



INTERNATIONAL
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“Equal rights, equal opportunities: Progress for all”

This year the United Nations focuses attention on the fact that the respect of women's rights and the guarantee of opportunities leads to significant advances in social and economic development. Under the theme, “Equal rights, equal opportunities: Progress for all”, International Women's Day underlines the need for governments, civil society, women's organisations, the private sector, the media, the entire UN system, and individual women and men to join forces in making important changes to policies, programmes, attitudes and behaviours to ensure that women fully participate in economic and social life.

Nearly every study that addresses the impact of women's participation in the economy concludes that gender equality is not only the right thing to do, it also makes good business sense. There are business studies showing that the higher percentage of women in decision-making positions, the more successful and efficient enterprises are. In times of economic stress, there is no business argument that can counter the value-added of investing in women. Similarly development studies over and over show that investing in women has a high return improving livelihoods, improving access to education for children and health for all, and reducing poverty in general terms, thus making an impact on overall national economic and social development.

In the co-operative movement, there are similar indications that women's participation leads to successful enterprises that fully serve the needs of all members and their families. Women are participating in co-operatives sometimes making up a very significant proportion of the membership and workforce as a recent ICA Gender Equality Committee survey is showing.

The evidence abounds for why it is in the interest of all to make women's rights and opportunities a priority and yet progress at all levels continues to be slow.

Despite this, ICA and its Gender Equality Committee wish to underline the important contribution made by the worldwide co-operative movement in creating a culture of mutual respect and its commitment to democracy and participation. All over the world, co-operatives contribute to the challenge of gender equality by implementing at various levels gender equality policies and programmes, providing co-operators with awareness-raising, training and education, and decent work. Furthermore, co-operatives are promoting this model of business to women entrepreneurs who often find that this form of enterprise allows them the flexibility and alternative management structures that they seek – an efficient business model that takes into account their specific needs and that promote their socio-economic empowerment.

More action is nonetheless required.

Co-operatives must intensify their efforts in improving gender equality in particular at this time of economic instability. Co-operative resilience can only be reinforced when programmes to ensure equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men are implemented, particularly at senior levels in our movement.

On the one side, there is continued need to review national and co-operative policies and co-operative statutes and bye-laws to ensure that these do not constrain women's access to equal opportunities including the right to own land and other property. Innovative strategies are needed to promote changes in organisational culture, rules of procedure and working methods as well as address constraints related to lack of time (work-family balance), and lack of personal security.

There is also the need for attitude changes. Too often obstacles in the form of negative stereotypes about women's leadership potential continue to limit change and progress. Specific measures to encourage and support women's participation and enable them to seek and gain senior leadership positions should be enhanced, including management and leadership training, formalised mentorship programmes and sustainable financial support.

On the 8th March 2010, International Women's Day, we call on ICA member organisations and co-operators, to review and reinforce their commitments, policies and programmes to make gender equality a reality.

Let us be leaders in assuring progress for all by taking important steps to booster women's rights and access to participation and leadership in co-operative enterprise.

Let us begin by asking all our members to ensure that from this year onwards that their representative delegations are truly gender-balanced.

Dame Pauline Green
President
International Co-operative Alliance (ICA)

Stefania Marcone
Chair
ICA Gender Equality Committee

The International Co-operative Alliance is an independent, non-government association which unities, represents and serves co-operatives worldwide. The ICA was founded in London in 1895. Its members are national and international co-operative organisations in all sectors of activity including, agricultural, banking, fisheries, housing, tourism, and consumer co-operatives. ICA has more than 237 member organisations from 89 countries, representing more than 800 million individuals worldwide.