

## Expanded abstract

# Female leadership on boards and corporate response to sustainability initiatives: An exploratory case in agri-food cooperatives

This paper analyses the typology of female leadership in decision-making bodies in Spanish agri-food cooperatives and the influence of female participation on corporate sustainability, measured through its three components ESG (environmental, social and governance).

In order to achieve the research objective, a qualitative case study was carried out with semi-structured in-depth interviews. An analysis was made of female leadership in boards, the female trajectory in the access to the presidency and the management carried out, in order to see what influence this leadership has on the sustainability of Spanish agri-food cooperatives. The criteria used for the selection of the cases were: legal form of cooperative, female presidency of the board and consolidated company.

The results show that women join the board on the basis of their previous experience in the cooperative, responsibility and commitment to the cooperative of which they are members. When it comes to exercising leadership, women rely on the cooperative culture, due to the values it implies, which are recognised by women as their own. On a day-to-day basis, women exercise leadership that can be defined as transformational, based on a more participative, empathetic and creative style of decision-making, greater solidarity and sensitivity towards social problems, great communication skills, generating enthusiasm among members, contributing new ways of thinking and solving problems. Moreover, women rely on their network of contacts to improve the cooperative's situation.

The paper shows that there is a positive relationship between women in leadership positions on the board and the improvement of sustainability in agri-food cooperatives. Specifically, in terms of environmental sustainability, it has been observed that women are inclined to care for the environment and to implement circular economy practices in the cooperative. As far as social sustainability is concerned, women are aware of the importance of their work, they know that cooperatives are economic engines of the areas in which they are established, so they try to cultivate networks of influence with all stakeholders in the area, seeking the greatest benefit for the member, given the importance they have to prevent rural depopulation and fix the population in the region. Finally, when studying sustainability based on the good governance of the cooperative, it was found that women in leadership positions carry out management based on transparency, communication and cooperative values.

In short, the paper shows that women in the head of agri-food cooperatives are vital actors in creating value in rural areas, retaining the population and facilitating collaboration between stakeholders to continue improving the environment. As leaders, they are very concerned

about their training and maintaining their networks, always with the aim of improving their performance in the cooperative and enabling greater gains for the members and the region. This reality can facilitate social and gender-related behavioural learning. Seeing other women in management positions can encourage new generations of women to take on management roles in the enterprise.