



CO-OPERATIVES UK

NEW INSIGHT 7

A woman's place in the co-operative movement?

Examining the issue of women's under-representation

Steve and Chris Williams

“By virtue of being co-operative, the co-operative sector should set an example to the rest of society”

Co-operative
WOMENS 2020
CHALLENGE

Introduction

This paper is based on interviews we conducted in May 2011 with sixteen women involved in the co-operative movement, commissioned by Co-operatives UK as part of the Co-operative Women's 2020 Challenge.

The aim was to examine women's understanding of the role they play within the co-operative movement and any issues they perceive are still present for women today.

The women we interviewed occupied mainly senior positions, at member or employee levels, within their organisations. Half were from consumer co-operatives, with the others spread across worker co-operatives, housing co-operatives and credit unions. All of the interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity in line with market research conventions.

A woman's place in the co-operative movement?

Why equal participation matters

From the outset we addressed why increasing women's representation in the co-operative movement is important. According to our interviewees, equal participation of women matters for at least two reasons:

Firstly, it matters because by virtue of being co-operative, the co-operative sector should set an example to the rest of society. It is both a social and a political issue.

Secondly, it matters for business and organisational performance. Given that women still account for the majority of shoppers and make up the majority of the members of the movement, it makes sense that organisations who are most in touch with the people who use their services, perform best. Therefore, if co-operatives better represent women they serve, there is a greater chance of success.

Looking at differences across the co-operative movement

When we asked whether the movement performed better on the gender issue than society overall (as manifested in other business and democratic institutions for example), the women we interviewed all seemed to want the co-operative sector to be more successful, but whether it actually was or not was debatable and opinion varied between each co-operative.

“Worker co-operatives and housing co-operatives seemed to provide very positive models of female participation. That is, these organisations provided opportunities for women to progress, and there was no reported sense of gender discrimination or glass ceilings.”

This desire for co-operatives to be beacons of progress on gender representation was made all the more strongly given the feeling we encountered that women are generally more oriented to co-operation, and that co-operation itself can be seen to be closer to a caring, mutually supportive way of living that some identified with women. As one woman put it:

“Co-operative values are feminine.”

We found evidence of difference between the types of co-operatives (i.e. worker, housing, retail, credit unions) but also within the same types.

Worker co-operatives and housing co-operatives seemed to provide very positive models of female participation. That is, these organisations provided opportunities for women to progress, and there was no reported sense of gender discrimination or glass ceilings.

Within the worker co-operatives we investigated, flat pay structures helped to create or reinforce a sense of equality. There was also a strong feeling that the people involved (both male and female) were committed to egalitarianism and so would accept nothing less.

Within the housing co-operatives, we found that women were often the members (including single mothers) and also the housing officers. Perhaps revealingly, there was a sense that women were particularly good at being housing officers due to their possibly having a more sympathetic manner.

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Within the consumer co-operative sector, we found wider variations. It was generally agreed that at the base membership level, there were more women than men. However, a pyramidal hierarchy emerged whereby, in some societies at least, at the apex there were more men than women. Having said this, the pattern was by no means uniform: at the board level in some societies there was equal representation.

There were also feelings that, although co-operatives might be better than private business, they were less supportive of women’s participation than the public sector, for example.

We can say then that a key task for the 2020 Women’s Challenge is to achieve across the movement what the worker co-operatives, the housing co-operatives and some of the smaller consumer societies have already been able to bring about.

What are the barriers holding women back from full participation?

If women are not fully represented at all levels within the movement, what is it that holds them back? Some strong themes emerged from the research.

“The Caring Imperative”: the major barrier mentioned was around what we term the “caring imperative”. That is, women seem to assume the role of the major care provider for the family: children, the sick, and the elderly. This is clearly a complicated area where issues such as men’s perceived inability to become primary carers (less flexible work, less inclination?) and women’s upbringing (with the perceived assumption of being the primary carer being inculcated from an early age) may play their part. However, in our interviews, there was a certain degree of fatalism, even among politically conscious women, that “that’s how it is” – women will always do more than their share of caring.

“It’s family and childcare that holds women back.”

Time and Work/Life Balance: many women observed that in the modern age, everyone seems very busy. Work seems more demanding as does life at home. To combine both is very difficult. To overlay this with involvement in other activities that demand time (such as co-operative meetings), life becomes so much harder. With the 'caring imperative' added to the time mix, it becomes even more difficult for many women.

Confidence: many felt that women were less confident than men (on average) and this meant they were less likely to put themselves forward for senior positions, particularly in very male-dominated walks of life.

"I find it hard speaking out in a large group – is that just me?"

Within the larger co-operative membership structure, women may also feel less able to make valid contributions on business related topics. For example, whilst a woman elected to a board might represent, and also be a representative of, the membership, she might still feel intimidated or unsure of her own value in contributing to a discussion with highly experienced male executives.

"Some women don't think they are good enough to participate".

“For some women, being involved in a co-operative had been a life-changing experience.”

Co-operatives can also of course be extremely supportive: some women felt that their confidence had increased considerably since joining (as employees or as active members), due to development programmes or simply finding conducive environments in which to speak. Indeed, for some women, being involved in a co-operative had been a life-changing experience.

