

Editorial

Special Issue: Women in Co-operation

Welcome to this special edition of the Journal, which focuses on the significant roles that women play in fostering co-operation and in the development of the co-operative movement and co-operatives.

Co-operatives are often, and sometimes unquestioningly, held up as exemplars in addressing inequalities and specifically gender inequities in the workplace. Compared to other enterprise and business models, we can see examples of co-operatives offering equality in pay and decision-making for example. Worker co-operatives that pay equal pay for equal value of work have no distinction between women and men's work and the pay gap is generally lower in other types of co-operative than in investor owned business; where non-hierarchical roles exist then this too gives greater scope for more democratic control. Yet, while theoretically improved gender equality is demonstrated, it is still seen to exist to "a limited degree" (Miller, 2012: 9).

Starting from the back of the journal rather than in order of publication, we can see from the review of the International Labor Organisation (ILO) and ICA report, that while co-operatives are well-placed to promote increased democratisation in the workplace through gender-inclusive policies, training and support and access to leadership and decision-making roles, there is still much to do. Despite Conn's (1990) article — *No Bosses Here: Management in worker co-operatives*, Miller's (2012) report on a small scale North American study still found several persistent inequalities linked to women's under-representation as co-operative members, lower status relative to men, and reduced participation in decision-making compared to men. Miller's study found that in the US worker co-operatives that took part in the study, women were still marginally under-represented in membership numbers. More significant was that women fared less well in relation to job tenure, hours worked, and income and, in some instances, there were examples of job segregation. While women do not participate less than men in decision-making in general, there were specific instances of technical and production decisions where this was observed.

The review of the ILO summarises some of the findings from a survey of 500 respondents on gender equality in co-operatives. In general, although there were key achievements — for example, in increasing access to jobs — progress has been slow and there is still much to be done. Some of this may well be in relation to government support for co-operative enterprise and the need for enabling regulatory frameworks. In 2011, the Andalusian government introduced a new Co-operatives Law that recognises and promotes gender equality as a fundamental principle, although Alonso and Verge (2014) suggest that the nature of decentralisation of Spanish government structures has meant a piecemeal and patchwork approach and that all Spanish women do not benefit from guaranteed equal rights. In the same year (2011), the Co-operative Women's Challenge was launched in the UK to promote fair representation of women at all levels of co-operative structures and particularly in management roles. Shortly after, in 2103 Chris Herries became the first female chair of Co-operatives UK — not a bad result after 143 years (Bibby, 2013).

Even so, generally women are seen to fare better in co-operatives than mainstream investor owned companies (Miller, 2011) and women have always been an integral part of co-operative history. This is shown in the short paper which showcases some of the well-known and not so well known female figures in the co-operative and welfare reform movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The often-hidden history of women in the co-operative and labour movements is of special and personal interest in that I am both a woman and a co-operator, but also in that I have family links to Margaret Ann Shard: the first women member

of St Helen's (Lancashire, UK) Co-operative Society board of directors, who became president; the first woman mayor of St Helens (1946); the town's first woman alderman (1955), and first Freeman of the Borough (1968); and a lifelong advocate and campaigner for the welfare of women and children (St Helens Reporter, 1955).

The power and presence of women is also clearly demonstrated in Catherine Shenaz Hossein's paper on *Black woman as co-operators*. In this paper, she focuses on the long history of women in low income communities in financial credit co-operatives, and the role of rotating savings and credit associations — ROSCAs or tontines. The paper provides both an historical account of ROSCAs and the development of peer-to-peer lending as well as providing a contemporary commentary based on interviews with women in Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Canada. Hossein emphasises the numbers of women involved in credit unions and self-managed banks around the world, and how these can focus on women supporting women and yet, they remain largely unrecognised. She suggests several reasons for this, including the tendency for co-operative history and legacy to be told through the voices and actions of male and European bias.

Hossein provides an interesting account of ROSCAs in the Americas, pulling on the experiences of enslavement, colonisation, and racism as critical in how people of African descent have organised their social and business selves. She tells several stories of women's experience. Under colonisation, for example, banks did not lend to local Black populations and especially not women. More recently, women use ROSCAs to avoid pay-day lenders and their high fees, as well as continuing to counteract social and financial exclusion. She also raises the question of whether ROSCAs should be formally recognised as part of the financial landscape and points to India as an example.

