agriculture in Ukraine") there is a new approach

to understanding state agricultural policy and the inclusion in legislation of the concept of 'state rural development policy' (Article 1 of the Law of Ukraine of 24 June 2004 "On Principles of State Agricultural Policy and State Rural Development Policy") (The Law of Ukraine "On Principles of State Agricultural Policy and State Rural Development Policy"). Neither the first nor the second set of objectives mentions the need to address the demographic challenges facing rural areas (Articles 2–3 of this Law). The same applies to the Strategy for the Development of Agriculture up to 2030 (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Approval of the Strategy for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas in Ukraine for the Period up to 2030 and the Adoption of the Operational Plan for its Implementation in 2025–2027"), which focuses on the need to create favourable conditions for the further development of agricultural production. It should be noted that this approach is one-sided, as it fails to take into account in any way the interests of the rural population, whose labour makes such production possible. Furthermore, no specific measures are provided for to prevent the depopulation of rural areas in the special long-term policy document setting out the strategic goals and objectives for addressing demographic challenges and resolving social and humanitarian issues – the Strategy for the Demographic Development of Ukraine (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Approval of the Strategy for the Demographic Development of Ukraine for the Period up to 2040").

Unlike Ukrainian agricultural legislation, the EU's legal framework includes documents specifically aimed at addressing the socio-economic – including demographic – challenges facing rural areas. First and foremost, this is 'A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040' (Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040"). Thus, it draws further attention to the conclusions of the Communication on 'Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action' regarding the challenges faced by most rural areas (an ageing population, depopulation and labour shortages) (Introduction). In this context, it is also worth mentioning Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 (Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for

Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Council Regulation (EC) № 1698/2005). With a view to preventing socio-economic decline and depopulation in rural areas, these documents emphasise the need for: further diversification of agricultural activities; the development of services in the fields of rural education, healthcare, leisure, culture, etc.; improving rural infrastructure (high-speed internet, transport links, public utilities); supporting young farmers; and encouraging rural entrepreneurship, particularly the participation of women in entrepreneurial activities.

As noted above, one of the problems directly linked to demographic trends is rural unemployment. As of 2024, the unemployment rate in rural areas was higher than in urban areas (12 per cent, compared with 8 per cent in urban areas). Broken down by region, the highest rates were recorded in the regions hardest hit by the war: Kherson (22 per cent), Kharkiv, Mykolaiv and Sumy (all at 19 per cent) and Donetsk (18 per cent) (Employment, Mobility, and Labor Market Trends in Ukraine, 2024). However, these figures cannot be regarded as accurately reflecting the level of rural unemployment, as the legislation governing employment relations amongst the rural population is designed to artificially reduce these figures. Thus, members of private farming households who are self-employed are classified as part of the employed population (paragraph 1 of Article 4 of the Law of Ukraine of July 5, 2012, "On Employment" (The Law of Ukraine "On Employment of Population"), provided that work on this holding constitutes their main occupation (Article 8 of the Law of Ukraine "On Individual Farm") (The Law of Ukraine "On Individual Farm"). In other words, as has been rightly pointed out in the academic literature, the employed population includes all farmers who run their own farms and do not work under an employment contract, regardless of the profitability of such farms, which deprives them of the opportunity to qualify as unemployed and receive unemployment benefit (Kovalenko, Chernous, 2009).

Thus, on the one hand, as experts point out, the situation regarding the supply of labour for agricultural production does not appear to be critical, as there is a more than sufficient number of unemployed people who could be recruited to fill vacancies in relevant specialisms (Patyka, Germaniuk, 2024). This is also confirmed by data from the State Employment Service of Ukraine: as of May 1, 2025 (the latest published figures), there were 3,493 vacancies and 13,131 jobseekers in the agricultural sector (Number of job openings and number of job seekers registered with the State Employment Service (by economic activity), 2025). In terms of occupations, the most acute staff shortages are observed among agricultural tractor drivers, electric and gas welders, fitters, and workers providing comprehensive agricultural support services.

A significant number of vacancies are available for roles such as 'livestock slaughterer', 'vegetable grower', 'livestock keeper', 'operator of pig farms and mechanised farms', and others (The number of job openings and the number of job seekers registered with the State Employment Service (by occupation), 2025). The vast majority of these occupations, which are in the highest demand in the agricultural labour market, were filled by male workers, primarily due to the nature of the work involved.

