

Gender equality and women's empowerment: The co-operative approach



Despite major progress, gender inequality persists around the world. A significant gap remains between women and men in terms of economic and professional opportunities, wages, access to resources and participation in leadership and decision-making structures.

Gender equality is a fundamental condition to achieve sustainable development. Co-operative enterprises have taken up the call of the United Nations, and are contributing to making gender equality and women's empowerment a reality.

What co-operative enterprises contribute

A people-focused and values-based business model, the co-operative form of enterprise facilitates women's participation in local and national economies, through principles of voluntary and open membership and democratic member control. Anyone, regardless of gender, can become a member of a co-operative.

In particular, co-operation allows the most vulnerable and marginalized women to create their own economic opportunities, influence decisions affecting their livelihoods in a democratic setting and build more inclusive economies.

Women in co-operatives: The facts

In South Africa, women make up 60% of co-operative members.

In Japan, 95% of consumer co-operative members are women.

Nearly 40% of female worker co-operative members in Spain are in leadership positions, and women represent 49% of worker co-operative members overall.

Uganda has seen an increase of 132% in women's participation in agriculture co-operatives.

Women's leadership on financial co-operative boards is 65% in Tanzania.

In the United Kingdom, 41% of board members of co-operative retail business are women, compared to 20% within the FTSE 250 and 26% within the FTSE 100. Nearly half of the larger co-operative retailers have at least 50% of their directorships occupied by women, with only 2% of the FTSE listed companies having that same representation.

How co-operatives can do more

In order for co-operative enterprises to continue advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, they need **an enabling legal, economic and social environment** in which to thrive.

Local institutions, national governments and international organizations can help by providing regional, national and local policies and regulations that facilitate the establishment and development of co-operative enterprises, and respect the unique values-oriented co-operative identity.