

Expanded abstract

Gender Perspective in Social Economy and Cooperativism: Towards a Transformative Research Agenda

Since the creation of the first modern cooperative in 1844 by the Rochdale Pioneers -27 men and 1 woman- and the subsequent founding of the Co-operative Women's Guild in 1883 in England, nearly two centuries have passed. During this period, there has been significant progress in both the advocacy for women's and men's rights and the implementation of transformative actions to ensure gender equality in cooperativism and the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE).

Nevertheless, the recognition of gender equality as a relevant research topic in the study of SSE and cooperativism was slow to take hold. Interest in this issue has grown progressively, in parallel with the evolution of broader societal debates on equality and gender justice. In the 19th century, the dominant discourse still revolved around the supposed inferiority -or not- of women and the feminine, within an intellectual environment marked by sexism and androcentrism. It was not until the mid-20th century that the foundations were laid to understand the sex-gender system and to conceptualize gender inequalities as a social construct rather than a fact determined by nature. This shift in perspective, combined with the contributions of feminist authors over the years, allowed gender equality to gradually permeate scientific literature, as well as the theories and models that shape the social economy and cooperative movements.

As a result, gender equality within the Social Economy has evolved as a subject of academic inquiry over time. The first publications from the late 19th and early 20th centuries documented and examined the demands of cooperative women of that era (McIvor, 2020; Hardstaff & Orsetti, 1930; Enfield, 1929). Later, scientific literature began to offer space to explore significant aspects related to equality between men and women in social economy organizations (e.g., women's participation in labor; the glass ceiling, the feminization/masculinization of sectors). These developments marked a major step forward in aligning the principles of the social economy with those of feminist economics (Cobbald, 1987; Oerton, 1996; Bauhardt, 2014; Arando et al., 2024).

More recent studies -such as those by Caroline Shenaz Hossein (2024)- broaden this approach by integrating the dimensions of gender, race, and class. They aim to highlight how racialized women face multiple, intersecting forms of oppression, while also developing innovative economic and cooperative strategies that enable them to resist and thrive in adverse contexts.

Objective

The main objective of the article is to offer a historical, critical, and analytical perspective on the evolution of research related to cooperativism and the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) from a gender perspective. It covers a broad period -from the 19th century to the present- examining both theoretical advances and empirical evidence that has emerged in this field. The article also aims to identify the main challenges and emerging lines of research in order to outline a transformative agenda focused on gender equality. It analyzes how SSE entities have served as spaces with transformative potential, while also reproducing structural gender inequalities similar to those found in the conventional capitalist model.

Methodology

The research is based on a critical and structured review of academic, historical, and regulatory literature related to gender and the SSE. This review includes analyses of publications from the 19th century to recent 21st-century studies, both at a global level and in specific contexts. It also examines institutional reports, case studies, and specialized literature to illustrate existing tensions, advancements, and contradictions.

Results

Cooperatives and SSE entities are characterized by their democratic structures and are generally more horizontal than capitalist enterprises. This is because they are based on principles such as voluntary membership and democratic governance, as well as values grounded in equality, equity, and solidarity. Although these principles did not explicitly mention gender equality until recent decades, cooperatives have always offered a more favorable environment for promoting equity and the inclusion of historically underrepresented groups.

Thus, it is not surprising that cooperatives and SSE entities have been pioneers in integrating women into their structures, embracing their socio-economic demands, and aligning with feminist economic principles. The scientific field has long recognized this role. In the late 19th century, women's demands focused on accessing employment within cooperatives and obtaining equal membership rights with men. In the early 20th century, women in cooperatives began organizing internationally, leading to the creation of federations of women's associations. During this phase, economic empowerment remained a core demand. Women involved in the cooperative movement actively worked to disseminate cooperative principles globally and incorporate feminist concerns-especially within consumer cooperatives. Despite these intense advocacy efforts, they were not widely reflected in the scientific publications of the time.

In the second half of the 20th century, the first studies on women's participation in SSE entities emerged. While some research still questioned the full integration of women into cooperatives, most studies emphasized the cooperative model's potential to empower women and promote gender equality in the workplace compared to the dominant business culture. Nevertheless, these early studies revealed that, even when women gained access to employment and membership in cooperatives, gender inequalities remained significant.

In the 21st century, there has been a marked increase in research examining the SSE from a gender perspective. Many of these studies emphasize the role of SSE entities in integrating and empowering women in the labor market. Indeed, these entities often provide more equitable environments compared to other business forms - a recurring trend across different sectors and countries. Seven key thematic areas have been identified: labor conditions, leadership and empowerment, female entrepreneurship, the agricultural sector, cultural and geographical diversity, care economy, and emerging sectors such as energy and digitalization.

However, it is important to acknowledge that SSE entities do not operate in isolation; they are embedded in the global socio-economic context. As such, although they may offer more favorable conditions, they tend to replicate dominant structures of the broader socio-economic system to some extent. In recent decades, research has increasingly acknowledged this reality and highlighted that cooperatives still have room to progress toward achieving effective gender equality - for example, by reducing occupational gender segregation, eliminating persistent glass ceilings, ensuring work-life balance, empowering women, and fostering an organizational culture centered on people and life itself.

One of the main limitations identified is the lack of gender-disaggregated data and other intersectional indicators. Additionally, the effective application of intersectional approaches in empirical research remains limited. The scarcity of longitudinal studies and specific indicators makes it difficult to measure the actual impact of equality measures adopted by organizations. These limitations underscore the need to strengthen data collection and analysis mechanisms, promote active policies addressing structural inequalities, and encourage transformative organizational cultures. Furthermore, a closer alliance between feminist economics and the SSE is proposed to collectively tackle the challenges posed by multiple forms of oppression.

Conclusions

The article concludes that for the SSE to become a genuine tool for social change, gender equality must be integrated as a transversal principle - not merely a secondary or regulatory element. Achieving this requires structural changes in organizational culture, leadership models, and participation mechanisms. It is necessary to move beyond mere parity in representation and work toward transforming values, structures, and practices based on equity, care, and collective well-being.

Additionally, the article suggests that SSE organizations should act as social innovation laboratories, capable of developing practical tools such as gender audits, self-training, and experience systematization that contribute to knowledge generation from practice.

This work provides significant original value by offering a broad and articulated overview of the role of women and gender inequalities in the history and practice of cooperativism and the SSE. Its proposal for a transformative research agenda based on intersectionality and feminist economics offers both theoretical and practical tools valuable for academia and SSE entities alike. Furthermore, it brings to light historical and current experiences of organized women in diverse contexts who have promoted alternative economic practices. The article's decolonial and feminist approach allows for a broader recognition of traditionally excluded knowledge and practices within the canon of social economy.