

Women and the Co-operative Movement

TAKING AN INTERNATIONAL VIEW

by

MURIEL J. RUSSELL

When I arrived at the I.C.A. headquarters on January 4th 1965, as secretary for Women and Youth, I found an empty desk except for one letter from the Swedish Co-operative Women's Guild wishing me well in my new job.

I was equipped only with a Co-operative Honours Diploma, a wide experience of service on my local Board and various Co-operative Union committees, a long record of Guild membership and speaking engagements at branches and finally a burning desire to make a success of the job. Perhaps the latter was the most important because it kept me "stoked up" when the going became somewhat tiring and frustrating during the next 14 years.

My terms of reference made me responsible for:-

1. The promotion of active interest and participation of women in every aspect of Co-operation
2. The promotion of education, information and enlightenment of women members and consumers
3. Encouraging understanding between Co-operative Movements and Women's organisations with similar aims
4. Spreading the work of women among youth.

Besides serving the I.C.A. Women's Committee, my work also entailed research, writing articles, serving working parties and arranging seminars, etc.

Women's Limited Role in the I.C.A.

Never before had the I.C.A. run such a department, yet it was in fact 80 years too late!! Few people realised either then or even now, that within the first decade following the birth of the Women's League for the Spread of Co-operation, as it was initially known, some of its midwives were turning their attention to the international scene and the birth of the International Co-operative Alliance in 1895. Two Guildswomen, Mrs. Margaret Lawrenson and Miss Tournier, were not only members of the Provisional Committee but remained members of the Executive Committee. Yet the "elbowing out" process began even in the first Congress when Miss Tournier seems to have been stung into "a tart reminder that if the promoters of the Alliance wished to succeed they must secure the co-operation of the women who, besides purchasing goods, wanted a voice in the Movement". She won her point because, we are told, there was a unanimous vote but the records of following Congresses repeatedly show that, despite frequent discussions on the role of women, seldom was one of their number appointed to the Central Committee and as far as I know no woman has ever been elected to the Executive Committee since.

Forming their Own Organisation

After 25 years of knocking at the door, tired of the struggle, women co-operators set about forming their own organisation, the

International Co-operative Women's Guild. It maintained itself for 46 years and only when the adverse economics of administration beat them, did they swallow their pride and ask for the department of which I subsequently took charge. My personal opinion is that the I.C.A. acted niggardly through those years. The only assistance it gave to the I.C.W.G. was hall accommodation and interpretation services at their Congresses which were held triennially at the same venue as the I.C.A. Congresses. All those women were Co-operators from 20 or more countries and were part and parcel of societies which had paid subscriptions to I.C.A.; therefore they had a right to better allocations from the collective funds.

The I.C.W.G. performed a wonderful service for the world Co-operative Movement within their limited means and, what is more, their representatives were well thought of in United Nations circles, e.g. UNESCO and FAO, where they expounded the message of Co-operation with conviction.

A Department in the I.C.A.

Let me hasten to add that money was not available to me either, but at least the I.C.A. found my salary, office costs, travel expenses and accommodation, unless some generous member organisation picked up the hotel bill as they often did. I benefited also throughout my service from two understanding Directors, colleagues in a variety of departments, e.g. education, agriculture, research and publication on whom I could rely to supply me with information and advice and, what was most helpful

throughout, devoted secretaries, despite being a "woman boss".

Very important too, I had a Committee of women, most of whom were leading members of Co-operative Women's Guilds and organisations and in a number of cases they had formerly served in the I.C.W.G. If any of them were officials, this meant they were usually the General Secretary or full-time President of their Guilds; in other words, although their Co-operative Unions paid their expenses and they had a certain loyalty to them, they also felt a responsibility to the women at the back of them to faithfully represent their views. Today I have a feeling there is a change taking place even though it is not too pronounced yet. Why? I put it down to two reasons:-

Firstly, many of those organisations are either disbanded or completely changed in character.

Secondly, more women during the last 20 years have successfully found places on national Co-operative councils or are in paid positions in the head offices of such organisations. We should rejoice about these even if they are still few and far between, but I can see a danger which will eventually change the Women's Committee, or even bring about its dissolution. It is a kind of "Managerial Revolution" which may not worry the individual but can endanger the true representation of women when there is no longer an obligation either to seek or reflect current opinions of the mass of women in their Movements.

