



Statement from the ICA Gender Equality Committee

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It is a pleasure to join here in Tehran for this important workshop on “Enhancing the Role of Women in Co-operative Business”. At the outset may I thank the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and particularly Ms Savitri Singh for her continued good work to address ICA’s mission of promoting gender equality in all activities of the co-operative movement. May I also thank the Central Union of Rural Agricultural Co-operatives of Iran (CURACI) for their commitment to improving gender equality by making this workshop possible and for the excellent arrangements they have made.

I would also like to send the best wishes of Ms Stefania Marcone, Chairperson of the ICA Gender Equality Committee, for a successful conference. Ms. Marcone would have liked to join us but due to conflicts in her schedule was not able to participate.

Women are the future of business.

Today, many policy-makers, corporate leaders and others would agree to this statement. Women are more educated than ever before, enterprises are seeking diversity of skills in their workers and they are striving for innovation; new markets are opening – markets that are driven by women’s changing status in society (60% of new car purchases in Japan are influenced by women, 70% of household purchases in Europe, women are considered to be the “real emerging market”); values and ethics are increasingly linked with economic and reputational success. Ensuring that women can participate in enterprises as employees, manager and leaders will enable enterprises to move ahead.

This is not a revelation. There are a number of studies that show that women’s participation in enterprises is good for business overall – but there is one new study that correlates the number of women participating in the leadership of business to better performance – thus making the business case for enhancing women’s participation.

An international study undertaken by McKinsey & Company, a prestigious consulting company was recently released under the title, *Women Matter: Gender Diversity - a corporate performance driver*. What they found was that enterprises with a higher proportion of women perform better. They also note that women participation may indeed be a factor for improving economic performance in particular in future.

McKinsey examined the correlation of better performance with the number of women in high level decision-making positions. Using a tool to measure organisational excellence against 9 criteria – leadership, direction, accountability, coordination and control, innovation, external orientation, capability, motivation, work environment and values - they found that the enterprises that ranked most highly against these 9 criteria also were

those with at least 30% women on management committees or boards. McKinsey cautioned that correlation was not cause, but that taking into consideration the remarks made by management, which echoed their conclusions, that this outcome was “striking”. McKinsey went on to see if there was a correlation between number of women in management and economic performance – and again came to the same conclusion. The more women in decision-making, the better the enterprise performed.

The corporate world is already investing in women and will likely increase those investments. They are promoting women’s education, reviewing their policies to ensure that they are attractive to women as employers, they are creating new products and marketing strategies to target women and thus will require women’s special skills and perceptions.

Is the co-operative movement reaching out to women in the same way ?

Co-operatives: Reaching out to women

The ICA has come to realise that the participation of women in the Co-operative Movement is imperative if the co-operatives are to respond to the present and future needs of society. Many believe that progress will come slowly as mind-sets change and some genuinely believe that gender equality may no longer require any further promotion. However, when we go back into ICA's history, we find that 'the place of women in the Co-operative Movement' has been an issue that has been addressed and discussed throughout the history of the ICA starting at the first Co-operative Congress in 1895 – 115 years ago – and as I will explain shortly, we still have some way to go.

Emmy Freundlich an influential ICA member said, "In all countries where there are co-operative organisations, it is invariably stated that the women must be won over to the co-operative idea if the movement is to attain its object. Yet very little has been done in most countries to win the women to co-operative cause..." Her statement dates from 1921. The 11th International Congress in 1924 called on member organisations to make "the election of women to the management boards of co-operative Societies obligatory...". A resolution on Gender Equality in Co-operatives was passed in 1995 followed by the revision in 1997 of the *ICA Rules and Standing Orders* from a gender perspective to allow more women to participate in decision-making. And, in 2000, the ICA Board adopted the ICA Gender Strategy, with the regions also adopting various declarations –including the Tagatay Declaration in this region.

The co-operative movement like international organisations and governments have committed to enhancing women’s participation. ICA has been tackling the issue since 1921 and to be fair there has been progress, just not enough to make women’s participation in co-operatives a reality for all women.

There have been advances at the ICA organisational level. ICA members have voted women to the global board – and we have our first woman president, but we have only 22% women’s representation on the global board. Women are participating in nearly all the regional boards. Women are representing their organisations and being given the responsibility to vote on behalf of their membership at ICA General and Regional

Assemblies – but we have not yet reached our 30% target of women who have the right to vote at these events. If the McKinsey study is any indication, we are not capitalising on the potential for a more effective organisation by not electing more women to decision-making positions.

At the member level, the ICA Gender Equality Committee surveyed ICA members in 2009 to ascertain the impact of the ICA Gender Strategy – 10 year review - asking them to provide information on the number of women members and employed. It asked to provide information on women in decision-making and share best practices and challenges as well as indicate the financial commitment that was made to promoting gender equality within their organisations. It came as no surprise that few organisations replied – although I must congratulate the Asia-Pacific region as the largest number of replies were received from the region. Thank you for replying.

Despite the low response rate, I think we do have some sense of progress. Indeed all members who replied indicated that there had been progress in gender equality in their movements! This is itself is excellent news. It means that our collective efforts to raise awareness and promote action have had an impact and there is visible change.

