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# COOPERATIVES AND THE WORLD OF WORK No.1

## Leveraging the cooperative advantage for women's empowerment and gender equality

*This brief is a part of the ILO COOP Cooperatives and the World of Work series. For more information and other articles and briefs on the series, visit [www.ilo.org/coop](http://www.ilo.org/coop).*

### INTRODUCTION

Gender equality refers to the enjoyment of equal rights, opportunities and treatment by men and women in all spheres of life. It asserts that people's rights, responsibilities, social status and access to resources do not depend on whether they are born male or female.<sup>1</sup>

Despite commitments in many international agreements and treaties to the principle of gender equality, women worldwide continue to face oppression, discrimination and human rights violations. These take many forms, from violence against women to restricted access for women to education and health services.

Inequalities between women and men also exist in the world of work, both in quantity of job opportunities and quality of employment. On average, men earn more than women undertaking equivalent work, and men continue to fill the leadership and management positions. Gender equality in the world of work signifies equality of opportunity and treatment, equality of remuneration and access to safe and healthy working environments, equality in association and collective bargaining, equality in obtaining meaningful career development, maternity protection, and a balance between work and home life that is fair to both men and women.<sup>2</sup>

This brief provides insights into questions such as: How can cooperative enterprises help promote gender equality? What are ways women can make use of the cooperative advantage to access opportunities that are otherwise denied to them?

A cooperative is defined by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise."

#### Cooperative Principles

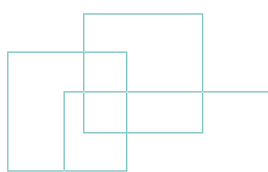
1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community

Source: <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>

The internationally agreed Cooperative Values and Principles commit the cooperative movement to the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. Democratic member control, on the basis of one member one vote and without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination lies at the heart of cooperative values.

<sup>1</sup> ILO: ABC of women workers' rights and gender equality (Geneva, ILO, 2007). Available at: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms\\_087314.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_087314.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid



Cooperative enterprises can play a role in contributing to achieving the economic and social empowerment of women. There are inspiring examples from around the world of women using the cooperative business model to support themselves, their households and their communities. However, there is more that the international cooperative movement can and should do to put women's empowerment and gender equality at the heart of its activities and agenda for change.

The ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No 193) calls for measures to promote the development of cooperatives in all countries. It recommends that "special consideration should be given to increasing women's participation in the cooperative movement at all levels, particularly at management and leadership levels". It also calls for national policies to promote gender equality in cooperatives and in their work.

Source: ILO (2002), Recommendation 193 concerning the Promotion of Cooperatives : [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:R193](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R193)

## ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT AND WORK

Cooperatives are enterprises controlled by and run for the benefit of their members, where profits are held to develop the business or are returned to the members, rather than going to the benefit of third parties.

More women than men live in poverty. Cooperatives can contribute to poverty alleviation by generating decent jobs that are productive and provide income to their members. According to the first cooperative principle on voluntary and open membership, women should be able to enjoy the same services and accept the same responsibilities as men within a cooperative.

Cooperatives offer a legally recognized way of providing protection for what may begin as unincorporated associations of workers in the informal economy where women are overrepresented. In fact cooperatives are a preferred choice for economically organizing among many groups of workers in the informal economy from street vendors and waste pickers to transport and home-based workers.

Cooperatives can also offer the benefits of collective organisation as an alternative to individualized self-employment. For example, domestic workers such as cleaners and care workers can often find themselves isolated from other workers and working in private homes and premises, at potential risk of exploitation and abuse. More than 80 per cent of the estimated 50 million domestic workers worldwide are women.<sup>3</sup> Cooperatives are increasingly providing a way for domestic workers to organize together and to help protect their working environments.

<sup>3</sup> ILO: Domestic workers across the world: Global and regional statistics and the extent of legal protection (Geneva, ILO, 2013). Available at: [http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2013/113B09\\_2\\_engl.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2013/113B09_2_engl.pdf)

Cooperatives run by and for women can offer particular opportunities for them to control their own economic activities, especially in situations where women face social and cultural constraints which limit their ability to participate in the world of work. Cooperatives that take into account and address the gender division of labour at home at work among their members, users and workers through their services are likely to become much more relevant for the communities in which they operate. Women-only cooperatives may help overcome social and cultural constraints which might otherwise limit women's participation in the workforce and can be particularly be relevant in gender segregated contexts.

