

The Role of Consumer Co-operatives in Promoting Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women

I. Introduction

Co-operatives play a great role in empowering women. As **principle-based** and **value-led** organisations, they promote democratic process, equality among members and different forms of education and vocational training and qualification raising for all the members, irrespective of gender, age or other basis.

Co-operatives are also committed to **concern for community** (Co-op Principle VII), which is why they constantly develop social actions, especially in support of those in most need. Being people-centred businesses, co-ops facilitate women's participation in local and national economies through principles of voluntary and open membership and democratic member control.

On the occasion of **International Women's Day**, Euro Coop would like to present the great effort of consumer co-operatives in eliminating violence, achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls.

We shall start with an overview of the main aspects of gender equality, followed by the latest developments at EU level through the "EU Gender Equality Strategy" and then transition to consumer co-operatives' best practices across Europe.

II. Background

Attaining equality between women and men and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women are **fundamental human rights** and **values** upheld by the **United Nations**.

Much progress has been made to protect and promote women's rights in recent times. However, nowhere in the world can women claim to have all the same rights and opportunities as men, according to the UN. The majority of the world's 1.3 billion citizens in absolute poverty are women. On average, women receive between 30-40% less pay than men for the same work.

The pervasive existence of discriminatory practices and inequalities between men and women has been observed in various shapes and forms, manifesting most prominently in accessing the job market, working conditions (including remuneration), decision-making power, economic independence and responsibility-sharing (for household, childcare and care of other family members)¹.

Women also continue to be victims of stereotypes gender violence, with rape and domestic violence listed as significant causes of disability and death among women worldwide.

¹ The Gender Gap in the EU's Public Employment and Leadership, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs European Parliament (2020) [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/689276/IPOL_STU\(2021\)689276_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/689276/IPOL_STU(2021)689276_EN.pdf)

Despite all efforts made, The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) concluded that Europe is at least 60 years away from achieving full gender equality.

Gender pay gap

As mentioned by the EU Commission women in the EU are less present in the labour market than men. The gender employment gap stood at 11.7% in 2019, with 67.3 % of women across the EU being employed compared to 79% of men (EU27). The gender pay gap in the EU stands at 14.1% and has only changed minimally over the last decade. It means that on average women earn 14.1% less per hour than men. Women in the EU even earned 39.6% less than men overall in 2014. One of the reasons is the fact that on average women spend fewer hours in paid work than men: while only 8% of men in 2019 worked part-time, almost a third of women (30.7 %) did so².

The reasons for the gender pay gap go beyond the simple issue of discrimination. They are a consequence of various inequalities women face in access to work, progression and rewards.



Figure 1 Source European Commission

❖ Sectoral segregation:

Around 30% of the total gender pay gap is explained by the overrepresentation of women in relatively low-paying sectors, while the proportion of male employees is very high (over 80%) in better-paid sectors.

❖ Work-life balance:

Women spend fewer hours in paid work than men on average but more hours in unpaid work. In total, women have more work hours per week than men, which might affect their career choices. This is why the EU promotes a more equal sharing of parental leaves, an adequate public provision of childcare services and adequate company policies on flexible working time arrangements.

❖ The position in the hierarchy influences the level of pay:

less than 10% of top companies' CEOs are women. The profession with the largest differences in hourly earnings in the EU is that of managers: 23% lower earnings for women than for men.

❖ Discrimination:

In some cases, women earn less than men for doing jobs of equal value. However, the principle of equal pay for

² See more for data [here](#).

work of equal value is enshrined in the European Treaties (article 157 TFEU) since 1957³.

Gender related violence

Gender-related murders of women and girls are committed in a variety of contexts and through different mechanisms. UNODC concludes that a total of 87,000 women were intentionally killed in 2017. More than half of them (58%), 50,000, were killed by intimate partners or other family members, meaning that 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day. More than a third (30,000) of the women intentionally killed in 2017 were killed by their current or former partner – someone they would normally expect to trust⁴.



Figure 2 Source: UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (Vienna, 2019)

III. At the EU Level: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025

Although inequalities still exist, the EU has made significant progress in gender equality over the last decades. Six EU countries register among the top 10 in the world for gender equality in 2020⁵. The EU Gender Equality Strategy delivers on the von der Leyen Commission's commitment to achieving a **Union of Equality**. The Strategy presents policy objectives and actions to make significant progress by 2025 towards a gender-equal Europe. The goal is a Union where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive and can equally participate in and lead our European society.