Hossein points also to mutualism and Black entrepreneurialism as survival and a route to mutual progress. For women, it not only provides choices over where to bank, but gives control over organising an alternative system of banking. This is a fascinating look at the internal workings of these systems and the engagement of women in running ROSCAs and controlling how they do business.

While one of the gaps in reviewing women's participation in the co-operative movement can be a lack of criticality around the intersection of class, gender and race, Ushnish Sengupta's paper focuses on race and gender in the leadership of co-operatives and asks the question leadership of whom, by whom and for whom? Sengupta notes that co-operatives have internationally adopted equity related principles. He suggests, however, that the co-operative principles remain ideal rather than reality for many even though, to a certain degree, co-operatives are more egalitarian than other types of organisation.

Sengupta looks specifically at co-operatives in North America to examine the differences between principle and practice stating that much of the literature on gender in co-operatives is disconnected from an analysis of race. He usefully raises the challenge that if co-operative leadership is gendered and racialised, with underrepresentation of racialised women in leadership positions, then work needs to be done to simultaneously tackle race and gender issues in co-operatives. Sengupta points to principle 1 as a focus for his argument — voluntary and open membership; a definition that includes opportunities for participation, decision-making and leadership. It is an issue that affects existing co-operatives and start-ups alike, and — referring to evidence from a recent ILO study (featured in the review section) — is more prevalent in North America and the Middle East where women's leadership is lower than average.

Sengupta proceeds to provide an overview and examples from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala indicating that an increase in free trade — and even fair trade — has not necessarily seen a positive impact on gender or racial equality. In Mexico, Sengupta describes how indigenous women have adopted non-hierarchical co-operative structures, which in turn have supported a return to more inclusive modes of decision-making. Furthermore, the politicised

nature of co-operatives has also benefited wider communities, and he provides a striking example of how women's involvement in co-operatives endangered their lives by association with the Zapatista independence movement.

Focusing on the US and Canada, Sengupta looks at the historical failure of multi-racial co-operatives, but points to the growing phenomenon of migrant-based co-operatives that may turn this around. He concludes with a hopeful message about the difference of co-operatives developed by racialised women – in their commitment to developing alternative economic practice and to combining social justice with traditional sustainable environmental practices.

In a short think-piece, Linda Shaw looks at two reviews of women in co-operatives and reflects on avenues for future research. What is common in the surveys and reviews is the persistence of gender inequalities in many co-operatives, even those that have a majority women membership. All call for more information on the extent of women's participation in co-operatives and this is where Shaw has some key suggestions regarding collection and interpretation of data, statistics and benchmarking. She uses the example of Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organisation (WIEGO) as an example of the success of collaboration and networking in being able to raise issues and get them onto mainstream policy agenda, and how this has been achieved.

With regard to women in leadership, she points to the need to look at appropriate teaching and learning strategies and pedagogical approaches that would help to develop evidenced-based women's education and leadership programmes. Lastly, she points to some institutional and historical issues that surround membership of co-operative societies, and which restrict women's participation today.

One of the recent studies that Shaw mentions is the ILO report on gender inequality and, as mentioned above this is featured as a review of the recently published report. Our final book review comes from John Goodman. We featured an article by Andrew Bibby based on his book, *All our own work*, in a previous issue of the *Journal* and with this in-depth review Goodman gives us a real flavour of the book and its contents. The review focuses on Bibby's account of 'Fustianopolis' as Hebden Bridge became known through the establishment of several fustian manufacturers, including Joseph Greenwood and his Hebden Bridge Fustian Manufacturing Co-operative Society or Nutclough Mill. While the review and the book provide an overview of these co-operative pioneers, there are, as Goodman points out, important chapters, too, on working conditions and wages and on the role of women workers at the co-operative who were recruited in large numbers once the co-operative had decided to diversify into making clothes. Although the numbers are difficult to ascertain, it is likely that women made up the majority of the workforce. Moreover, women workers were as entitled as the men to become members, although none of them ever became a member of the management committee.

As the Co-operative Women's 2020 Challenge made clear, there is a "desire for co-operatives to be beacons of progress on gender representation" (Williams and Williams, 2011: 4). There is much that we can learn from the history and experience of women in co-operation. We have three more years to:

achieve fair representation in democratic structures; have more women in senior management roles; and encourage women to campaign for gender equality across economic and social participation in order that women's voices can be heard (ibid, 2011: 10).

Jan Myers
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