## REALIZING WOMEN'S POTENTIAL

Women remain greatly underrepresented in senior-level management jobs in the world of work. In recent years there have been discussions at global, regional and national levels of appropriate measures to bring more women onto boards of directors and senior management teams of enterprises, with formal quotas being adopted in some countries. Nevertheless, change is still slow.

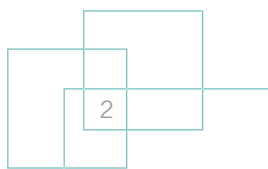
A Leadership Training Manual for Women Leaders of Cooperatives was developed by the ILO and the ICA in 2005 to raise awareness of gender equality issues in the workplace and to build-up the capacity of women leaders in cooperatives by equipping them with necessary knowledge and skills. This Training Manual is now being updated with the ICA Asia Pacific region taking the lead.

The first edition of the Manual is available at [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new\\_delhi/documents/publication/wcms\\_124337.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new_delhi/documents/publication/wcms_124337.pdf)

Based on their values and principles, cooperative enterprises should be at the forefront of moving towards greater gender balance in leadership and senior management positions. There are good examples of cooperatives promoting women leadership, but more research and evidence on the role of cooperatives is needed.

The International Cooperative and Mutual Insurance Federation (ICMIF) recently published a report Women in Leadership Positions featuring the views of female CEOs and Presidents of its member firms. ICMIF claims that more cooperative insurers are led by women than is the case generally in the insurance sector (recent data suggest that 18.6 per cent of the 118 cooperative insurers surveyed have women CEOs, still a minority but significantly higher than the 2.6 per cent figure reported by the UN for the world's top 500 companies).

For more information, see <http://www.icmif.org/>



# MAXIMIZING THE VALUE OF COOPERATIVES FOR WOMEN

There are hundreds of thousands of cooperatives worldwide, and inevitably not every individual cooperative necessarily abides by the high standards of the international Cooperative Values and Principles. Being structured as a cooperative enterprise does not by itself guarantee that gender equality is going to be fully integrated into the enterprise. Furthermore, some cooperatives remain 'top-down' creations of states, political parties or other agencies rather than genuine member-led and -controlled ventures.

There are some common areas of concern in relation to gender issues in cooperatives. These include the extent to which women can participate fully in the functioning and governance of their cooperative; women's opportunities to engaging and being heard in debates as co-operators on equal terms with men; the availability of opportunities for career advancement for women workers; and the access available for women members to cooperative resources and services such as education and training, financial services, and child care.

In other words, whilst cooperatives have the potential to contribute more towards advancing gender equality and women's empowerment goals, they need to take steps to ensure that their theoretical commitment is translated into practice.

The issue of member participation in cooperatives (closely linked to member democracy and corporate governance) has been recognized by the international cooperative movement as one of the strategic issues to be addressed, if the potential and momentum created by the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives in 2012 is to be converted into making the cooperative form of business the fastest growing form of enterprise and the acknowledged leader in terms of economic, social and environmental sustainability by the end of this decade.

In its Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade, the ICA has identified a range of possible or indicative actions in relation to one of the Blueprint's five thematic pillars, participation.<sup>4</sup> These include:

- Gathering and collating information about best practice; finding and sharing the best ideas, including in areas as age and gender balance
- Gathering and collating information which demonstrates how such examples of best practice are positively linked to strong performance
- Examining and challenging existing practices of cooperative democracy

<sup>4</sup> ICA: Blueprint for a co-operative decade (Brussels, ICA, 2013). Available at: <http://ica.coop/en/media/library/member-publication/blueprint-co-operative-decade-february-2013>

Initiatives such as these could usefully explore the potentially different experiences of men and women on member participation in cooperatives. The ICA Strategy for Promoting Gender Equality was developed already in 1995 - the year of the adoption of the United Nations' Beijing Declaration. As preparations are under way for Beijing +20 review of progress meeting, it would offer the cooperative movement a good opportunity to review its own progress on gender issues.

Promoting examples of good practices in relation to gender equality in cooperative enterprises by economic unit, sector, country and region can have a powerful effect not only in encouraging other cooperatives to take similar steps but also more widely, in the non-cooperative world of work and businesses. Cooperatives should take pride in their potential to play exemplary role in laying down markers for all forms of businesses.

The world's largest cooperatives (the 'Global 300') have a particular role to play in this respect to lead with their example and to make resources available to smaller cooperatives, and those in developing economies. Leaders of cooperatives, and of national and international cooperative bodies, need to show political commitment to gender equality and to demonstrate that equality policies are being implemented in their own organizations.