Respondee to the survey also reported a high proportion of women employees – many in excess of 50% - indicating that co-operatives may have a special role in addressing women's workplace issues such as the double-burden of family and employment (flexible working hours, child and elderly care services and career flexibility), capacity-building for women managers (mentoring, network building, etc), and promotion and salary practices.

Sex disaggregate membership numbers continue to be difficult to collect – and some organisations that report few women members raise the question of whether women are eligible to be members or whether family households or heads of households are only eligible for membership – this is a case we sometimes see around the world with respect for example for farmers co-operatives.

'Women in decision-making' is also a delicate issue and one where progress has been mixed. It is also an issue that stands to be informed and progressed by research undertaken by our corporate competitors.

So there is progress, but we are faced with a number of challenges.

Women's interest in enhancing their participation in co-operatives

If we know how co-operatives can benefit from women's participation, what is the benefit to women? This is perhaps an area that we take for granted.

We know that the co-operative model of enterprise is attractive to women. Women only co-operatives model offer flexibility and democratic and non-hierarchical structures which are able to take into account their specific needs. Women only and mixed co-operatives also respond to both women's practical and strategic needs by providing access to income-generating activities and provide essential services which contribute to the

advancement of women such as health-care, child-care, consumer goods, financial services, housing, etc. By virtue of this double capacity, women can have access to common production resources (such as credit, land, marketing facilities, infrastructure, tools, technology, etc), which increase their income as well as lighten the double burden.

However, given that co-operatives are a reflection of their members and the society which they operate, they often reflect the predominant societal and cultural biases as well as legal systems. Thus, women are still struggling to achieve gender equality and so the challenges that we face at this workshop - how to enhance women's participation in co-operatives.

Issues for consideration

Nearly every study that addresses the impact of women's participation in the economy and in business concludes that gender equality makes good business sense and so promoting women's participation is the right thing to do at all levels – from a human rights perspective to an entrepreneurial success point of view as well as from a development perspective. And yet globally women are not yet able to access equal opportunities. They are not yet significant in decision-making positions, although we are seeing more women leaders in national politics; they are still discriminated against in policy and legislation and in practices; they are subject to violence and are the most vulnerable in times of economic stress.

This is the conclusion of the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. Many will remember how involved women and women co-operators were to inform and influence the action plan. It declared our shared determination to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity. It also recognised the persistent inequalities between men and women the repercussions they have on societies. It concluded with commitments to addressing constraints and obstacles and recognised the urgency of action. The United Nations assessed the impact of the Platform and although much progress has been made, considerable obstacles remain – women's rights including the right to own land, to access credit, and a wide range of socio-and economic activities – the right to equal opportunities in the workplace and in decision-making – to name just a few.

Like the ICA, world leaders have made political commitments but we know that only if that commitment is echoed at the national level and at the co-operative level, will progress be made. Many agree that for gender equality to become a reality, we will need what some refer to as 'cultural revolution'. Changing mind-sets are more difficult than changing policies – not to say that policy reform is not a very difficult, long and complex process – but changing perceptions and having people accept change is our biggest challenge.

So how do we proceed?

I can only suggest areas for your consideration on what needs to be done. I hope to learn from you about successful practices and together we may be able to put together a road map of joint activities in the future. However, here are some proposals:

- We will need to continue to raise awareness of co-operative leadership on gender equality and the benefits of women's participation. We need good practice from within the movement as much as studies on corporate practices from our competitors.
- Leadership for the highest levels must make the commitment to promote enhanced participation of women – president or chief executive – if change is to be accelerated.
- We need to strive to meet and surpass the target of 30% of women on co-operative boards – at the ICA level, at the co-operative level
- We need to ensure capacity building for women to make sure that they have the skills to be effective within their co-operatives as leaders, managers and employees.
- We will need to continue to build women co-operator networks within national movements and share experience at the regional and global levels – identify good practice
- We should also not forget that we will increasingly need to understand under what conditions women will want to participate more fully in co-operatives – workplace issues (flexibility, services and facilities), organisational culture issues (male dominated models of anytime/anywhere on call), gender equality issues (equal pay, equal responsibility), self-esteem issues (communicating achievements, skills, talents), level of ambition etc.
- By the same token we will need to understand why women may choose not to participate – opt out – of co-operative participation at the highest levels. .

The 15 year-old Beijing Platform for Action, the 10 year-old Strategy for Gender Equality, the Tagatay Declaration – all remain as guidelines for enhancing women's role in co-operative business.

We all know that men and women have different values, perspectives and ways of working. Women's needs, interests and priorities reflect their broad economic, biological, and social roles. They bring a diversity of experiences, knowledge and values and so they can benefit co-operatives by bringing a different approach to strategies, policies and ways in which business is conducted. On the other hand under representation of women constitutes a loss for co-operatives and does not allow the interests and needs of members and their families to be catered for in full.

Together let us make the co-operative movement stronger with women's full participation thereby empowering women and promoting social-economic development in our communities.

REMINDER – CELEBRATE THE DAY

3 July 2010 – International Day of Co-operatives, “Co-operatives Empower Women”

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