However, as already noted earlier in this paper, women make up the majority of the rural population (according to the latest official figures from 2021) (Distribution of Ukraine's permanent population by gender and age as of January 1, 2021, 2021). Since 2022, this gap has only widened. The main factors behind this have been the large-scale mobilisation of men of working age, internal and international migration, and the deaths of men called up into the armed forces. Under these circumstances, an increase in the proportion of women's labour across all sectors of economic activity is to be expected. The agricultural sector is no exception; quite the contrary – the employment of women in jobs and professions traditionally regarded as 'male-dominated' is seen as a key priority for addressing the shortage of agricultural specialists and ensuring the smooth functioning of the agricultural sector. In 2024, according to the results of a nationwide survey on the impact of the war on Ukraine's agricultural enterprises, conducted by the FAO, 69.6% of the agricultural enterprises that took part in the survey (more than 2,600 enterprises from 23 regions of the country) cited labour shortages as one of their key challenges (FAO. 2025. Ukraine: Impact of the war on agricultural enterprises – Findings of a nationwide survey, October–November 2024, 2024).

Research into women's employment in agriculture is crucial for ensuring gender equality in labour relations. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the active work being carried out at both the national and international levels. It is based on standards for the protection of women's rights against discrimination in employment relations, such as the European Social Charter, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast)), Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, etc. European countries have long been actively implementing the principles of gender

equality in labour relations, as researchers have noted. For example, Sweden's successful experience in promoting women's employment and upholding the principle of equal rights for men and women in the workplace (Mudrolyubova et al., 2022). A National Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men for the period up to 2030 has been drawn up at national level (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Adoption of the National Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men for the Period up to 2030 and the Approval of the Operational Plan for its Implementation for 2022–2024"). The objectives of this Strategy also include 'creating conditions to increase women's economic participation, particularly among those aged 25–29, as well as opportunities for women to secure formal and full-time employment in jobs with decent working conditions, particularly for women living in rural areas.' Efforts to train women in new professions are being stepped up. For example, the State Employment Service is running a pilot project to provide vocational training for women with a view to helping them find employment in sectors where they have traditionally been under-represented. The professions on offer include agricultural machinery and equipment repair mechanic, tractor driver, and tractor operator in agricultural (or forestry) production, amongst others (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Implementation of a Pilot Project to Organise Vocational Training for Women with a View to Their Employment in Sectors Where They Have Traditionally Been Under-represented").

On the one hand, these initiatives are timely and well-founded. Researchers also view the integration of women into production processes traditionally dominated by men as a factor in helping to overcome gender stereotypes and expand opportunities for women's career progression (Chornobaiev, 2024). At the same time, according to the authors of the article, it is essential to take into account the risks to women associated with the specific nature of work in agricultural production, the presence of harmful and hazardous occupational factors, as well as the objective characteristics of the female body and women's reproductive function.

In accordance with Article 10 of the Law of Ukraine "On Labor Protection" (The Law of Ukraine "On Labor Protection") and Article 174 of the Labour Code of Ukraine (The Labor Code of Ukraine), women must not be employed in heavy work, work involving harmful or hazardous working conditions, or in underground work (except for underground work relating to sanitation and domestic services, and non-manual work). The list of arduous work and work involving harmful and hazardous working conditions, in which the employment of women is prohibited, was at the time approved by Order No. 256 of the

Ministry of Health of Ukraine dated December 25, 1993 (The Order of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine "On the Approval of the List of Arduous Work and Work Involving Harmful and Hazardous Working Conditions, in Which the Employment of Women is Prohibited"), and included the following types of work in agriculture: work in wells, manure pits and tanks, silos and haylofts; work involving the transport, loading, unloading, mixing and preparation of pesticide formulations, as well as the maintenance and repair of equipment used in the application of pesticides, and a number of other tasks. However, this list is now deemed to have lapsed (The Order of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine "On the Repeal of Order No. 256 of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine dated December 25, 1993"). In fact, women are currently entitled to work in all jobs where safe and healthy working conditions are provided. Working conditions at workplaces are determined through an assessment carried out in accordance with the Procedure for the Assessment of Workplaces in Terms of Working Conditions (The Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On the Procedure for the Assessment of Workplaces in Terms of Working Conditions"), taking into account the State Sanitary Standards and Rules 'Hygienic Classification of Work Based on the Harmfulness and Hazardousness of Factors in the Working Environment, and the Severity and Intensity of the Work Process' (The Order of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine "On the Approval of the State Sanitary Standards and Regulations 'Hygienic Classification of Work Based on the Harmfulness and Hazardousness of Factors in the Working Environment, and the Severity and Intensity of the Work Process'"). It should be noted that the latter document distinguishes between the severity indicators of the work process for women and men (Annex 15 to the Procedure). The responsibility for carrying out workplace assessments in terms of working conditions rests with the employer, and it is now entirely up to them to ensure that women can work in appropriate and safe conditions. In other words, the lack of a clear prohibition on employing women in heavy work or jobs involving harmful and hazardous conditions increases the risk of employer abuse, which is an especially pressing concern in agriculture due to the unique nature of labour relations on farms and in agricultural co-operatives.

