



Co-operative Party Policy Brief June 2014

# women & equalities

**the co-operative party**  
politics for people





This Policy Brief summarises the Co-operative Party's policies on Women and Equalities, drawn from the Party's national manifestos and the work of co-operative movement worldwide individual submissions in the first round of the 2014 policy process. More information is available on [www.party.coop](http://www.party.coop).

The Co-operative Party takes inspiration from co-operators such as Mrs Mary Cottrell and Mrs Lily Howe who became the first female editor of the Co-operative News in 1972 and in 1984 went on to become a member of the North West Co-operative Development Council and a trustee of the Plunkett Foundation. Mrs Mary Cottrell became the first woman elected to the board of the Co-operative Wholesale Society (now The Co-operative Group) in 1922. She served on the board until 1936, when she retired. In 1909 she was elected to the Ten Acres' board, and in 1917 became the first woman to represent the Midlands Section on the Co-operative Union (now Co-operatives UK) board. The same year, she was elected as the first Labour and Co-operative representative on the Birmingham City Council.

## Co-operative Movement Values and principles and global commitments

The Co-operative values and principles provide a solid foundation to the Co-operative Party's deep commitment to equality amongst all sections and groups within our society. The principles of democratic member control, concern for community and values of equity and solidarity and democracy and equality are carried in the hearts and heads of co-operators worldwide.

In 1995 the global co-operative movement's commitment to equality was made manifest when we, the co-operators of the world, approved the Resolution on Gender Equality in Co-operatives at the International Co-operative Alliance Centenary Congress, thus setting it as a global priority. At that moment in time, we agreed that, "a better balance between female and male co-operators and employees would be a re-energising force and source of competitive advantage to co-operatives, that women and men must have equal participation and job opportunities, the same working conditions and equal pay for equal work, as well as equal training and educational opportunities, and that shared influence and shared responsibilities between women and men are key to co-operative excellence", and therefore, "equality between men and women in decision making positions and in the activities of the co-operative movement" is an essential aim for our Movement to move forward.

These Co-operative values and principles inspire work around the country which tackles inequality. There are important projects including disabled worker co-operatives such as one in York which specialises in wood work and garden furniture, this Co-operative sprang from the closures of a local Remploy base. This could provide inspiration for other collection of workers affected by Remploy closures. Other Co-operative ventures provide a business support and promotion for disabled workers, this services can substantial benefit its members and deserve the necessary support and promotion by Government.

## LGBT Equality

The Co-operative Party believes that there should be complete equality for LGBT people. The Co-operative Party is committed to creating a society which does not give rise to the issues raised by recent Stonewall figures which demonstrate that Lesbian, gay and bisexual people often expect they will be treated worse than heterosexual people when they deal with schools and family services. Or that significant numbers of gay people fear they would still face discrimination if they sought to play an active part in politics, whether as a potential Member of Parliament or local councillor. And many of the political parties' own gay supporters believe that gay candidates would face discrimination.

The lives of many gay people at work remain difficult, despite major efforts from leading employers and employment protections having been in place for ten years. They often face bullying and feel unable to be open about their sexual orientation with colleagues and managers. There are examples of activity within the Co-operative movement which seek to address this situation which should be adopted in other areas. For example Respect is The Co-operative Group's inclusive lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) network which is made up of a dedicated LGBT Steering Group from across the Co-operative Group's family of businesses and from all over the UK. The network is the largest LGBT network in the UK with over 8,500 'Friends of Respect' - over 1,300 of these are employees. In 2012 84% of their employees completed our annual staff survey and 91% declared their sexual orientation. 4% of their employees identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Co-operative Societies have a proud record of demonstrating their equality based co-operative values in the workplace for example The Co-operative Group is proud to be the most gay friendly retailer in the UK and have been ranked 3rd in the 2013 Stonewall Workplace Equality Index - the only retailer to feature in the Top 100 and the first to make it into the Top 10.

