

“Sustainable and Social Inclusion: Empowering Women in Mountainous Regions through Mobility and Gender Equality” Meeting 6

Hosted by Municipality of Valongo, Portugal

GreenMove’s sustainability – thoughts and next steps

Järva Municipality, ESTONIA

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Introduction

- Järva Municipality is a **rural local government** in central Estonia, known for its open landscapes, strong agricultural traditions, and closely connected communities. It was formed through administrative reform by merging several smaller municipalities, and today it consists of a network of villages and small settlements rather than one dominant urban center.
- With a relatively **low population density**, Järva offers a peaceful living environment while maintaining a wide range of public services, including schools, kindergartens, libraries, sports facilities, and cultural centers. The region has long been considered the “**granary of Estonia**,” and agriculture—especially dairy farming—remains a key part of its identity and economy.
- At the same time, Järva is forward-looking, supporting innovation and sustainable development, particularly through its **strong forestry** and **bioeconomy** sector. Its central location in Estonia provides good connections to larger cities, while preserving the values of local identity, cooperation, and balanced regional development.



The current role of women in our local economy and community life

- In Järva Municipality, women play a **central role** in both the local economy and community life. Järva is a rural municipality of 1,223 km² with 8,730 residents spread across one small borough, several small settlements, and 100 villages. Its network-based model means public services are maintained across many communities rather than concentrated in one large town, which increases the importance of everyday care, education, culture, and local initiative—areas in which women are **especially visible**.
- Women are particularly important in **the care and public-service** economy. In a rural municipality like Järva, community well-being depends heavily on teachers, childcare staff, social workers, care workers, librarians, and cultural organizers. Women often form **the human backbone of the services** that allow rural communities to remain livable for children, older people, and vulnerable residents.
- Women also **contribute strongly** to local business and entrepreneurship. In practice, women are highly visible in small-scale enterprise, service businesses, handicrafts, catering, wellness, education-related services, and community-led projects.
- In tourism and cultural life, women are likewise **highly influential**. Local reporting also shows women as initiators of major cultural events and volunteer-driven activities, which is typical of rural Estonia.
- At the same time, women's role should not be romanticized. Estonia still has a **noticeable gender pay gap** overall. So, in Järva too, women's contribution is immense, but it is not always matched by equal visibility, pay, or decision-making power.




The typical daily and seasonal mobility patterns of women in our rural area

- In **Järva Municipality**, women's daily mobility reflects a dispersed rural environment where journeys often involve **multiple linked purposes** rather than a single commute. It is common to combine work-related travel with school or kindergarten drop-offs, grocery shopping, healthcare visits, and other family-related responsibilities within one trip. Women's main destinations typically include workplaces in **education, care services, retail, or local administration**, alongside schools, medical facilities, and shops.
- Seasonal conditions significantly influence these patterns. During autumn and winter, **limited daylight, snow, and more difficult road conditions** increase travel time and reduce flexibility. In spring and summer, movement becomes easier, but long distances between settlements still limit everyday use of walking or cycling.
- Compared to men, women's mobility tends to be **more fragmented and care-oriented**, shaped by responsibilities linked to children, elderly family members, and household management. Men's mobility, on the other hand, is more often structured around **direct travel between home and work**, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, or transport. As a result, differences are not only about distance, but also about the **complexity and purpose of trips**, with women's travel patterns requiring greater flexibility and coordination.