It should also be noted that, in accordance with Article 9 of the Law of Ukraine "On Organisation of Labour Relations under Martial Law" (The Law of Ukraine "On Organisation of Labour Relations under Martial Law"), during the period of martial law, women (with the exception of pregnant women and women with a child under one year of age) may, with their consent, be employed in heavy work and in jobs involving harmful or hazardous working conditions.

Viewing this legislative stance solely through the prism of a potential labour shortage during this particular period, the authors of the article note that working in such conditions may have negative consequences for women in the long term and adversely affect the demographic situation. For example, experts have justified the advisability of prohibiting women of reproductive age from working as tractor drivers and machine operators, given the proven link between the incidence and nature of gynaecological conditions and exposure to vibration and other occupational factors (Pistun, Khomyak, & Khomyak, 2007).

The promising legislation, namely the Draft Labour Code of Ukraine, does not contain any provisions restricting the employment of women in heavy work or in jobs involving harmful or hazardous working conditions. Furthermore, Chapter 6, 'Safety and Health of Workers', consists of just two articles: one defining the concepts of safety and health of workers at work (Article 183), and the other setting out the principles of legal regulation of safety and health of workers at work (Article 184). The latter provision, in turn, refers to the Law of Ukraine "On Occupational Health and Safety", the draft of which was adopted as a basis at first reading (The Draft Law "On Occupational Health and Safety"). The draft law establishes special health and safety rules only for 'pregnant workers, workers who have recently given birth, and workers who are breastfeeding' (Article 28). The Draft Law does not contain any other distinctions between workers on the basis of sex in the context of regulating health and safety relations at work. Moreover, the obligation to assess occupational risks rests with the employer (Article 14 of the Draft Law).

5. Conclusions

As in the pre-war period, the process of depopulation in rural areas of Ukraine continues. A statistical analysis suggests that the rate at which the rural population is declining is catastrophic. Under these circumstances, the Strategy for Demographic Development of Ukraine, approved by Order No. 922-p of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated September 30, 2024, should have provided for specific measures aimed at bringing rural areas out of the demographic crisis.

The main factors behind the decline in the rural population remain, as ever, high mortality rates and

relatively low birth rates. The demographic situation in rural areas is also adversely affected by ongoing migration, driven not only by unsatisfactory living conditions but also by the military operations taking place within Ukraine.

The development of agricultural legislation does not help to resolve the aforementioned problems. Moreover, there is now a clear trend towards the legislature paying less attention to ensuring social safeguards for the rural population. Although the Law of Ukraine "On Priority of Rural Social Development and the Agro-Industrial Complex in the National Economy" did provide for the need to implement demographic policies that take into account the needs of rural areas, in the more than 35 years that have passed since its adoption, no effective legal mechanism has been established to prevent a demographic crisis. The Law of Ukraine "On Principles of State Agricultural Policy and State Rural Development Policy", whilst setting out the objectives of the relevant policies, does not mention the need to address demographic issues in rural areas among them.

As regards the level of rural unemployment, according to official figures as at 2024, it was only 4 per cent higher than in urban areas. In the opinion of the authors, these figures do not reflect the actual situation. On the one hand, members of private farming households who are self-employed are classified as part of the employed population (Article 8 of the Law of Ukraine "On Individual Farm"). On the other hand, the agricultural sector is characterised by a high level of use of hired labour without the employment relationships being properly formalised.

Under martial law, the deployment of women to carry out heavy work and work in harmful or hazardous conditions has become common practice. There has been a particular increase in demand for jobs in agriculture, which were traditionally regarded as predominantly male-dominated. This has significantly expanded women's opportunities to exercise their right to employment. However, the effectiveness of such implementation must depend directly on ensuring safe working conditions, effective monitoring of compliance with labour legislation, and striking a balance between the principle of gender equality and the need to protect women's health. These considerations must be taken into account not only in current legislation but also in future legislation, in particular in the draft Labour Code of Ukraine.

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