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.