



# Transforming our world: A cooperative 2030

*Cooperative contributions to SDG 5*

*This brief is part of the **Transforming our world: A cooperative 2030 series** produced by the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC). Through a series of 17 briefs, one for each Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), COPAC hopes to raise awareness about the significant contributions of cooperative enterprises towards achieving the 2030 Agenda in a sustainable, inclusive and responsible way, and encourage continued support for their efforts.*

*This brief in the series focuses on SDG 5 – achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.*

## About the Sustainable Development Goals

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were adopted by world leaders in September 2015 during a historic summit at the United Nations. The SDGs set out a vision for countries to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

For more information, visit [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment).

## About cooperatives

Cooperatives are defined as ‘autonomous associations of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise’.<sup>1</sup>

All cooperatives subscribe to a set of values and principles that support the social and people-focused nature of their activities. They are operated democratically by their members. Whether customers of the business, workers or residents, members have an equal say and a share of the profits.

Cooperatives are a powerful economic and social force, present in most countries of the world and in most sectors of the economy. The cooperative movement counts more than a billion members.

<sup>1</sup> International Co-operative Alliance (1995). *Statement on the Co-operative Identity*. Manchester. Available from <https://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>



**Gender equality** refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality means that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.

**Women's economic empowerment** refers both to the ability to succeed and advance economically and to the power to make and act on economic decisions. Empowering women economically is a right that is essential for both realizing gender equality and achieving broader development goals.

*Source: UN Women Gender Equality Glossary*

## The cooperative difference

Gender equality and women's empowerment stand alone as a goal, but are also integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development. Women engage exponentially more in unpaid domestic work and care than men and are vastly underrepresented in leadership positions. In a review of 67 countries with data from 2009 to 2015, less than a third of senior- and middle-management positions were held by women.<sup>2</sup>

The cooperative model is well-suited to advancing women's economic participation in three key ways: increasing access to employment and work, enabling economic democracy and agency and boosting leadership and management experience.

Cooperatives are spaces where women can create their own work opportunities and overcome economic exclusion. For example, women who earn their living in the informal economy, such as home-based workers, domestic workers and waste pickers, often choose to come together through the cooperative model to improve their livelihoods, enhance their access to goods, markets and services (like insurance) and engage in advocacy efforts through their collective voice. In this way, cooperatives have provided a number of pathways for women in the informal economy to transition to the formal economy by stabilizing their incomes and improving their working conditions.

With open membership as a founding principle and equity and solidarity as core values, cooperatives are inclusive enterprises open to anyone willing and able to become a member and share in the management and profits of the business. Women can overcome the challenges they face as individuals through the cooperative benefits of economies of scale and negotiation power. Through democratic governance, they also serve as spaces where women can engage in decision making and power sharing.

Cooperatives promote education and training of their members as a key tool for the success of their businesses. Women who work or participate in cooperatives can benefit from opportunities for professional development, skill training and leadership building. Cooperatives in a number of sectors have women well-represented not only in their membership but also in their leadership positions. According to a recent study, nine of the biggest 100 cooperative and mutual insurers in the world have women CEOs, compared to only one of the top 100 stock company insurers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> E/2017/66, Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals; Report of the Secretary-General (11 May 2017). Available from <http://undocs.org/E/2017/66>

<sup>3</sup> ICMIF, "Cooperative and mutual insurance sector has significantly higher numbers of women CEOs than stock companies" (8 March 2016). Available from <https://www.icmif.org/cooperative-and-mutual-insurance-sector-has-significantly-higher-numbers-women-ceos-stock-companies>

**Want to see more examples of how cooperatives empower women?**  
Visit the Coops for 2030 campaign at [www.coopsfor2030.coop](http://www.coopsfor2030.coop) and the International Labour Organization page on cooperatives and gender equality at <http://s.coop/268gc>

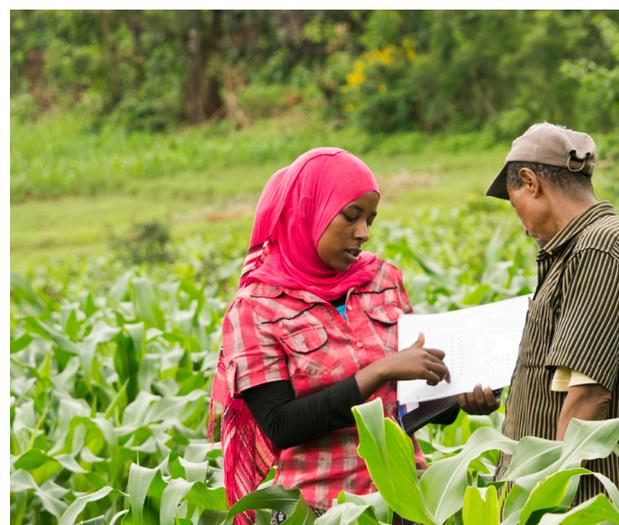
### From the field: How cooperatives promote gender equality and empower women

**By their very nature, cooperatives are clearly agents for gender equality and women's empowerment. But how does this translate into real change for women around the world? Here are a few examples of cooperatives in action.**

Founded in 2008 by 17 immigrant women in Brooklyn, New York, Beyond Care Childcare Cooperative is a worker-owned cooperative that provides full-time and part-time childcare, nanny share for multiple families, on-call and emergency childcare and group childcare for organizations. The cooperative offers quality jobs that pay a living wage and a healthy working environment for employees. As of 2016, 38 cooperative members had completed specialized training courses, including business development and nanny training.<sup>4</sup>

Consorzio Copernico<sup>5</sup> is a consortium of six social cooperatives established in 1997 in the Piemonte region of Italy. The cooperatives either produce educational and social welfare services for children, adolescents, families, immigrants and asylum seekers or provide job opportunities to people with challenges for securing work, such as people with learning difficulties or disabilities, people who have addictions, offenders who are given the chance to work outside prison, or long-term unemployed people. The six cooperatives employ more than 200 people, 76 per cent of whom are women, where 18 per cent face some type of disadvantage. Currently all of the Board members are women.

