

Expanded abstract

Is the glass ceiling more fragile in the Social Economy? A Spanish cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises analysis

Objectives

The term “glass ceiling,” which refers to the invisible barriers that prevent women from ascending to the highest levels of the labor hierarchy, persists in the labor market despite the progress achieved in terms of gender equality. In this context, the Social Economy (SE), which is characterized by values of solidarity, equality, and democratic participation, could offer a more inclusive and equitable alternative model to eliminate gender gaps in the labor market.

In this context, one of the persistent challenges in the field of gender-focused studies of the social economy is to assess the sector’s capacity to support women’s empowerment and their access to positions of responsibility and decision-making in the management of their organizations (Baruah, 2023). This paper thus aims to analyze the dynamics of access to management positions in order to ascertain whether the behavior of SE entities constitutes a more favorable ecosystem for the professional development of women in their companies than in the rest of entities. The objective is to calculate the probability of promoting the most senior positions in companies and to ascertain whether, in these SE entities, women have a higher probability of access than in commercial companies. This would indicate that they experience fewer obstacles and that the glass ceiling is more fragile.

Methodology

The database utilized is the Continuous Sample of Working Histories (MCVL in Spanish). This is an organized set of anonymous microdata extracted from administrative records in Spain. It includes information on the characteristics and working life (including personal, job and employer characteristics) of a random sample of all individuals who have had an affiliation in the Social Security during a particular year, 2021 in our case. Using that dataset, we analyze the working life for the period 2013-2021 for 310,450 individuals, of which 9,313 were employed in cooperatives or worker-owned companies, as a representation of entities of SE.

The methodological approach employed is the estimation of a probability model (logit), which quantifies the probability of access to the contribution group with the highest qualification and responsibility. The target variable is a dichotomous qualitative variable constructed from the identification of a labor trajectory that identifies the individual who has experienced an improvement in their professional category from the beginning to the end of the analyzed period, reaching the highest level of the contribution groups (contribution group 1). To iden-

tify the factors influencing access to management positions, variables related to the purpose of the job, the sex of the workers, and the type of company (cooperatives and worker-owned companies vs. capitalist companies) are included. Additionally, a set of personal, work, company, and environmental characteristics are considered, which help to identify the facilitating factors for women to break the glass ceiling.

Findings

The analysis of the labor histories for the period 2013-2021 shows that cooperatives and worker-owned companies exhibited a higher degree of feminization in total employment (54.8% versus 42.9% in commercial companies). This suggests that SE entities may be more inclusive in terms of hiring women. Nevertheless, the proportion of individuals who attained managerial positions was lower in SE entities (11% vs. 29% in trading companies). This discrepancy may be attributed to the smaller size of the trajectories and workers in each type of company in SE entities.

The results of the logit models indicate that female workers in cooperatives and worker-owned companies are more likely to reach the highest-skilled contribution group than their counterparts in the rest of companies. This suggests that in SE entities, women face fewer obstacles to ascend to top management positions, which may indicate a more fragile “glass ceiling” in these organizations. In particular, the employment trajectories of women over the age of 30 in cooperatives and worker-owned companies demonstrate a higher probability of accessing top management positions compared to women in the rest of companies. This evidence suggests that SE is not only more inclusive in terms of hiring, but also in terms of promotion and career advancement for women.

A comparison of different types of companies reveals that cooperatives and worker-owned companies provide a more equitable environment for women’s professional development. However, traditional trading companies, despite having a higher proportion of men in management positions, present greater barriers for women in terms of promotion to senior positions. The size of the company is also a significant factor. Cooperatives and worker-owned companies, which are typically smaller in size than trading companies, offer a more collaborative and accessible environment that can facilitate women’s advancement to leadership positions. However, in larger commercial companies, more rigid hierarchical structures may impede women’s advancement.

Conclusions

The SE, represented by cooperatives and worker-owned companies, offers a more favorable environment for gender equality compared to traditional business enterprises. By prioritizing people over capital and practicing solidarity and democratic governance, they facilitate greater gender equity and a lower “glass ceiling” for women.

This finding is of crucial importance for the design of policies that promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in the workplace. Career paths in SE tend to be more stable, with

less variation in contribution groups, which contributes to a more equitable environment for women's professional development. Stability and equality in the workplace are essential characteristics of cooperatives and worker-owned companies that can serve as a model for other organizations.

The implications of these findings are significant for public policy and business practices. They suggest that SE support policies can have a positive impact on promoting gender equality in the workplace. Furthermore, they indicate that encouraging the creation and growth of worker cooperatives and worker-owned companies could contribute to reducing gender gaps in the workplace. Traditional business enterprises can learn from the inclusive and equitable practices of cooperatives and worker-owned companies to improve their own gender equality policies.