



International Co-operative Alliance

Message for International Women's Day (8 March 2001)

Implementation of gender equality:

The challenge for the Co-operative Movement in the 21st century

On 8 March, we will celebrate the first International Women's Day of the 21st century and the beginning of an era where gender equality will become reality. Co-operators worldwide know that the intertwining forces of gender inequality and conflict threaten peace and security worldwide and that advancement of women is essential if we are to find effective solutions to today's global problems. Yet, women and children still continue to be disproportionately affected by violent conflict; they are victims of discrimination, intolerance, injustice and unfairness in both the industrialized and developing countries of the world. The international Co-operative Movement is committed to work towards change.

On the occasion of this International Women's Day, the international Co-operative Movement wishes to pay a special tribute to the thousands of women-co-operators worldwide who are engaged and committed to defending and promoting the co-operative principles and values. Through their action they contribute to establishing a society which puts people in the forefront, promotes solidarity as well as fair and efficient markets. ICA wishes to acknowledge in particular those women who have chosen the co-operative form of enterprise as a way of fighting against poverty, exclusion, segregation which in various forms and degrees continue to afflict a large portion of the world's women.

It is notable that women find that co-operative societies respond well to their needs. They know that the co-operative is a modern and vibrant enterprise; it is an enterprise which creates and maintains employment. Flexible in its organization, the co-operative enterprise is capable of seizing opportunities while skillfully adapting itself to economic and social change. It is both a grass-roots organization and a networked organization which enables it to benefit from economies of scale and be economically active at national and international levels. And, the co-operative builds people's confidence and strengthens democracy.

Today as we look back over the last decade, we recognize the progress made in addressing gender issues. We know that women's abilities and capabilities represent a fundamental resource that we cannot afford to ignore. Governments and individual organizations must provide conditions under which women can contribute effectively to producing this much needed global change and allowing us to seize opportunities and build an equitable, fair and peaceful society.

The ICA and the world co-operative movement have made their own contribution to promote the advancement of women in society and in the economy. ICA and its member organizations are fully aware that the new role that women play has significantly contributed to the positive economic and social development over the last years. However, ICA too recognizes that much remains to be done.

ICA has reaffirmed its strong commitment to gender equality through the recently adoption of a Gender Strategy. The strategy sets out specific steps which the Co-operative Movement can take to increase the pace of change. It includes putting gender-equality dimensions into all policies and programme planning and implementation and calls on its members to review their policies in order to remove the obstacles and invisible barriers that continue to hinder the full implementation of a basic co-operative value: equality between women and men.

Let us strive to make the 21st century a time for the fulfilment of women's rights and aspirations. Let the 21st century mark the realization of true gender equality in co-operatives worldwide.

This is a global challenge that we, co-operators, cannot afford to lose. We owe it to the present and future generations. Let us make the celebration of International Women Day a continuing celebration and not simply a moment in time!

Roberto Rodrigues, ICA President
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