

Women and the Co-operative MovementIN CO-OPERATIVE EMPLOYMENT? ...

by

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In Britain today, when women's employment is often regarded as of secondary importance in the fight to create jobs, many women are turning to Co-operatives as an alternative. Since no research has been done it is impossible to give actual numbers, but the feeling is that numbers of women in Co-operatives are high compared to that of men. Women working in Co-operatives cover many trades and services including food, printing, publishing, building, clothing, manufacturing, and cleaning.

To try and understand why women in particular find Co-operatives an ideal working situation we must first look at women's needs in the job market. The need for flexible working hours, to allow for childcare, is very important. Often part-time work is more suitable for women, but since there is so little work to be had generally, finding a part-time job or one that offers childcare facilities is often impossible.

For women who have found employment with hours that suit, a main problem can be that the job itself is often dull, boring, repetitive and rarely offers openings for promotion to a responsible position or the chance to acquire new skills. The main reason for this we are often told is obvious. Employers want to train or promote people whom they feel will stay on and work for many years within that organisation

and not someone who will leave to have/bring up children. This is the usual reason we are given but there is also an inbuilt chauvinism which means employers will often promote men before women.

Advantages of Setting up a Co-operative

Women who wish to work in an all-women environment and those that wish to work in areas traditionally thought of as male, e.g. plumbers, electricians, builders etc, have even greater problems. Acquiring these skills, we are told, is easy in this age of sexual equality. For example, women can enroll on a Training Opportunities course (TOPS) at a local skills centre. This may be true, but finding work as a female bricklayer afterwards is virtually impossible. In consequence, some of the major advantages for women setting up and running a Co-operative can be seen as:

1. Scope for flexible working hours and organisation to allow for childcare.
2. Scope to acquire and use new skills.
3. Scope to acquire and use skills traditionally thought of as male.
4. Freedom to work within an all-women environment.
5. Complete control and responsibility for their working lives.

This could be seen as an encouraging and ideal situation, until one looks beyond the

actual Co-ops. and considers women's place in the wider worker's Co-operative movement. There the picture is very different.

Role of Women in the Structures?

If we look at the national umbrella organisations and their structures, it seems to be that the Co-operative movement is setting up the same hierarchical structures that the Co-operatives themselves are working to avoid and as a consequence the women's place in these structures is similar to the women's place within government, unions, and industry - at the bottom of the pile.

For example, the national Co-operative Development Agency have a board of directors who are all male. The Industrial Common Ownership Movement have a council of twenty-three, four of whom are women. The Industrial Common Ownership Finance (ICOF), have ten trustees of whom two are women. The Scottish Co-operative Development Committee (SCDC) has eighteen committee members, none of whom are women, although there are ten additional places for representatives from Co-operatives and occasionally some of these are women. C.E.C.O.P., the European co-operative group has one woman representing ICOM. Not only is she the only woman member but she is the only woman ever to be on this committee.

The many local Co-operative Development Agencies (CDA's) throughout the country seem to be doing no better, many of the boards or management committees being all male, and the development workers themselves are often male with women being employed in an administrative capacity at a much lower salary. This was

highlighted recently at the Annual General Meeting of the CDA Network, where many of the women expressed real concern and dissatisfaction with the way CDA's were being structured.

The Need for Training

This under-representation of women and women's interests at an international, national, and local level can only result in women working at the grass roots losing out.

Women Co-operators desperately need training, particularly in financial management, they need access to advice, support, and assistance, and they have little chance of getting all of this unless they have representatives with their needs uppermost in their minds, at a national level.

The answer to the question, why are there not more women involved in the umbrella organisations, is a difficult one. It may be that after trying to cope with running a Co-operative and looking after a family, there is little time left. It may also be partly due to the hierarchical structures within the organisations. This type of organisation and the way of working is often alien to women, who naturally work better in a Co-operative situation.

ICOM Women's Link-Up

ICOM Women's Link-Up* was set up by a

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number of women within ICOM to promote training and equal opportunities for women within the Co-operative movement. We plan to have a national conference this year where we hope to highlight some of these issues and to provide a forum for women in the Co-operative movement to meet, exchange experiences and information, and gain support. We will also endeavour to give women a chance to meet others in similar trades. ICOM Women's Link-Up now has two seats for nominated representatives to ICOM Council.

An application has gone to the E.E.C. for funding to provide training for women in Co-operatives. The project will be managed at a local level with a national co-ordinator.

Another initiative being planned is by a group of women in Oxford who plan to hold a national conference for women-only Co-operatives where they will explore the problems and benefits of these types of enterprises.

In conclusion, women in the Co-operative movement are coming together and with that united strength, the women's place within the movement will change. But is this enough? If we are not to end up with a white, middle class, male dominated hierarchy, then we as a movement must work together to produce a truly Co-operative movement.

Note of the Author RHONA HOWARTH was a founder member/worker with Durham Wholefood Co-operative between 1976 and 1981 when she became a development worker with ICOM North. She is a member of ICOM Council representing ICOM Women's Link-Up and an ICOF trustee.