Appointment to I.C.A. Committees

Another yardstick which is often used to assess progress in international Co-operative circles, is the number of women appointed by their countries to the I.C.A. Central Committee. In 1971 I prepared a report for that Committee on "The Role and Situation of Women in the Co-operative Movement" which showed that of 150 representatives from 52 countries, only one was a woman - she was from Poland; one of a delegation of eight!

In the next 7 years the Womens' Committee won the right to have its Chairman on the Central Committee, with the right to vote. Only a neat piece of "footwork" saved that vote for the women when later their Committee was re-designated an auxiliary. What was more pleasing was the gentle stirring of change among Central Committee delegations which resulted by 1978 in the appointment of 7 women representatives. Today there are 9 - from Bulgaria, Canada, G.D.R., Hungary, Puerto Rico, U.K., U.S.A., and the Women's Committee representative who is from Sweden; for comparison it must be added there are now about 260 members from nearly 70 countries. The likelihood of any substantial acceleration under present rules seems very unlikely and this makes the probability of a woman being elected from the Central to the Executive Committee even more remote. However, as one who supported the idea of a special place for the Women's Committee, I welcome the provision made since my retirement for its Chairman to have a seat. The fact that she has no vote on the Executive has both advantages and disadvantages but either way that need not be discussed here.

In Consumer Affairs?

In the consumer field women are much more alert now to the need for new standards and protection. Women Co-operators have made a fair contribution in the I.C.A. through its auxiliary which deals with consumer affairs. In the Scandinavian Co-operative Movements, in particular, there has been an increasing emphasis on improved consumer standards in their own shops and this has been largely due to the pressure from the guilds which actually changed their title from "Women's" to "Consumer" Guild. The subject has not been pursued with the same vigour in this country and I believe there is scope for much more collaboration between our Guilds and the C.W.S. in this area.

In the Developing Countries

The most positive change for women Co-operators over the last 20 years is evident in the developing countries. Until 1965 little action had been taken to organise or teach the millions of wives, mothers and daughters involved daily through their husband's membership in Co-operatives mushrooming into existence throughout what is known today as "The Third World". To her great credit, the late Miss Polley, post-war General Secretary of the I.C.A., arranged with UNESCO support in 1962, an important Conference in New Delhi for women in S.E. Asian countries. As a result an expert undertook a survey of the Region.

In India itself several State Co-operative Unions set up specialist units or "wings" for women's activities. During the 70's with the support of my Committee, I was able to tackle

East and West Africa, arrange refresher action in connection with the work already getting underway in South East Asia and then achieve another "first time" by bringing together women from 14 countries in Latin America. Of course, this development was not a lone effort; with open hands we accepted any assistance in personnel and finance from United Nations and donor agencies.

But for me there was something more important. I saw, in the developing countries, new types of young women, mainly from the lower middle income groups, who had themselves received some education and were prepared, given the right guidance, to pass on the knowledge and training in Co-operative practices to their less fortunate sisters in the semi-urban and rural areas of their countries. I see in them still, and needless to say there are not too many of them, the kin of those dedicated women whom the Co-operative Women's Guild produced in the first twenty vital years of its existence. Whilst they have to earn a living, unlike those English pioneers, there appears a similarity of motive within them which spurs them on. Probably they see the job there waiting to be done as did the early Guildswomen in the 1880's here; maybe it is the appeal of the mountain peak to the young climber. Whatever it is, I have seen a strengthening of confidence and a will, to achieve results which is refreshing and encouraging. Furthermore, I saw signs that this spirit was manifesting itself in the villages and downtown areas of many developing countries, perhaps not very abundantly but assuredly laying foundations.

Who knows? Maybe some microchip library in 2083 will still hold scraps of evidence to show that in this period young women in Kenya, Peru, Sri Lanka or wherever, contributed to a new period of economic and social growth which was intended to benefit people and not profiteers, as did our own members a century ago.

Note of the Author MRS. MURIEL J. RUSSELL J.P., C.H.D., has been active in many capacities in the Movement since childhood; she gained the Honours Diploma in Co-operation after full-time study at the College; has served variously in the C.W.G., including a period of two years on its Mid-Southern Sectional Committee; has been a director of the Enfield Highway Society since 1946; in the Co-operative Union has been chairman of its Dry Goods Trade Association and is a member of the Southern Sectional Board, serving as its Chairman this year; and was Secretary for Women and Youth at the I.C.A. for 14 years from 1964.