



Taking stock — Researching women and co-operatives

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In the light of increasing attention to the role of women in co-operatives, it seems timely to discuss findings from recent reviews and to propose some next steps in terms of a research agenda. Dr Linda Shaw provides a viewpoint drawing on her own research background both inside and outside the co-operative movement to consider the roles, participation and contribution of women in co-operatives.

The reviews published in 2015 and 2016 (forthcoming) each take a global approach to women and co-operatives. Two (Schincariol McMurtry and McMurtry, 2015 — see review later in this issue; and Duguid and Weber, 2015) are studies of the existing literature on women and co-operatives whilst the third (Rawlings and Shaw, 2016, forthcoming) reports on the findings of a stakeholder survey. Not unsurprisingly, perhaps, there is a considerable overlap in the conclusions from these studies. All report on the persistence of gender inequality within the leadership of co-operatives, even those with a majority of women members. Overall, levels of women's participation vary considerably from sector to sector and by region. Financial co-operatives reported more progress on this front than co-operatives from other sectors, though the reasons for this were not apparent. While the co-operators interviewed for the ILO survey (Schincariol McMurtry and McMurtry, 2015) felt strongly that the values and governance of co-operatives afforded better opportunities for women's participation than other types of private business, it is clear that there is still a long way to go.

All three surveys call for more data on women's participation in co-operatives and this is where some critical next steps need to be taken. The current lack of data makes it impossible to track equality indicators and contrasts unfavourably with many other government and business initiatives. Although the current work on improving co-operative statistics by the ILO is welcome, it is not due to report until 2018. The co-operative movement itself needs to make the collection of gender disaggregated data and equality indicators (governance, assets, membership etc) an immediate priority. And while we are at it, let's ensure there are more women on high-level panels at co-operative events and conferences. At the moment, keynote women speakers are thin on the ground at the big co-operative conferences.

We also need to attract more mainstream academic attention to the movement as a whole. There are many case studies of individual co-operatives in the developing world and undoubtedly there are many more to be identified simply because the researcher investigates co-operatives through another lens – farming practices, the environment, even gender. They do not identify the study as being about a co-operative but may refer to a farmer association or women's collective, for example.

This is a difficult one to address but I want to suggest one way forward which links to another shared recommendation, for better networking and the sharing of success stories. Here, I suggest, is an area where a dedicated women's/gender and co-operatives network which brings together both researchers and activists, can offer some solutions. Just such a network, WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising) has been extremely successful in researching the situation of informal women workers and in getting these issues onto mainstream policy agendas. WIEGO brings together membership based organisations of informal workers, researchers and practitioners from development agencies. High quality research including a statistics programme has provided the bedrock for the work of WIEGO. Of course, having founder members based at Harvard has not hindered them either. Nonetheless their achievements are impressive, so take a look at their website www.wiego.org. Can we in the co-operative movement aspire to something comparable?

A further area of consensus from the research reports' findings was for more education and training for women, including leadership training. This is a perennial call across most areas of the co-operative movement. As a former vice-principal of the Co-operative College this subject is dear to my heart. However, I was struck when I first joined the college by the absence of women's leadership programmes compared with my previous experience in the trade union movement where such training had been on the agenda since the 1980s. There is clearly a need for this both in the UK and internationally to enable women to become leaders at any level. More diversity in leadership does not just happen, but needs a series of positive support measures in which education, training and mentorship need to play a central role.

There is a research agenda here as well. We lack studies of effective education and training approaches and strategies. While not going for a blueprint approach, we need to know what works best in different situations. Such research needs to go beyond simply listing the institutions and courses on offer to investigating pedagogy as well. There is more than enough research evidence to show that the more active the learner is, the better they learn. This means moving decisively away from lecture based and information heavy approaches, which are sadly still all too common. Re-imagining and developing women's education programmes needs to be based on evidence including best practice case studies.

This is quite an agenda! However, there is still one more aspect I would like to add. There is much in the history of women in the co-operative movement that has resonance today. Eliza Brierley is rightly celebrated as the first female member of the Rochdale Pioneers and as an early embodiment of the principle of equality. At the same time, we also need to recognise the limitations placed on co-operative membership for women during the nineteenth century. This happened because co-operative membership was often limited to one person per family — typically, of course, the male head (Vorbergh-Rugh, 2016 forthcoming). Family based membership of a co-operative still restricts women's participation today, for example, across many regions in Africa. One of the challenges to this situation in the UK came with from the development of the Women's Co-operative Guild. What can we learn from this example that is relevant for today?

I hope my comments will draw attention to these studies and also help co-operators not only to take stock but show some of the ways in which closer researcher and movement collaboration can help drive change and improvement for women in co-operatives.

The Author

Dr Linda Shaw recently retired as vice-principal of the Co-operative College after 14 years in which she developed the College's research profile to help to build an evidence base for co-operatives, and trustee of Women Working Worldwide (www.women-ww.org).

Women Working World-wide: www.women-ww.org

WWW works in partnership with grassroots organisations to support and encourage women workers in international production chains supplying European markets to claim their rights, improve their conditions, seek solutions to women's issues and be rewarded equitably for their work. WWW strengthens the capacity of grassroots organisations to listen to and represent women's voices and strive for improvements in their working lives.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing: www.wiego.org

WIEGO is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO's research and policy analysis focus on the concrete

reality of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. They seek to improve research and official statistics on the informal economy. This both increases the visibility of the working poor in the informal economy and fortifies the efforts of their organisations to secure a more supportive policy and regulatory environment.

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