

# MUST READS ON

# COOPERATIVES, WOMEN'S RIGHTS & GENDER EQUALITY

## ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY: THE CO-OPERATIVE WAY

Author: International Labour Organization

The adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 laid the foundation for action towards gender equality in all aspects of economic, social, cultural and political life. Twenty years later, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Co-operative Alliance (Alliance) have come together to assess how one particular sector—the co-operative movement—is impacting (and is impacted by) progress towards women's empowerment and gender equality.

Great strides have been made towards gender equality over the last two decades. Nevertheless, deep gender disparities persist across the globe, surfacing in labour markets, as well as other realms. Compared to men, women continue to earn less, are more likely to partake in unpaid labour, and are more apt to be excluded from decent work and opportunities for advancement. As gender equity is increasingly seen as a pillar for sustainable economic development and broad social well-being, alternative

models to development which incorporate women's equality in work are needed. Rooted in values of self-help, equality, and equity, as well as economic growth through cooperation and democratic processes, co-operative enterprises are well-positioned to answer this call.

The Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade, adopted by the General Assembly of Alliance in 2012, set forth key ambitions for the co-operative movement. According to the Blueprint, one critical area for co-operative development is creating economic opportunities for marginalized populations—especially women. Another key area is to, “elevate participation within membership and governance to a new level”, which entails expanding membership to include more women and further engaging women members in cooperative democratic processes. Despite a push for gender equity in co-operative policy and practice, little evidence has documented whether and in what ways co-operatives affect women's empowerment and gender equity. The present report aims to address

this knowledge gap.

Drawing on surveys and interviews with experts and practitioners from the co-operative, labour and women's movements, this report sets forth a preliminary review of the interface between the co-operative movement, women's empowerment and gender equality. The findings suggest that various manifestations of gender equity have been achieved across the co-operative movement, and that the co-operative model is particularly adept at addressing women's empowerment and gender equality concerns. However, the findings also identify various obstacles to women's empowerment and gaps in gender equality that persist within the co-operative movement. In responding to these obstacles and gaps, the report sets forth recommendations for policy and practice. It also indicates areas that warrant further research.