



CO-OPERATIVES LEARNING SERIES



What gender considerations must be taken into account in co-operative development?

GENDER CONSTRAINTS TO CO-OPERATIVE PARTICIPATION

Very poor women and men face their own set of constraints interacting in co-operatives and their markets. Women are often limited from actively participating in business activities owing to: risk of physical, sexual, and other gender-based violence; limited social standing or social capital in the community with limited access to certain market opportunities or group structures; social or cultural confinement and immobility; inadequate legal protection or enforcement of existing laws; traditional gender roles and expectations; and lack of control over resources (in particular, property). Although this learning theme focuses principally on the constraints faced by women, it is important to recognize the constraints faced by men which limit their participation in co-operatives and the market systems in which they operate.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES FOR WOMEN

As development projects work to strengthen co-operatives, changes can take place that are considered positive, but which may, ultimately, have unintended consequences for women. It is important to take these into consideration and recognize how to minimize their negative impact on women and household relationships.

Introduction of new technologies and agricultural practices

- **Change labor patterns:** New technologies may allow women to spend less time clearing land or weeding and have more time for household activities or to interact with buyers. But landless women may not have the income opportunities that they used to have as day laborers providing land clearing and weeding services.
- **Change safety conditions:**

Women may have to use heavier and less safe equipment, leading to higher rates of injuries or incidences such as miscarriages.

Shifts to high value crops

- **Alter control over resources:** Women may have less ability to decide how much produce goes to the co-operative market and how much is retained for the family to consume. Men may want to maximize income and, hence, may

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not want to use their crops, a potential income source, as food for the family. This is particularly challenging when higher value crops may not be food crops, but rather cash crops, which could leave the household more food insecure. A solution could be for the co-operative to always promote that households still produce a minimum amount of food crops.

- **Alter control over benefits:** As incomes from the co-operative increase, women may experience increased conflict over decisions about how much money to spend on food for the family versus other expenses that men may find to be more important, leading to higher incidences of physical abuse for women.

Introduction of new market channels

- **Change time allocation:** Women may need access to child-care to be able to participate in co-operatives more actively. Women may risk decreasing the ability to nurse babies for a healthy length of time if they have to travel to co-operative meetings or other areas, or to undertake tasks for the co-operative without their babies.
- **Change routes travelled:** Women may need to travel on less safe routes to access co-operative meetings or to access new markets or inputs on behalf of the co-operative.

Introduction of new storage facilities

- **Change of control of food resources:** Warehousing receipt programs and other off-farm storage programs, often run by co-operatives for their members, decreases women's ability to retain produce as food for the household.

Formalization of contracting between co-operatives and market actors

- **Formalization of ownership of land and equipment** can change household dynamics.
- **Increased pressure for women to transact with sex** as a form of contract compliance.

Introduction of more formalized financial requirements

- **Change income control:** Certain co-operative memberships, and even co-operatives' contract farming arrangements and certain warehouse receipt programs, often require the opening of a bank account. Bank accounts are often opened in the name of the man heading the household. Buyers often make payments directly into these bank accounts. This removes women's knowledge of what income is being received and women's access to the income. Women may, therefore, not be in favor of more formal financial structures that could decrease their control over income.

- **Change financial management** (owing to formalization of household financial management practices): By supporting or requiring transparent record-keeping systems in co-operatives and, therefore, in households, women can no longer hide how they are allocating income and are no longer able to get away with spending as much on food, medicines or school fees.

GUIDELINES ON STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CO-OPERATIVES

Design the logistics of participation in co-operative meetings and activities around women's circumstances and needs

- Share co-operative and market information using communication channels used by women.
- Identify labor-saving technologies to reduce women's time on production and other household responsibilities, and, thereby, giving them time to participate in meetings.
- Encourage co-operative meeting times and venues, and market times and venues to allow for easy access and participation by women.
- Support access to information sources about the co-operative activities that are in close proximity to women and available at times when women can access them.
- Provide for shared child-care while group meetings are being held.

Reduce the cultural barriers to women's participation

- Gradually obtain the buy-in and support of men on women's participation in co-operatives and market activities so that women's empowerment is not seen as a threat.
- Create women-only groups or meetings, if appropriate, to encourage the entry of more women into the market where it is unacceptable for women to intermingle with men that are not family members.
- Encourage membership to be based on output (e.g. liters of milk or baskets of tomatoes) rather than access to factors of production (e.g. legal title to land or registered ownership of animals).
- Encourage official membership of women registered in their own names (not their husbands'), such as women who are household heads.

Build women's skills, confidence and social capital/standing

- Link women with support structures and networks to build their social capital, skills and business confidence.

- Leverage existing women's groups as a means of delivering training and conducting other capacity building activities.

Address lack of ownership and control of productive assets and land by women

- Encourage membership requirements that do not require land ownership, which would often exclude women's participation.

Address lack of access to financial capital because women lack assets for collateral

- Work with lending institutions to design loan products for women, such as the use of non-land assets in lending.

Address women's limited opportunities to network and develop business relationships with buyers or suppliers

- Leverage existing buyer or supplier relationships and build on the trust in these to embed additional services for co-operatives, especially women members.

EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD: MAKE IT HAPPEN! CAMPAIGN IN RWANDA

Using roundtable discussions, the *Global Communities'* EMIRGE program in Rwanda has been promoting and supporting women's involvement in leadership at the co-operative level. Recognizing the importance of gender parity, especially in Rwanda, where the government advocates the issue, the EMIRGE program brought on a gender specialist.

Identified challenges for women's participation in co-operative leadership include:

- **Poverty:** Poor women often lack the self-confidence and respect from others, so they do not run for leadership positions.
- **Cultural constraints:** Certain cultural beliefs keep women from taking on leadership positions, especially in rural areas.
- **Lifestyle conflicts:** Women are responsible for the majority of household activities and the family, so they often are too busy to take on further responsibilities, or feel forced to choose between their family and a leadership role.
- **Stereotyping and leadership styles:** There are often negative connotations associated with women's leadership styles of being too weak and kind and not decisive and aggressive (more masculine traits).
- **Fatigue:** Women face many obstacles in becoming a leader, from discrimination to family demands to lack of opportunities; women often get tired of trying to overcome these obstacles.

The EMIRGE gender specialist first attempted to answer this question of "why do women not participate as leaders in co-operatives." The approach taken was through roundtable discussions with **only female co-operative members**. In these first discussions, women realized their opportunities and became very excited about running for leadership positions. However, they met a lot of resistance from men in the community (including within the co-operative and husbands), being met with verbal abuse to women who were participating in the co-operatives. The women soon saw the need to include men in order to demonstrate their capacity to manage, oversee finance, interact with buyers, etc. and, hence, accept women's capacity to operate in the marketplace. The EMIRGE gender specialist **advocated to invite men to these roundtable discussions** to openly talk about this important topic. **This was a key turning point, as once men and women took part in the conversations together, the whole community began to support women's leadership roles.** Further, men became community mobilizers and began to go to local leaders to explain why women should be involved. Men in mixed gender groups are now sharing that they see women as more patient, good leaders, good managers and good financial managers. Any men not supporting women's roles or being verbally abusive are being fined as part of the group protocol.

It is also worth noting that there was resistance from the project to include both men and women in the discussions together, as the belief existed that women would enjoy being alone to discuss openly without men. However, the gender specialist insisted on bringing the two groups together, which was successful.