The **key objectives** are ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics. The Strategy pursues a dual approach of gender mainstreaming combined with targeted actions, and intersectionality is a horizontal principle for its implementation.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/equal-pay/gender-pay-gap-situation-eu_en

⁴ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (Vienna, 2019)

⁵ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii#:~:text=The%20GII%20is%20an%20inequality%20index.&text=Thus%20the%20higher%20the%20GII,major%20areas%2>

While the Strategy focuses on actions within the EU, it is coherent with the EU's external policy on gender equality and women's empowerment⁶.

IV. Consumer Co-operatives & Women's Socio-economic Empowerment

A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise. It abides by 7 internationally acclaimed co-operative principles: 1. Voluntary and open membership; 2. Democratic member control; 3. Member economic participation; 4. Autonomy and independence; 5. Education, training and information; 6. Cooperation among cooperatives; and 7. Concern for community.⁷

Consumer co-operatives are enterprises owned and democratically managed by consumers, thus fulfilling the needs and aspirations of their members, individually, and of society, collectively. As such, consumer co-operatives have an inherent responsibility to their local communities within which they are an extension.

SPAIN: Eroski Making Gender Equality a Reality

Eroski's "**Women Who Count**" Programme is celebrating its first anniversary these days. This is an initiative that was created with the aim of giving a voice to the personal experiences of women with the same common thread: women's empowerment. Throughout this first edition, 16 women who work in different socio-business areas have shared their personal experiences. The [programme](#) brings visibility and recognition to the role played by women in sectors where men are traditionally the majority. The aim is to show what lies behind their decision and how they can serve as an example to other women.

Eroski promotes diversity, gender equality and respect also with other kinds of activities. For instance, in November 2019, Eroski held a conference on the topic: "**I am not invisible. Diversity makes us stronger**". This event is part of a series of initiatives promoted by the Eroski Observatory for Equality and Diversity. Created 15 years ago, the Observatory has as a mission to foster a non-discriminatory culture in line with the co-operative values. The observatory ensures that the principle of equality is implemented throughout the organisation because Eroski believes in the strength of people, in the transformational power of work and in equal opportunities for personal and professional development. In 2016, we continued to develop this policy with 58 specific measures on equality, such as guaranteeing the correct functioning of the protocol established to prevent possible cases of workplace harassment and a confidential consultation service for referring any incidents.

ICELAND: Coop Is Officially an Equal Pay Employer

Samkaup - Iceland's consumer co-operative is certified to meet the requirements of **the equal pay standard ÍST 85: 2012**, which allow the use the **equal pay label 2019-2022**.

In 2018, legislation was passed mandating companies and institutions in Iceland, with 25 or more employees, to implement the Equal Pay Standard, and undergo an audit and receive certification that they offer equal pay for work of equal value.

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152>

⁷ <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>

The certification IST 85: 2012 on equal wage standard certifies that KSK/Coop Island establishes, implements, maintains, and improves the management of equal wage affairs. Furthermore, the certification attests that women and men working for the organisation enjoy equal wages and the same employment terms for the same jobs or jobs of equal value.

The primary objectives Samkaup wants to achieve in terms of equality are:

- Paying women and men equal wages and the same terms for the same or equally valuable jobs;
- Providing equal opportunities for women and men;
- Offering women as well as men the same opportunities for vocational training and education;
- Making Samkaup a family-friendly workplace;
- Fighting sexual harassment, bullying or violence in any way.

Concerning the Equal Pay Certification, it also represents an important message to stakeholders, partners and other organizations, concerning not discriminatory policies and empowerment of all the employees, regardless of gender. *“We are extremely proud to receive the certification. Samkaup places great emphasis on complying with The Equal Status Act. It is important to show that we guarantee our employees that same wage, regardless of gender, nationality or age,”* says **Gunnur Líf Gunnarsdóttir**, Managing Director of the Human Resources at Samkaup.

ITALY: Knights of Merit 2020 – Coop Recognition by the President of the Republic

In 2020, Rosa Maria Lucchetti, workers at the Ipercoop Mirafiore in Pesaro, was awarded a prize by the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella. Lucchetti, in fact, stood out for her great gesture of generosity during the Coronavirus pandemic, when she left a letter to the 118 operators, giving them three prepaid 250 euro cards to buy food.

The **recognition** by the President of the Republic is due not only to Rosa Maria's **generosity**, but also to the category she represents. Co-op, as well as other retailers' workers have been at the forefront during the hardest moments of the pandemic by working long hours, implementing new measures and keeping everything under control.

