

EXPANDED ABSTRACT

Do cooperatives have favorable contexts for gender equality?: Special reference to the province of Teruel

Objectives

Cooperative enterprises have different organizational and operational characteristics that could provide favorable conditions for gender equality. In this paper, we describe several aspects of the working conditions and workplace flexibility of women in cooperatives in the province of Teruel, a region that is characterized by its low population density. In addition, we study other aspects involved in the running of these organizations in the context of social economy, and how this could have potential benefits and advantages for the personal and professional development of women and their families. A greater understanding of these organizations will facilitate the development of actions aimed at strengthening business projects that contribute to integrate women's needs and the needs of their surrounding environments.

Design/methodology/approach

A qualitative analysis has been carried out through in-depth interviews, which have provided more detailed and extensive information than other available methodologies. The initial sample consists of 99 cooperatives, representing 31.03% of the total population of cooperative entities in the province of Teruel, Spain. This sample was then filtered by selecting the cooperatives which have a greater percentage of female employees higher than male employees, or have more female than male directors, including those cooperatives which fulfilled both of these conditions. There resulting set of 12 cooperatives with a large number of female employees among its staff or with high female participation in their boards of directors. We subjected to semi-structured interviews, one per cooperative, of their partners and/or employees, using a semi-structured questionnaire.

Results / Research limitations / Implications

The results suggest that self-management allows greater flexibility than other forms of enterprise in areas such as conciliation or working conditions. Likewise, women recognize that their involvement with the entity must be greater, since their future employment depends on the survival of the cooperative. One factor that affects the reconciliation of family, work and personal life is the presence or absence of seasonality in the activities carried out by the cooperative. Internal measures for the seasonal adjustment of demand could contribute to improving the reconciliation and also to reducing inequalities between men and women.

With regard to working conditions, there are opportunities for conciliation and timetable flexibility that rely on the goodwill and the climate of trust existing in the cooperatives. This issue is closely related to the good relations among its members, as evidenced by the opinions of the respondents and the presence of female leadership focused on greater collaboration and teamwork. It is noteworthy that these cordial relations extend even among the companies in the sector. Collaborative attitudes between cooperatives of the same sector of activity are frequent.

Self-management allows the working day to be better and more easily adjusted to the specific needs of female employees as compared to other styles of management. In general, working hours are not cause for concern. Women are aware that if the activity requires a greater time investment, their commitment must be greater, since their future careers depend of the survival of the cooperative

The good relations existing among the different cooperatives in the province are remarkable. The study emphasizes the establishment of mutually supportive relationships with other cooperatives and, in many cases, the use of synergies with the competing companies. This reinforces the expected behaviors for organizations based on inter-cooperation and networking.

Due to the peculiarities of the context in which these cooperatives operate, mainly in rural areas, cooperatives can cover the needs of the partners, boost rural development, to improve trade activities, provide support and advice to access to new foreign markets; improve structures through integration processes and obtain competitive advantages with formulas of inter-cooperation with other groups.

Regarding the support of the public administrations in issues related to paperwork or consultation and advisory services, no conclusive results have been obtained. Relations with public administrations, however, could be improved to take full advantage of the potential of wealth creation in cooperatives and to achieve greater effectiveness of policies of public support for the promotion of female entrepreneurship and social economy entities. The recognition of gender inequalities in the labor and business sphere by the Spanish government, expressed through the Gender Equality Act, should be taken into account when implementing administrative procedures for cooperatives in order to be more sensitive to women's necessities.

Simplification of administrative procedures and a more individualised guidance and advice for female entrepreneurs in the social economy should be included in the agendas of public authorities. These measures become especially sensitive in territories such as Teruel, where the weakness of its business fabric and its relatively high rate of female unemployment are clear components of the economic stagnation of the province.

Some questionnaire answers show that cooperative principles are present in these entities, as is the case in one company where the partners reported being satisfied and happy to contribute to the respect of agriculture and to promote environmental care.

In addition to the financial income associated with participation in the cooperative, other non-economic “intangible” benefits related to personal satisfaction and fulfilment derived from such participation should be highlighted. This added value must also be taken into account at the time of quantifying the benefits of both cooperatives and the social economy as a whole, and especially when formulating strategy and assessing the results achieved.

Practical conclusions and original value

The findings show that there is still a long way to go to achieve the reconciliation of personal, family and work life that allows full equality. This issue reveals the need for action, both institutionally, through a suitable framework of support measures, and internally, within the entities themselves, through incentives leading to the full implementation of these cooperative values and rules of conduct.

Our results give new evidence of the internal and external social policies, and of institutional and business relationships of these cooperatives characterized by a high representation of women. It is also noted that self-management allows improve adaptation of the working conditions and flexibility of women in cooperative workplaces. Moreover, they realize that their involvement must be greater, since future employment depends on the survival of the cooperative. It would be interesting for future studies to compare these results with the equivalent relationships observed between shareholders and employees in other types of entities. Future research could also examine whether other factors, such as the size of the organization, can influence the existence of harmonious relations.

KEYWORDS: Cooperatives, employment, woman, conciliation, Spain, depopulation.