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)<sup>6</sup> is a national union of 1.5 million informal women workers in 14 states of India founded in 1972. SEWA operates through unions and cooperatives democratically run by women members. Starting with a financial services cooperative and a garment production cooperative, SEWA today promotes 115 cooperatives across India. The SEWA Cooperative Federation has as members cooperatives in the artisanal, dairy, agriculture, financial, service and vendor sectors. The Federation helps women organize and register their own cooperatives, supports new cooperatives, builds women's capacities to run their businesses, advocates at the political level for cooperative support and offers mentoring, marketing and networking opportunities.



<sup>4</sup> Matthew Lenore, Providing Care through Cooperatives 2: Literature Review and Case Studies (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2017). Available from [http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/publications/WCMS\\_546178/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/publications/WCMS_546178/lang-en/index.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [www.consorziocopernico.it](http://www.consorziocopernico.it)

<sup>6</sup> [www.sewa.org](http://www.sewa.org)

In northeast Brazil, the Interstate Movement of Babassu Coconut Breakers (MIQCB) organizes 300,000 women devoted to family farming and the extractive activity of Babassu palms. Through their cooperatives and associations, the women have added value to Babassu nuts, producing Babassu oil, flour and soap, distributed into the domestic and international market. Their creation has had a great role in empowering women and enhancing their participation in economic and social spheres, improving equality in the cooperators' households. As a result of their collective action, a law was passed in sixteen municipalities that declares free access to Babassu palms, thus ending decades-long conflicts between family farmers and landowners.<sup>7</sup>

In Mexico, twelve women founded in 2002 the cooperative Mujeres Experimentando in the Alvarado lagoon and are now acknowledged as pioneers of an organizational model that has been expanding throughout Mexican coastal areas. Through these cooperatives, women run artisanal fisheries, engage in sustainable aquaculture projects to diversify their income and operate shops where they sell their produce. As a result they have managed to improve their wellbeing, their self-esteem and autonomy and have created spaces for female participation in a sector where they have been traditionally excluded.<sup>8</sup>

In 1985, seven mothers in Tehran, Iran founded the kindergarten Rah-e Roshd,<sup>9</sup> hoping to provide a better education for their children despite the ongoing war with Iraq. The small school blossomed from its beginnings in a family house to five schools across Tehran, and now serves children aged 3-18. More than 2,000 children have been educated in these cooperative schools, with women managing everything from curriculum to operations. In 2015, Rah-e Roshd was voted the best cooperative in Iran for generating jobs.

Kilimanjaro Cooperative Bank Limited (KCBL) in Tanzania is owned by cooperatives, most of whom engage in coffee farming. A top cash crop, coffee production is a male dominated industry, due to practices that restrict women land ownership and inheritance, though women do most of the farm work without payment or membership benefits from the cooperative. To empower women, the International Labour Organization's CoopAfrica office, KCBL and Kenya Natural Foods Cooperative (KNFC) partnered to provide soft loans and training to select women's cooperative groups to help them diversify into crops not dominated by men. At the end of the project, 268 women were growing non-traditional produce such as mushrooms, dried fruit and rosella flowers, benefiting from reduced prices for inputs bought collectively and from new market linkages with the tourism sector.<sup>10</sup>

7 Francesco Burchi and Sara Vicari, "To Be or Not to Be a Member of a Primary Co-operative in Brazil: Any Difference in Household Decision-Making and Gender Equality?", *Oxford Development Studies*, 42:3 (2014), p. 343-364.

Iran Viegá, Noemi Porro and Dalva Mota, "Movimento social contemporâneo e processos de territorialização por comunidades tradicionais: a construção da identidade política do Movimento das Quebradeiras de Coco Babaçu", *Estudos de Sociologia*, v. 17 (2011), p. 42-65.

8 FAO, *Atlas de las mujeres rurales de América Latina y el Caribe: 'Al tiempo de la vida y los hechos'* (Santiago de Chile, 2017). Available from <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7916s.pdf>

9 <http://raheroshd.org/rr/index.php/en/>

10 Eva Majurin, *How women fare in East African cooperatives: the case of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, International Labour Office, 2012). Available at [http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/ent/coop/africa/download/woman\\_eastafrica.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/ent/coop/africa/download/woman_eastafrica.pdf)





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## About COPAC

COPAC is a multi-stakeholder partnership of global public and private institutions that promotes and advances people-centered, self-sustaining cooperative enterprises, guided by the principles of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental – in all aspects of its work. The Committee's current members are the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Co-operative Alliance and the World Farmers' Organisation.

For more information, please visit  
[www.copac.coop](http://www.copac.coop).