The main barriers that women face in accessing transportation in our region


- In Järva Municipality, the biggest barriers women face in accessing transport are not only physical, but also economic, temporal, and structural. Järva is a large rural municipality with many villages and long distances between home, work, school, shops, and healthcare. In that kind of environment, **access to a car** often determines whether mobility is practical at all. Estonia-wide evidence suggests that rural households are strongly car-dependent: only about 10% of rural households do not use a car, while 30% of households nationally own two cars and 10% own three or more. In rural Estonia specifically, 97% of families have a car and 61% have two cars, which fits Järva well: because of the long distances, it is quite normal here for a family to have two cars.
 - For women, the key economic barrier is therefore not always the total absence of transport, but **unequal or fragile access to a private vehicle**. Municipality-level gender statistics on car ownership are not readily published, but Estonia has a **documented gender gap in both earnings and driving access**. Statistics Estonia's earnings application shows men still earning more than women nationally, and earlier Estonian reporting found that men were significantly more likely than women to hold a driver's licence.
 - There are also **time** and **care-related barriers**. Women's mobility in rural areas is often **more fragmented**: work trips are combined with school runs, shopping, medical visits, and caregiving. Where bus schedules are infrequent or poorly aligned with work and family routines, this makes public transport much less usable in practice. Estonia's own transport behaviour data also shows that men drive daily more often than women, while people in rural areas use cars most often.
 - **Physical barriers** matter too: dark winters, snow, long road distances, and limited alternatives such as frequent bus service, sidewalks, or cycling routes reduce flexibility. So, in Järva, **women's transport disadvantage** is usually not about a formal right to travel, but about whether daily life can be managed safely, affordably, and on time.
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<https://te.ee/objektid/aravete-lasteaed/>

How does limited mobility directly impact women's access to economic opportunities, education, healthcare, and social participation in our community?

- In Järva Municipality, limited mobility can directly reduce women's access to **paid work, healthcare, and social participation**, even if exact Järva-specific gender statistics are not separately published. The municipality itself recognizes that **social transport** is needed for people who, because of social, economic, or health-related difficulties, need help reaching public services or meeting everyday needs. Its stated purpose also includes **reducing the care burden on family caregivers**. In the 2026 budget notes, Järva highlights social transport for older people as a **key service** that ensures access to necessary services and supports daily coping.
- A realistic local example is a woman living in a village outside the main service points. If she works in education, retail, or care, but also has to take a parent to the doctor or manage children's schedules, infrequent public transport can make full participation in working life very difficult. In practice, this may push women toward part-time work, more local but lower-paid jobs, or dependence on a household car. That matters because women in Estonia still earn less on average: Statistics Estonia reported a **13.1% gender pay gap** in 2023.
- So transport exclusion does not only mean inconvenience. In a rural municipality like Järva, it can mean **fewer job choices, delayed care, and less independence**, which in turn weakens women's quality of life and empowerment.



Initiatives, policies, and projects in Järva region that addressing specifically women's mobility needs

- The honest answer is that in **Järva Municipality** there are currently **no clearly defined transport initiatives that have been designed specifically for women as a target group** or presented explicitly as gender-equality measures in transport. Our local approach has so far been more **universal and practical**: the aim has been to improve mobility for all residents, especially for those who are older, have disabilities, or live in remote villages.
- The closest example is the **social transport service** organised through the municipality's social sector. Although it is not intended only for women, it does indirectly support many women, because women are often the ones combining work, caregiving, children's needs, and support for elderly family members. In that sense, the service helps reduce some of the mobility burden that falls disproportionately on women.
- What has worked relatively well is the understanding that transport is not only about roads and buses, but also about **access to healthcare, services, and everyday life**. The main lesson, however, is that we have not yet looked at mobility enough through a **gender perspective**. We have focused more on rural accessibility in general than on the different mobility patterns of women and men.
- So the key lesson from Järva is simple: even when gender-specific policies do not yet exist, local governments should start by **recognising that transport needs are not gender-neutral**, especially in rural areas.

The innovative, context-specific solution that could improve mobility for women in our rural region

- One practical and context-specific solution for **Järva Municipality** would be a **municipal on-demand mobility service** that combines social transport, village-based ride requests, and a **simple digital booking platform**. Instead of relying only on fixed bus routes, women could book transport for specific needs such as work, healthcare visits, shopping, school-related trips, or caregiving responsibilities.
- This would directly address the main barriers in rural Järva: **long distances, infrequent public transport, time pressure, and dependence on household cars**. It would be especially helpful for women whose daily travel is **fragmented** and includes several **linked activities** rather than one simple commute.
- To make the system inclusive, booking should be possible both through a **mobile app and by phone**, so that older residents or people with limited digital skills are not excluded. Vehicles should also be safe, accessible, and coordinated with local service centres.
- The strength of this model is flexibility: it fits a **network-based rural municipality** much better than traditional fixed-route solutions and would support both inclusion and independence.





