

Women and the Co-operative MovementAN EXPERIENCE IN DEMOCRACY

by

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I have been asked to give my views and experiences on the role of women in the democracy of Co-operatives. I have been actively involved with the Co-operative Movement for 38 years. Before 1945 I was a member of various Co-operative youth groups and like most youngsters of that time (1939-1945) felt I had all the answers to life's problems not least of which was playing a leading role in the local Co-operative. Of course there was much to distract us from our purpose, mainly the restrictions of war-time. Nevertheless we tried in our own way to push capable people forward to election to various committees. However, time was not ripe for a take-over by youth. We were told "you'll learn, things cannot be changed overnight - wait your turn". "What for" we asked - "dead men's shoes?"

During the War - and After

Whilst we were acceptable replacements for all kinds of work during the war years and even the rare occupation of a seat on a Co-operative Management committee, come peace and the return to civilian life by the menfolk, then most of us were told "back to the kitchen sink". Many women felt the need to stay at home, have families and be with their husbands. However, there was the smaller group of women like

myself who saw in the Co-operative Women's Guild the opportunity for further education and training to enable them to go forward for selection for committee positions in the wider Co-operative movement. Many of us had always felt we had to be as good as - if not better than - our male colleagues to be considered, yet the truth was that women were their own worst enemies. There was still the attitude prevalent in the public of voting for a man rather than a woman.

Entry into the Movement's Democracy

In 1961 I was elected to the Board of Directors of the then London Co-op., one of two women on a board of 16 - later to be joined by four others. I felt I had really achieved some success for women's rights and yet on attending not only Congress but Education Convention and the Co-op. Party conference I realised how unreal was my satisfaction, for the number of women serving the movement was dismally few. Yet behind the scenes, as shoppers, as teachers and as the backbone of the Co-operative Party with their band of willing workers without whom few Councillors or Members of Parliament would have been elected, women outnumbered the men.

In 1971 at a meeting of the International Co-operative Alliance in Bucharest a paper was presented on "The Situation and Role of Women in the Co-operative Movement". It drew attention to the fact that even areas where the majority of voting members were women elected only a minority of women to the committees and, more important, that the more senior the status of the committee the smaller the number of women represented.

The Congress Resolution

As a result of this paper a resolution was tabled at the 1972 Co-operative Union Congress moved by myself and seconded by Cathie Bardwell of Ipswich Society. In this we called upon the Central Executive to issue a statement incorporating all the relevant points, i.e. inadequate representation of women in Co-operative leadership, locally, sectionally and nationally and in the field of Co-operative management. This resolution was unanimously accepted and a working party was set up. As a serving member of this working party I spent some time investigating the problems - which were many even in the so-called enlightened days of the 1970's. We came forward with recommendations to the following year's Congress. I cannot of course deal with each and every one, but mention a few as they affected me personally:-

1. Women should be encouraged to take up membership of retail societies in their own right - something I had always advocated.
2. Women's organisations should promote and support more women of ability for service on national and local committees. I was given the opportunity to serve on the Southern Sectional Board and the N.E.C. of Co-operative Party.
3. Education committees should organise events to explain the duties and privileges of Co-operative membership with emphasis on the participation of women and to this end there should be closer working between Education committees, guilds and other groups. My first opportunity to serve the

Movement came as a result of my earlier training in the CWG and at the Co-operative College.

Special Places for Women?

There were people who suggested that special places should be provided for women on committees, I have always been against this. It lays too much emphasis on the fact that the member is a woman and too little to the question of equality in ability with her male colleagues. I believe that a woman should secure her place on merit only. Consider the few women who are serving the movement nationally:

C.W.S. Board	2
C.U. Central Executive	2
C.U. Education Executive	6
National Executive Co-op. Party	2
C.U. Parliamentary committee	3
Sectional Boards	9

I do not feel they have been elected because they are women but because of their capability.

If all committees were elected on capability fewer failures and more successful Co-operatives would almost certainly have been the result. I have found many men expert in their daily employment but not necessarily good board members. On the contrary they were narrow in their outlook. Having to cope with the daily problems of a family and home as well as a part-time job has given me wider experience of life and has certainly sharpened my powers of assessment.

In the Future?

In this the centenary year of the CWG we need to look forward to the next century. Over half the population are women and yet women constitute a tiny proportion of the participating democracy of the Co-operative movement. As the recession has deepened more women have been forced to give up their paid employment and I see them as a great reserve of strength upon which we should be drawing. Women's position in present day Britain must be understood at various levels.

When I first became an active Co-operator, I looked up the word "Co-operation" in my dictionary - it means 'working together' and I believe that the only way forward is true Co-operation. My first experience of 'working together' dates back to 1945. I was able to attend my first conference because within my guild branch members willingly looked after my children when they came home from school, and members of my family gave them holidays so that I could attend schools and Congresses to broaden my knowledge. How often does this happen today I wonder? Yet if women are to increase their representation on Co-operative committees true Co-operation must be learnt and practised by all.

Note of the Author NORAH E. WILLIS J.P. is married with two children and four grandchildren; active in Co-operative and labour movement all adult life; served as director of London Co-op. 20 years and now chairman of London region C.R.S.; member of Co-op. Union Central Executive, chairman of Development committee, and member of Education Executive; served in many offices of C.W.G. including National Vice President;

served community in Transport Users' Committee for London, school governorship, hospital boards and as member of Essex County Council; President-elect of Co-op. Union Congress 1983-4.