The Co-operative Party is proud to have worked with the Labour Party in Government between 1997 and 2010 to deliver real advancement for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans equality namely:

- achieved an equal age of consent;
- ended the ban on LGBT people serving in our armed forces;
- ended discrimination against Lesbian & Gay partners for immigration purposes;
- given LGBT individuals and couples the right to adopt children;
- scrapped the homophobic Section 28 (Clause 2a in Scotland);
- become a signatory of the Treaty of Amsterdam, which gave the EU powers to end discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation;
- banned discrimination in the workplace and in vocational training with the introduction of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations;
- created the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) which gives LGBT people

statutory body protection;

- included homophobia in the definition of hate crimes;
- increased sentencing for homophobic hate crimes;
- removed outdated offences such as gross indecency and buggery;
- produced and implemented the Gender Recognition Act, allowing Trans people to have their true gender recognised in law;
- created the Civil Partnerships, allowing LGB people to have their loving relationships recognised by law and have the same benefits as married couples;
- outlawed discrimination in goods and services (with no exceptions);
- launched a campaign in the UN for the Decriminalisation of Homosexuality focusing on the nine countries where it is still punishable by death;
- awarded statutory rights for fertility treatment for Lesbians on the NHS.
- introduced the Equality Act

## Co-operatives empowering women at home and abroad

Through the work of organisations like the Women's Guild and our movement's values and principles the Co-operative movement has a strong story to tell. For example in the UK. Larger retail consumer co-operatives are leading the way on gender diversity, with many women represented at a senior level. For example:

- 37% of directorships are held by women in co-operatives, compared to 20% of leading companies
- One third of co-operative retail society board presidents are female, compared to 3% of the equivalent role of Chairman for leading companies
- 25% of co-operative management executive posts are held by women, compared to 5% for leading companies

Equally, although inequality in pay between men and women remains high in Europe, surveys have shown that salaries in worker co-operatives tend to foster gender equality.

According to the findings of the European Project – Active Women in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) - there is more gender equality in worker co-operatives across France, Italy and Spain, than in traditional enterprises.

The survey, undertaken by COCETA<sup>1</sup> (the Spanish Confederation of Worker Co-operatives) found that 70 per cent of members that took part said there are no major earning differences between men and women in their organisation. Women working in co-operatives in all three countries were over-whelmingly satisfied with their work-life balance, promotional prospects and access to professional development.

The survey reveals that worker co-ops provide more opportunities for promotion and training than traditional enterprises. They said they could reach the highest leadership positions whilst also benefiting from training opportunities. 49 per cent of worker co-op members were women

1 <http://www.coceta.coop/>

and 39 percent of them held leadership positions.

This is in stark contrast to women working in other sectors. In Spain, for example women have to work 82 extra days to receive the same salary as a man. France is in a similar situation, with women needing to work 15 months in order to earn as much as men earn in one year, according to Eurostat

### Case study - ILO Business Development Support to Nronga Women Dairy Cooperative, Tanzania

Working on empowering local communities to enhance their economic position and address the challenges surrounding them, the ILO-SIDA and CoopAFRICA\* project on HIV/AIDS supported the Nronga Women Dairy Cooperative Society to train its members on entrepreneurship development and business management. Using the Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) training programme, ILO enabled 400 women in Nronga village to change their ways of doing business to a more profit making focus.

Discussions with the Cooperative Manager Ms. Ainea Usiri following the intervention have revealed that the volume of milk collected at their cooperative has increased, and women are keeping proper records on milk sold and used for the family consumption. Some of the members have started new businesses and they now have good knowledge of searching for markets and producing goods that respond to the needs of their clients. Women are no longer scared to take risks and start new business ventures.

The British Co-operative movement has a long history of empowerment, indeed, prior to the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, married women had only very limited rights to own property in their own name –including co-operative dividends. Under the law, after marriage a woman's property belonged to her husband. However, in practice many mid-nineteenth century co-operatives treated the 'divi' as the wife's separate property, sometimes (as in Rochdale in the 1850s) refusing to turn over dividend payments to husbands without their wives' permission. The dividend was very important to women on limited budgets, because it gave them the opportunity to save by shopping at the co-operative, accruing dividends that were paid out quarterly or half-yearly. Many families used their dividend money to make larger purchases such as children's school clothes or furniture, or to save up a nest egg to provide against emergencies.

Our co-operative principles inform other important work such as tackling violence against women. The first consultation of parties include evidence of this from Wales where the Police and Crime Commissioner had carried out a thematic review of violence against women and girls which was carried out in conjunction with voluntary sector organisations as well as the Police.