Male-Led Cultures: in some parts of the movement, there was evidence of a male-led culture that acts as a barrier to women feeling, or actually being able to, fully participate. This can manifest itself in, for example, drinking at the bar after meetings, or assuming that women in a meeting will pour the tea and coffee. Women will react to situations like these in different ways: some will be able to cope with occasional "locker room humour and male posturing" for example; some, sadly, will be held back.

"Retail is Male": or at least, running the stores is a male-dominated profession. Thus, whilst we might find women in senior jobs in Societies, the pattern seems to be that these were in areas such as HR or communications. The retail and trading sides still seem to have a strong male orientation.

Women Do Not Put Themselves Forward: related to the confidence issue, women wait to be asked, rather than putting themselves forward.

Discrimination: we did not find recent examples of basic discrimination. We did find women who had suffered discrimination outside the movement (victimisation due to pregnancy and sexuality) and who, on subsequently working in a co-operative, saw the movement as more progressive. We did however find some examples from a few years ago, notably a woman employee (now a member director) having her contribution to a meeting interrupted with “I can’t believe one little girl’s head can know so much.”

Meeting and Facilitation Styles: we found a belief that whilst some women are used to the classic, formal meeting, others might find this approach off-putting. It was felt by some that the process of chairing, arguing, and passing resolutions is male-orientated and also reflects the aggressive style that is most notoriously associated with the House of Commons. For example, the Prime Minister’s “calm down, dear” remark had been made the week before our interviews began and was mentioned by several interviewees. It confirmed their point of view and served to show how an intelligent woman could be “put in her place” by male authority figures.

How to address the issues: the interviewees’ ideas

Whilst nobody felt that there was an easy answer to the question of how to increase female participation, ideas emerged from the research which, if taken on board, would go some way to addressing the issues as part of the Co-operative Women’s 2020 Challenge.

Childcare/Cared for Care: as looking after children or the infirm was one of the barriers holding women back, best practice should be adopted in relation to paying for childminders, providing crèches and supporting carers.

Timing: it was felt that the times of meetings were often problematic, and thought should be given to alternative times for meetings or to varying the times so that at least different people might be able to attend. Unfortunately, there seemed no easy wins on this topic – any changes would have a knock on effect on other members.

Locations: the same dilemma applies to where meetings are held. A particular issue mentioned was that all Co-operative Group board meetings are held in Manchester. Consideration might be given to alternatives but no doubt this would raise other problems.

Mentoring, Role Models and Networking: to help address the issues of confidence and potential feelings of isolation, the idea emerged of developing a mentoring approach, which might also be linked to networking events.

Focus by the movement and societies: many felt that if the movement focussed on the role of women, then the consumer co-operatives societies in particular would feel positively encouraged to move towards more equal gender engagement and raise the bar, which would subsequently create an air of change across the wider movement.

Quotas: the issue of setting quotas on boards was mentioned by many but almost always in a negative way. However we did have a small minority who argued that setting quotas would force the societies to focus on better representation of women.

Female Only or Female-Led Co-operatives: the movement could encourage start-ups led by women. It was felt that women were often excluded by standard businesses and business models, so launching their own co-operatives could be a positive way of addressing this and letting them fulfil their potential.

The wider context

Whilst our interviews were directly concerned with gender, it is noteworthy that other issues around diversity were reported. For example, it was often reported that the movement, or the specific co-operatives we were exploring, did not seem to reflect the ethnic diversity in modern Britain. We also found some women were not sure whether any discrimination or barriers they faced were based on their sex, or on other things such as age or sexuality.

Perhaps we should keep in mind that whilst the Women's Challenge and the 2020 goals should be met, there is an even bigger goal: to make the co-operative movement more broadly representative overall.

A message to the Co-operative Women's 2020 Challenge

“We found that more than anything, there was a desire for specific ideas and initiatives to emerge that could be taken out to the constituent parts of the movement.”

A few women said that to some extent it was a shame that the movement still needed to discuss the issue of female under-representation (that is, that it was still a problem):

“I'm disappointed we still have to see women as an issue in co-operatives.”

However, all of the women interviewed were positive about the potential the launch of the Challenge had for women. It was felt that with collective willpower and focus made by the whole co-operative movement, there would be real progress. We found that more than anything, there was a desire for specific ideas and initiatives to emerge that could be taken out to the constituent parts of the movement.

For further information about the Co-operative Women's 2020 Challenge go to the dedicated website at www.cooperativewomen.coop.

Co-operatives UK

Co-operatives UK works to promote, develop and unite co-operative enterprises. It has a unique role as a trade association for co-operatives and its campaigns for co-operation, such as Co-operatives Fortnight, bring together all those with a passion and interest in co-operative action.

Any organisation supportive of co-operation and mutuality can join and there are many opportunities online for individuals to connect to the latest co-operative news, innovations and campaigns. All members benefit from specialist services and the chance to network with other co-operatives.

www.uk.coop

Co-operative Womens 2020 Challenge

The Co-operative Womens 2020 Challenge is a campaign which will seek to ensure women are fairly represented at all levels within The Co-operative Group and the wider co-operative movement.

The challenge aims over the next 10 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.

www.cooperativewomen.coop

THE AUTHORS

Steve and Chris Williams set up Stratosphere Planning and Research in 1999. Stratosphere is a specialist qualitative research agency working across a range of sectors.

www.stratosphereresearch.co.uk

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