Adequate training is necessary for ensuring that all members are able to fully participate in their cooperatives. It is particularly relevant for women, who may have to overcome social and cultural barriers and who may have previously been excluded from access to educational opportunities.

Cooperatives should be encouraged to collect and publish sex-disaggregated data on a range of issues including numbers of women and men: as cooperative members; directly employed by the cooperative; in senior management and leadership positions; in different types of jobs (e.g. part-time, full-time, paid, unpaid, volunteer); and according to the quality of jobs created (e.g. contracts, social security benefits, etc.). Where these statistics suggest gender-based inequalities, cooperatives should be encouraged to report regularly to members and to the public how they are addressing these issues.



# CONCLUSION

The cooperative model offers women, particularly but not exclusively those in rural areas, in the informal economy and on low incomes, important opportunities for employment, enhanced livelihoods and access to productive resources and services. However, many remaining barriers still prevent women from enjoying all the benefits of the cooperative model. These barriers can be overcome if cooperatives and the international cooperative movement and its allies adopt the following measures:

- Promote cooperative values and principles
- Facilitate greater access for women to business advisory services, skills and management training, and finance to start up and strengthen their cooperative enterprises
- Measure the nature and extent of women's participation in cooperatives across all levels, particularly at senior levels, and make this information available
- Place gender equality at the heart of cooperative contributions to sustainable development

## THEY'RE MAKING THE MOST OF THE COOPERATIVE ADVANTAGE: WAGES GIVES CLEANING WORKERS BETTER WORKING CONDITIONS

Women's Action to Gain Economic Security (WAGES) uses the cooperative model to develop worker-owned green businesses and to create decent jobs for low-income women. Based in California, USA, WAGES helps to support five cleaning cooperatives who offer house cleaning in the city of San Francisco and in neighbouring communities.

One of the cleaning cooperatives is Eco-Care Professional Housecleaning, which offers services in the South Bay neighbourhood. Bertha Naranjo is one of the nine women who established the cooperative more than ten years ago, with support from WAGES. Bertha talks of the sense of pride, dignity and security which has come as a result of the cooperative. "For me, it's about empowerment," she says. "As a business owner you do [the work] with more passion because you know it is your business. And you want to see it succeed."

The cleaning cooperatives established with the support of WAGES have together created jobs for hundreds of marginalized women workers. There has also been another advantage: all five cooperatives are committed to using 'green' cleaning products without the toxic chemicals used in many professional cleaning products. This helps eliminate some of the environmentally harmful effects which can come from using commercial products, but equally important it also ensures that the women workers are working with materials which do not damage their own health. "Traditional household cleaning products are not as harmless as we might think," WAGES points out.

## THEY'RE MAKING THE MOST OF THE COOPERATIVE ADVANTAGE: COLLECTIVE ACTION IN FOOD BUYING BY WOMEN IN JAPAN

The collective power of women for social change cannot be underestimated. Today there are around 600 consumer cooperatives across Japan, with a total of 27 million members.<sup>5</sup> More than 80 per cent of those members are women.

In the 1960s, Japanese consumers became increasingly concerned about the use of chemicals as food additives in the processed and packaged groceries, which often caused serious health problems. In addition, consumers were concerned about high inflation, misleading labelling in groceries, and air and water pollution.

Such circumstances gave momentum to consumers seeking food that was healthier and safer for consumption as well as more environmentally friendly. In the 1970s, the numbers of consumer cooperatives engaged in home delivery services based on joint purchasing increased rapidly.

Typically, around five to seven women got together and formed a group responsible for ordering, distributing and paying for the food. Members voiced their opinions to the cooperative, which in turn improved operations and developed business further.

Today, in responding to changing and varying needs of members, individual delivery services and online shopping are becoming increasingly popular alongside traditional way of joint purchasing.

Cooperatives have helped to strengthen the relationship between producers and consumers by removing much of the uncertainty and the overheads which exist in more commercial market relationships. The cooperatives have also been able to achieve environmental objectives, for example via "My bag campaign" which has successfully reduced the use of plastic bags over the past 40 years.

This is an example of women taking collective action in cooperatives toward achieving the triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental goals of sustainable development.

<sup>5</sup> Japanese Consumers' Co-operative Union website. Available at: <http://jccu.coop/eng/>

### Contact information

Cooperatives Unit  
Enterprises Department  
International Labour Organization  
4 route des Morillons  
CH-1211 Geneva 22  
[coop@ilo.org](mailto:coop@ilo.org)

**ILOCOOP**  
[www.ilo.org/coop](http://www.ilo.org/coop)