Co-operatives at home and abroad offer inspiration for a new generation determined to ensure that empowerment and equality is achieved through co-operation. The case studies below offer a glimpse into these organisations.

## Case study - Local factory closes, Midlands stitches community back together

Midshires Clothing, is a worker Co-operative, providing quality garment manufacturing, embellishment and alteration services in the UK, primarily to the co-operative, education, work wear and healthcare sectors.

Midshires proudly aims to preserve skills which are in the decline in the UK, enabling innovation, making a fair profit and adhering to co-operative principles; and are successfully doing so in their clothing factory which is based in Kettering in Northamptonshire.

Over the last twenty years there has been a slow decline in the British garment manufacturing industry, with business being lost to the Far East.

The reduction in UK garment manufacturing services has not only caused unemployment and loss of skills, but also creates problems for companies wishing to source UK made products, limits the ability for them to be innovative and means flexibility and speed are hard to achieve. Due to increasing ethical and environmental concerns and the desire to 'buy local' there is increasing recognition of the benefits of UK-made products.

Midshires Clothing provides a UK worker co-operative manufacturing facility. As well as serving existing businesses, BrightKidz and Alpha Workwear we have a strong focus on serving the healthcare, education and hospitality sectors, providing an attractive choice for customers whose ethical values are high.

## Women's Challenge 2020

The Co-operative Party strongly supports the ambition behind the 'Women's Challenge 2020'. The Co-operative Group and Co-operatives UK have set a 10 year challenge to its members after research showed that although women make up 51% of the population, they are under-represented in almost every area of public life.

A key challenge for the Co-operative Group is to ensure that their membership is properly represented across their structures and businesses. Within this overarching aim, there are three subsidiary challenges they hope to take forward. These are:

- Taking steps to ensure that democratic structures are more representative of their members.
- Looking at ways in which they can enhance the presence of women at senior management levels within their corporate structure and businesses.
- Fulfilling their commitment to the values and principles by taking the message outwards, and rediscovering the movement's historic role in taking forward gender equality.

## Co-operative Women's guild

The Co-operative Party strongly endorses and supports the important role of the Co-operative Womens Guild. Co-operative Women's Guild was founded in 1883 (1892 in Scotland) to educate women in the principles and practices of Co-operation and to work for the improvement of the

status of women. It aims to:

1. To promote through the expansion of Co-operation such conditions of life as will ensure for all people equal opportunities for full and free development.
2. To educate women in the principles and practice of Co-operation in order that they shall be loyal members of their Societies and play a full part in the control of the Co-operative Movement.
3. To encourage and prepare women to take part in local, national and international affairs.
4. To work for the establishment of world peace.
5. To provide social, cultural and recreational activities through which members may live a full and interesting life

## **Co-operative Party's work towards greater equality**

After the Co-operative Party National Executive Committee elections in 2011, only one of the eleven regional seats was held by a woman. So, the Co-operative Party National Executive Committee took the decision to reserve four of the regional seats for women and now, for the first time, the Party has an NEC with gender balance<sup>2</sup>.

The Co-operative Party believes that equal gender balance of elected representatives is an important pre-requisite for a modern democracy. Prior to 2010 The Co-operative Party's gender split in Parliament was more even than other parties at 40%. However, the Party's NEC took the decision that it needed further improvement. Since the 2010 election the Party has selected parliamentary candidates at a ratio of 50-50 male and female. The Party will also continue to lead the way in promoting gender balance in Holyrood and Cardiff Bay, it is worth noting that we currently have a 75% female group in the Scottish Parliament.

The Co-operative Party believes that politics in the wider sense must provide an encouraging environment in which the widest section of members and the public wish to get involved in. The Co-operative Party will audit our policies to ensure that they encourage equality and appeal to all members. Equally the Co-operative Party will audit our processes to ensure that they encourage recruitment and a full participation by all members. In order to ensure that the widest section of members wish to become more active and executing co-operative politics around the country the Co-operative Party will audit our campaigns to ensure that they encourage equality and appeal to all members.

---

<sup>2</sup> For further information about members of the Co-operative Party NEC go to [www.party.coop](http://www.party.coop)





# politics for people

77 Weston Street, London SE1 3SD

020 7367 4150

[info@party.coop](mailto:info@party.coop)

 [@CoopParty](https://twitter.com/CoopParty)

[www.party.coop](http://www.party.coop)