Women engagement in the planning and design of mobility solutions. Indicators

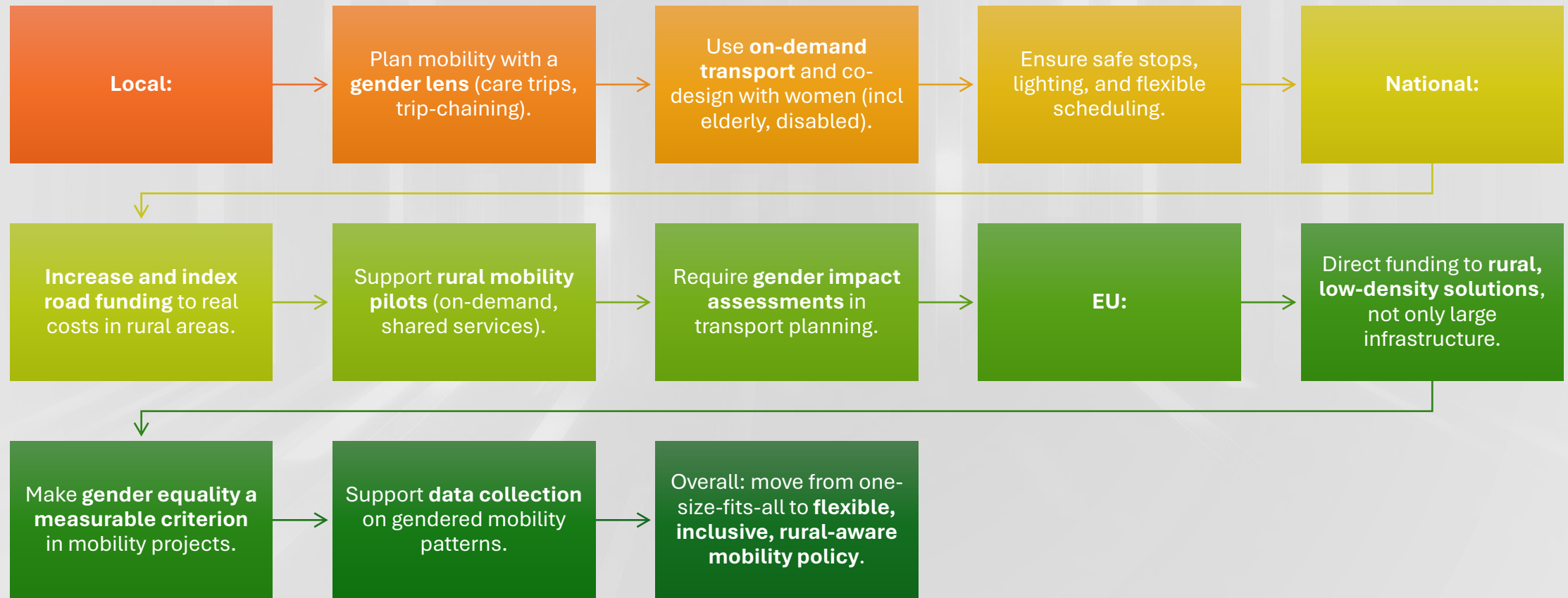
In **Järva Municipality**, women have so far been involved in mobility planning mainly through **general community engagement** rather than gender-targeted processes. Going forward, a more deliberate and structured approach would strengthen both outcomes and legitimacy.

Indicators:

- women's access to work, training, healthcare, and services;
- time saved on daily trips and caregiving-related travel;
- reduction in missed appointments or missed workdays;
- share of women reporting safer and easier travel;
- reduction in social isolation, especially among elderly women;
- number of women from vulnerable groups using the service;
- women's participation in planning and decision-making;
- user feedback showing increased independence and quality of life;

The strongest measure is not only “how many used it,” but whether women can **participate more fully in everyday life.**

Policy recommendations at local, national, and EU level to ensure that transportation infrastructure and services actively contribute to gender equality in rural areas



**Thank you for your
attention!**

**Welcome to
Estonia, welcome
to Järva!**

