

Expanded abstract

Women in Social and Solidarity Economy: socioeconomic alternatives for all?

Objectives

Coinciding with the outbreak of the economic crisis that began in 2008, in Catalonia there has been a continued growth of socio-economic initiatives within the framework of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), a sector characterised by significant female participation. In a context of high economic and vital vulnerability women have generated, amongst other, responses aimed at satisfying individual and collective needs through cooperative management. Within the 'Crisis and female alternatives' research project we have analysed such socio-economic alternatives led by women in Catalonia from the Feminist Economics (FE) conceptual framework, in order to understand to what extent they may be reproducing social inequalities. As a contribution to the dialogue between SSE and FE, we have addressed this concern by reflecting on the degree of democratisation of the SSE sector in Catalonia in terms of its inclusiveness, i.e. the existing options to access it. Our main research question is what does it mean to democratize the economy from the feminist perspective? In this article we address the hypothetical absence of inequalities reproduction in two ways: in terms of the participation of the socio-economically disadvantaged sectors, as well as in terms of the overcoming of the hierarchy between the productive and reproductive dimensions of the economy.

Methods

In order to identify the axes of inequality that constrain the real possibilities for the participation of women in SSE, we have interviewed and analysed the profile of 17 women in four areas of SEE activity: care and attention to people (7 initiatives), agroecology (4), housing (3), and construction of community networks (3). The SSE experiences analysed are located either in the Barcelona metropolitan region or in Central Catalonia. The selection of these four areas is motivated by the fact that they develop an economic activity that unifies production and reproduction in the resolution of diverse needs. The simultaneous approach to both spheres of socio-economic experiences is a premise of the Feminist Economics conceptual and analytical framework. The first group includes initiatives for the care of the elderly, people in a situation of functional dependence and young children. The second group includes initiatives for the consumption, processing and/or distribution of agroecological food. The third group includes two housing cooperatives (one under construction and the other in the project development phase at the time of the fieldwork). Finally, the fourth group includes initiatives that seek to promote and build interpersonal and/or community links. The selection of the initiatives was

made after a preliminary mapping in each territory of SSE experiences in the four sectors of interest and ease of access to informants.

In terms of format, the initiatives include 6 associations, 7 cooperatives, 1 self-managed parenting group, 1 family farming enterprise, 1 trade union and 1 platform. All but one are small-format initiatives, in line with the majority profile of SSE initiatives in Catalonia, which are small and cooperative in format.

This sample was complemented by 5 interviews with informants from three key sectors for the development of the SSE in Catalonia: public administration (socio-economic innovation), Cooperative Athenaeums and ethical finance. All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees and subsequently anonymised and coded for in-depth qualitative analysis using Atlas.ti.

Results

The results presented in this article suggest that the SSE, as it is currently organized, presents limitations or difficulties in reversing some of the inequalities on which the capitalist market economy is built, both productive and reproductive. In particular, the analysis of the interviews with women participating in cooperative projects suggests that in the generation of socioeconomic alternatives within the SSE, inequalities of access are reproduced along five axes: socio-economic level, educational level, place of origin, family responsibilities, and political-relational capital. This result is also supported by the key informants interviewed.

In the area of productive or paid work, socioeconomic level, together with educational level and relational capital, are determinants for access to these alternatives. The participation in the SSE of the women interviewed is not explained so much by the urgency of responding to basic needs as by the capacity for collective action and the presence of other resources such as capital, education and relationships. Women with more precarious socioeconomic profiles do not have a significant presence in cooperative initiatives. Thus, what drives most of these initiatives is more the ideological commitment to a certain way of generating employment and economic activity than a need for self-employment per se. Origin articulates a fourth axis of inequality, since women of non-EU origin are practically absent from the SSE. Likewise, the (few) women of non-EU origin who work in cooperative projects develop activities linked to reproductive and care work, socio-labour insertion or specific work with the migrant population, all sectors characterized by their low social value and high labour precariousness. In the area of the unpaid or reproductive economy, we analysed the ability to reconcile a paid activity with family care responsibilities, following the contributions of the FE, which takes into consideration all the work necessary for subsistence, well-being and social reproduction. Thus, although the need to reconcile work with family life and caregiving responsibilities seems to be an important reason for many women to join the SSE, this expectation is often frustrated and only materializes in certain situations or family situations. As a generator of inequalities in access, the options available for managing family responsibilities also have an impact on the possibilities for women to become involved in the SSE, as well as on the conditions under which they do so. If these first two dimensions show important weaknesses when it comes to

facilitating economic alternatives in the SSE field, the last factor analysed, relational capital, appears as a key factor in explaining participation in this field, combined with an important ideological motivation and the presence of resources for collective action.

Conclusions, original value and limitations

This article contributes to fill the lack of empirical studies that analyse in detail the SSE sector. As an added value, the originality of this contribution lies in the fact that it is framed in the dialogue between SSE and Feminist Economics. These are two critical economy sectors on the rise that, although sharing the proposal of alternative socioeconomic models that place people's lives and needs at the centre of economic activity, they diverge in the scope of their transformative potential. We have sought to deepen the democratizing project of the economy claimed by the SSE from the FE framework. Assuming non-reproduction of inequalities as the objective of any socioeconomic project that is considered transformative, we have problematized the feminization of SSE to detect inequalities of access and identify which women are most favoured for participation in this type of alternative economic initiatives.

Our results suggest that the SSE, as it is currently organized, presents limitations or difficulties in reversing some of the inequalities on which the capitalist market economy is built, both productive and reproductive, showing weaknesses when it comes to facilitating economic alternatives for women. Consequently, we can affirm that the transformative potential of the SSE as a democratizing alternative for the economy is called into question if we analyse its degree of inclusiveness, since there is a risk of generating a model that is only accessible to certain socioeconomic profiles. Addressing this risk is a major challenge for the sector. In this regard, our results suggest the relevance and need to deepen the analysis of socioeconomic processes from currently non-hegemonic perspectives. Among them, the FE perspective allows us to problematize these processes, explicitly incorporating their reproductive dimension. This critical view is particularly necessary in areas that are intended to be transformative, such as the SSE.

Among other issues, as future lines of work to address the challenge of feminist democratization of the SSE, we identified the need to explore the degree of recognition of reproductive work in cooperative initiatives beyond the discursive, i.e., if and how this recognition is operationalized. Likewise, it is necessary to continue exploring the tension between vital (personal) time and commercial (collective) time involved in the work overload that women in the SSE report. Addressing the precariousness of women's work and life in the SSE sector involves identifying, among other things, innovative formulas for care co-responsibility and time use that are not currently being generated. The FE also allows us to highlight non-monetarized socioeconomic practices. In this sense, a closer look at the processes of mutual support and empowerment often linked to women's participation in SSE is particularly interesting. Continuing to advance in the analysis of the convergences and divergences between SSE and FE would finally allow us to analyse whether and how the SSE is responding to women's productive and reproductive economic needs.

Indeed, this last key issue is related to the limitations we can bring up related to our study, as this approach to both productive and reproductive dimensions of the economy is a challenge both conceptually, when combining conventional and non-conventional indicators and empirically, when analysing socioeconomic initiatives. Addressing this challenge is, at the same time, a main contribution of the research here presented.

Keywords: Women, Social and Solidarity Economy, Feminist Economics, Access inequalities.