The **heroes** of the pandemic are, after all, **ordinary people** who continued to work and guarantee the functioning of essential services for the benefit of society.

Coop Italy launched the **COOP "Close the Gap - let's reduce the differences"** campaign of actions and commitments to promote women's gender equality and combat inequalities. Among the first actions is the participation to the petition "Stop Tampon Tax! Menstruation is not a luxury" promoted by the "Onde Rosa" association to cut VAT on tampons. From 6 to 13 March, Coop will apply a VAT reduced to 4% to all sanitary towels, a symbolic act to **raise awareness** on the fact that inequality also starts from daily discriminations.

At Coop Italia, **women represent 70% of all employees**, over 44% of members of the Board of Directors, more than 32% of the management positions, as well as more than half of the voluntary members at local level. For this reason, Coop Italia intends to promote a culture of change, respect and empowerment, not only among members and employees but in society at large.

Coop Italia is committed to rewarding every year virtuous behaviour that promote gender equality among the suppliers.

“We want to move more decisively towards a culture of diversity and inclusion, with the idea of setting ourselves objectives that are not cosmetic. Coop is very sensitive to the issue, the principle of integration

and equality is a constitutive part of being a cooperative," explains **Marco Pedroni**, President of Coop Italia and ANCC-Coop (National Association of Consumer Cooperatives).

Another related project is the anti-violence counter. The E.M.M.A. Onlus association at the Ipercoop in via Livorno in Turin has just opened an anti-violence desk for women who seek support. According to studies carried out on the subject, *"one woman in three is the victim of at least one episode of violence in her lifetime,"* says Anna Maria Zucca, president of the association E.M.M.A. Anti-Violence Centres. The forced coexistence during the lockdown has exacerbated the problem and at the same time, because of the restrictions, it has become more difficult to seek help. The counter will initially start online and then open onsite once the health emergency is over.

UNITED KINGDOM: Midcounties Applies the Society's Agile Working Policy

The Midcounties Co-operative has partnered with a new **Employee Assistance Provider** who share insight on the effects of work on every demographic and provide helpful support for colleagues who may be struggling because of responsibilities outside of work. Midcounties launched the **Society's Agile Working Policy** - a framework for consistent and fair practice when considering agile working arrangements. The co-op is in the process of completing a detailed analysis of any barriers to female progression across all trading groups, but especially food retail.

The selection processes and interview questions have all been revised to ensure they are diverse and gender-inclusive; these questions have been benchmarked by **ENEI (Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion)**. The Society has a centralised recruitment team who determine attraction methods, complete pre-screening and first stage interviews to ensure consistency in attraction and selection.

Midcounties has worked closely to select the right recruitment partners to attract senior level roles, ensuring that they share values of equality and inclusivity, which has led to a better gender balance at shortlisting stage and enabled the appointment of more senior females.

The **Career Framework** has been rolled out across the co-op which ensures to have fair pay ranges at every level of the organisation. All workers have access to the Career Framework and the associated salary bands so that they can plan their development and raise their awareness of opportunities. Furthermore, the bonus scheme has been revisited to ensure that it is based on trading group and society performance as opposed to individual performance. This is a fair and transparent way of ensuring that all colleagues are rewarded based on **team performance** and avoids any **unconscious bias** from local managers in influencing bonus awards.

A big investment in learning and development for employees at all levels has been done, ensuring that opportunities for progression across the society are relevant and accessible.

NETHERLANDS: Promoting Female Empowerment Beyond the Store

Coop Netherlands strongly subscribe gender equality and women empowerment. In the management, board and member council the participation of women is adjusted according to its guidelines. Coop Netherlands **pays equal wages for men and women who carry out the same job**. Furthermore, in terms of future prospects, both men and women are strongly incentivised to attend advanced training and development courses.

Coop Netherland also observed a **growing number of female shop managers**, however, the promotion of female empowerment does not stop at the cash register. Thanks to [fairtrade projects](#), many women

are supported in a process of social and economic empowerment elsewhere, sometimes even in adverse cultural contexts.

At Coop, the proportion of women has been constant for years by about **56%**. Coop's Board consists of four men and three women. With this, Coop broadly complies with the legal target of at least 30% women in its management bodies.

More info [here](#).

