

The Critical Role of Women in U.S. Cooperative History and Lessons for Today's Work

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Women have always been an integral part of cooperative history --whether benign silent and supportive in the background, or loud and boisterous organizing in the foreground. Many times it is being the loyal backbone of many cooperative organizations. Women's roles in cooperatives have been critical, and today it is even more critical that women recognize their different perspectives, power and influence and use them to educate members, bring fresh perspectives, organize prospective members, create vision and otherwise sustain cooperatives as a way to eliminate poverty and provide income and to create and provide the many services that communities need to truly sustain themselves.

Introduction

- A. Around 50.8% of the estimated 318 million people in the U.S. are women. We can guess that at least half of the people in co-ops are at least proportionate to the population, but I believe it is more.
 1. No one, no organization that I could find – not the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives, the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, Democracy at Work Institute, National Cooperative Business Association, Southern New Hampshire University, Center for Cooperatives & CED, the California Center for Cooperative Development, Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Project, International Co-operative Alliance --has statistics on the number of women in cooperatives. This in itself is significant! Someone looking for a thesis might want to take this research and subsequent conclusions on.
 2. What is the sense of folks in the room? What has been your experience about the ratio of women to men in cooperatives that you have encountered?
 3. Women do much better in cooperatives than traditional businesses.
 - a. According to Genna R. Miller, Economist at Duke University, "women fare better in co-ops than in the mainstream capitalist labor force in terms of occupational attainment, hourly wage rates, and achievement of leadership roles."
 - b. But there is also an understanding that the leadership roles in co-ops are primarily male dominated, and when women are parts of boards and executive committees, they feel isolated and powerless.
 - c. This has been the case historically: Women were a part of the cooperative movement in about equal numbers in the early 1900. But like their business

counterparts, women were low paid workers, unlikely to be in leadership positions, according to author Dana Frank.

- d. Mao Zedong, the late chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, said that Women hold up half the sky, but when it comes to getting paid for their work, exploiting women's labor hold up the exploitative economy. According to the National Women's Law Center, two-thirds of the people earning minimum wages are women, especially women of color.

II. The History of Women in Cooperatives in the U.S.

- A. Women in The Knights of Labor and women's cooperatives
- B. Women of Color were staunch supporters and organizers of the cooperative movement in the early part of the century
 1. Ladies Auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.
 2. Halena Wilson
 3. Ella Jo Baker
 4. Amy Jacques Garvey
 5. Fannie Lou Hamer
- C. Freedom Quilting Bee as a economic force against political repression
- D. Black and Latino Women Organize to Meet Their Needs.
 1. Cooperative Home Care, from welfare mothers to home care providers.
 2. Childspace in Philadelphia
 3. Ujamaa Collective in Pittsburgh
 4. Black Women have special needs and situations: Where are the Black women cooperatives?
- E. Immigrant co-ops flourishing as a means of economic survival
 1. WAGES in the Bay Area broke ground.
 2. Sunset Cooperatives
 3. Other spinoffs
- F. White women in cooperatives
 1. Helping to form worker cooperatives
 2. Credit Unions'
 3. Ag cooperatives
 4. Student Housing Cooperatives?

III. Women in Cooperatives Internationally Have Much to Teach Us – The Need and Demand

- A. The Japanese Seikatsu Club Movement took control of food safety.
 1. As of June 2007, the Seikatsu Club is a union of 30 local co-operatives with a total membership of over 290,000; 99.9% of whom are women.
 2. Palestinian cooperatives organizing against all odds.
 3. Women in Turkey and Arab country
 4. What Can we Learn

IV. In the U.S. we have a special role to play

- A. The economy is forcing cooperative organizing as well as other alternative economics
- B. We have technological, skills and money to be able to organize
 - a. We also have racism, sexism, heterosexism and classism in our movement
- C. Women are more collaborative and take care of everyone
 1. Inclusion and diversity committees in co-ops

- a. Rainbow Grocery
- V. Confronting the “ism” and empowering women
 - A. Self surveys – What do you need to deal with internally? What belief system fuels your fire?
 - B. Actively seek to take on leadership roles.
 - 1. Be aware of language; stop speaking like we’re powerless and victims
 - 2. Self Education and Study Groups
 - C. Actively take on sexism in the movement.
 - 1. Form inclusion/diversity committees in your co-ops and other organizations.
 - a. Ground yourselves in the communities in which your cooperatives are rooted.
 - b. Have education as part of your committee work.
 - (1)Have presentations on all the “isms” in creative ways.
 - 1. Co-op marketing should look into doing education and marketing in your neighborhood and among all groups
 - 2. Share tactics and strategy and learn from other women and supportive men in other cooperatives
 - 3. Be a part of anti-racist organizing
 - D. Developing manufacturing cooperatives
 - 1. Dire need to make money!
 - E. Its time: We have had centuries of male domination, and look what we have allowed to exist!
 - F. Without the work of women the cooperative movement would remain small, unimaginative and stunted.
 - 1. Women’s collaborative skills, intelligence, creativity and nurturance is desperately needed to make the leap to a full cooperative society. Without it, we are doomed to blindly and sadly go the way of capitalism – on a narrative destruction path.
 - G. Have discussion on ways to do this and some of the problems that people are facing.
 - 1. Start a listserv or some other mechanism.
 - 2. A volunteer to get it going and maintain communication?

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