



International Co-operative Alliance



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Gender Equality Committee International Women's Day – 8 March 2012

Recognizing women entrepreneurs as actors of the economic development and active stakeholders of people's social change

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world” proclaimed Gandhi and women entrepreneurs have been keen to interpret this statement. Currently there are some 187 million women entrepreneursⁱ throughout the world. These women have not limited themselves to dream their lives but have decided to live their dreams. They are driving forces of the economic development and social changes that make them actors of an historic change that cannot be reversed.

Women's role in the economic growth and productive entrepreneurship has changed to the same extent as their role in society. They have overcome economic hurdles and even worse, sexist stereotypes, beliefs underestimating their capabilities and more globally, cultural barriers inherent in their places in society, and have faced up to the challenge of building up enterprises not only to survive but because they felt capable of identifying opportunities to put into practice their own ideas. They are motivated by their commitment to a vision of life and incentivated by their innovative mind, tenacity, perseverance and strength, which are acknowledged as specificities of women's nature.

Women entrepreneurs are usually younger these days and they know clearly that their priorities are being promoted in different scenarios. Among their broad range of capabilities, one which stands out is their capacity to harmonize their personal and professional objectives with their environment and to strike a proper balance between these priorities. They are holding executive positions, are presidents and founding members of enterprises, leaders of associations and urban as well as rural communities. They are skillfully introducing and developing a more action-oriented type of work while managing their time to dedicate more of it to their families and to the quality of family care while being increasingly aware of the importance of self-care.

Far from being helpless victims of injustice and exclusion that has been their lot all along the history of societies, women have shown their intelligence, high degree of resilience and courage when encountering hardships. They keep unveiling that they control their creativity skills and their passion is a key to their empowerment as a result of what they do that may be more or less important but the value of which is recognized as a talent to reinforce entrepreneurial activities.

Women entrepreneurs, even the youngest ones, know women's historic background and have gained self-awareness that they are not doomed to repeat it. Creativity, innovation, their management and administration skills are links in a chain which is not slowing down but

rather benchmarking their evolution and development side by side with others. Women entrepreneurs do not only enjoy their own development but they contribute to a better quality of life of those working under their leadership and they are instrumental in the fundamental promotion of the productive sector.

However when compared to the number of men entrepreneurs or holding executive positions in companies, figures reveal that women are still lagging far behind men. For example, out of 465 world entrepreneurs' cases covered by the Endeavor Globalⁱⁱ initiative, only 60 are women's case studies. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, GEM, drew again the same conclusion in 2011, i.e. women are less involved in entrepreneurial activities than men. Out of the 59 countries analyzed by the GEM, the only National Business Register in which women are more numerous is the Ghanaian one though the Republic of Korea is worth mentioning as a significant exception since women entrepreneurs are five times as many as men.

Despite poor figures and the trend highlighted by tedious research items that women are not concentrating on growth-oriented sectors, the major qualitative leap forward of women which the society at large and more precisely the co-operative sector should support is not being challenged.

In a globalized environment in which constant crises are rampant, risks and uncertainties for the future of our economies are looming large, young women entrepreneurs should be seen as dynamic, competitive and efficient business initiatives' creators, having a positive impact on employment and its subsequent wider social welfare. However primarily these women have to have their values and their status' own capabilities recognized not only because these qualities have helped them develop more productive and efficient enterprises but often more democratic, socially and environmentally more responsible and ethical companies.

Women bring valuable assets to companies and the Women's Day is an historic landmark to recognize it, to learn from them and enhance their skills to promote a better economic and social welfare. Their multitasking capabilities, their practical and quick problem-solving approach, their co-operation and team-spirit instinct, their intuition, vision and creativity have translated gradually in trusting relationships, empathy and assertiveness, revealing that they can put themselves in the place of others, that they can instill their energy, illusion and passion at work, that they are strong and resilient, that they make and maintain their decisions with kindness, that they manage to strike the right balance between their various responsibilities, offering more generously their information, time and resources, indeed they are committed, self-demanding and have an eye for details, they are intelligent, wise and have a good common sense, they have perseverance, consistency and good organizational skillsⁱⁱⁱ.

Our societies need women entrepreneurs but the creative, innovative and determined spirit of women should be backed up to further develop the predominant role they should play in the social and economic development. Governments, the private and the third sectors should stimulate favorable conditions in terms of education and funding instruments, policies aimed at reinforcing the access and support of women entrepreneurs, more particularly the younger ones.

Various initiatives from the co-operative sector have provided women with educational and financial opportunities to promote their entrepreneurship and there is tangible evidence that co-operatives empower women by giving them a wider freedom of choice and action, encouraging their individual and collective self-development in the economic, social and family areas. An increasing number of women are directly involved in the management and administration of co-operatives and their organizations promoting thereby women's

empowerment but the inequity gap is still large and its mitigation would require more sustained and long-term efforts.

The UN have recognized in different documents and strategies the strong linkage between a better education, access to technologies and employment for women, on the one hand, and poverty reduction as well as human development advancement, on the other hand. This approach has been integrated into the co-operatives' initiatives to promote women's entrepreneurship. Against this background, ICA urges again its members and all co-operatives' members in the world to stay on course.

If the XX century has witnessed drastic changes in the social role of women, more particularly their emergence in the public spheres that have been traditionally dominated by men, the XXI century must witness the consolidation of women entrepreneurs' role in the people's socioeconomic development.

The recognition of the impact of women entrepreneurs' and managers on the economies must be supported by political and governmental actions through which governments and social co-operatives are invited to contribute to their fairness and growth.

May the year 2012, the International Year of Co-operatives, be also a springboard to foster even further women entrepreneurs and co-operatives' women members and the International Women's Day, 8 March, be the beginning of the achievement of this commitment.

María Eugenia Pérez Zea
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ⁱ Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2011). 2010 Women's Report. Donna J. Kelley, Candida G. Brush, Patricia G. Greene and Yana Litovsky. Retrieved from: <http://www.gemconsortium.org/docs/download/768>

ⁱⁱ See: <http://www.endeavor.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ From: Los 12 activos de las mujeres en los negocios. <http://www.mujeresconsejeras.com/doce-activos-mujeres-aportan-negocios/2011/11/09/>