FINLAND: SOK Accedes to the UN Global Compact Women`s Empowerment Principles

SOK has joined the [UN Global compact women`s empowerment principles](#), aimed at empowering women in the workplace, marketplace and community. The message is clear: “Equality Means Business”, so the Principles emphasize the business case for corporate action to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

The 7 Principles:

1. Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality;
2. Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and non-discrimination;
3. Ensure health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers;
4. Promote education, training and professional development for women;
5. Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women;
6. Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy;
7. Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality

The UN Global Compact encourages organizations to create a culture of integrity across their business, from strategy to operations. More than 9,500 participating companies and 3,000 non-business participants have already embraced the commitments of the UN Global Compact. To [join](#) them as part of the world’s largest global corporate sustainability initiative, the organizations, such as SOK has already done, must voluntarily pledge to:

- Operate responsibly, in alignment with [universal sustainability principles](#);
- Take actions that support society;
- Commit to embedding sustainability deep into the organization’s DNA;
- Report annually on ongoing efforts;
- Engage locally where the organization has a presence.

SOK is in line with the country’s statistics, particularly concerning the equal pay among man and women, and education level. An average of 60% of members are women of SOK, which proves Finland has a good track record in gender equality.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2015 ranks Finland as 3rd in the world. Finland is a country where women usually work full-time and enjoy equal access to education and healthcare. It is also where women are most likely to be able to participate fully in the country’s political and economic life, as stated by the national constitution.

NORWAY: Coop Provides equal Opportunity Through Sport Sponsorships

Being one of the major sport sponsors in Norway, Coop is determined to contribute to equal opportunities in sports. In January, Coop together with other sponsors and the Norwegian Athletics Association, the Norwegian Skiing Association and the Norwegian Wrestling Association launched the project "Equal Opportunities".

The three-year project will help girls and women in both recreational and professional sports get the same opportunities as boys, focusing on equal training facilities, support systems and competition opportunities, along with plans for recruiting women leaders and coaches.

Coop is the main sponsor of the first league for women and men in Norwegian football. Through these sponsorships, Coop provide equal support to both women's and men's first league teams.

UKRAINE: Coop Focuses on Women's Empowerment on the Workplace

The issues of gender equality, access to active work and equal opportunity are very important for Ukraine's consumer co-operatives.

Almost 75% of employees in Coop are women. They come from different regions, are of different age and positions - from saleswomen to management positions. In general, the statistics are very revealing:

- ❖ 69 % of leaders are women;
- ❖ In Coop Ukraine (headquarters): 4 out of 9 women hold management positions;
- ❖ 42% of leaders in Coop Ukraine are women who manage the Board at the local level;
- ❖ 13 out of 22 co-operative educational institutions are led by women, 90% of the deputy rectors of educational institutions are women. There are 24 women scientists who head departments in two universities of Coop Ukraine (this makes 45% of leaders of 53 departments).

Coop promotes equal opportunities for women and men in access to education and training as well as career opportunities and equal salary.

The administrations of co-op educational institutions guarantee equal conditions for women and men during the enrolment, assessment and granting of individual scholarships to students. Of the 20,000 students in the co-op academic institutions, almost 60% of them are women.

The women who have made a brilliant career in Coop Ukraine:

Marta Kandyba, Chairman of the Board of Volyn Region Union of Consumer Societies, a representative of women co-operators of Ukraine and a member of the Gender Committee of the International Cooperative Alliance. Total work experience in Coop Ukraine is over 36 years. **Lidia Voynash**, Member of the Board of Coop Ukraine, Director of the Department of Personnel Policy, Education and Science of Coop Ukraine, Director of the Training and Methodological Center "Ukoopovita", has been working in the Coop Ukraine system for 37 years. **Svitlana Nestulya**, over 18 years in the system of Coop Ukraine, Director of the Educational and Scientific Institute of Leadership in the Poltava University of Economics and Trade, Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, author of the idea and founder of Poltava Regional School of Student Self-Government Leadership, University of the Third Age, Poltava Adult Education Center, deputy of the city council and former deputy mayor of Poltava.

V. Conclusion

As seen, consumer co-operatives have an important role to play in increasing women's empowerment through their unwavering commitment to promote training, education, information, awareness and the many projects countering violence, among other activities. However, co-operatives would be more effective in the presence of an enabling policy and business environment; in other words, if policy and

legal frameworks regulating co-operatives were more gender sensitive and supportive of women's concerns.

As highlighted by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), 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 (ICA,2016)⁸.

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⁸ <https://www.ica.coop/sites/default/files/Alliance-Coops&Gender-Brief.pdf>