

Women and co-operatives: promoting equality and empowerment

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The co-operative advantage for women

- Overall consensus on the benefits for women from enterprise engagement
- Example of loan funds for individual women to develop as micro-entrepreneurs
- But – recent literature points to lack of evidence for any long term impact on poverty for loan beneficiaries
- Institutions matter – the ‘black box’



Collective entrepreneurship

- Growing evidence of the benefits of *collective* forms of entrepreneurship for women
- ‘Working cooperatively together to produce and market goods, as well as to access inputs, credit, services, information, can offer economies of scale, knowledge sharing and increased bargaining power. Collective enterprises also have the potential to play a political role in advocating for the interests of their members – especially when linked together through networks, alliances or federated structures.’
- Jones, Smith and Wills – *Gender and Development* 2012



Benefits of the *co-operative* model for women

- Income and voice
- “Not business or a movement but both”
- Embedded values of equality
- Rich heritage – stories – blends with cultural traditions
- Appropriate for informal sector workers
- Access route for other services eg extension, credit





**Women Basket Weavers Co-operative
Kenya**



Barriers at membership level for women

- Membership often linked to ownership of assets eg coffee bushes, land which resides with men, the 'right' kind of cow
- Tradition of household membership means male head of household attends meetings/stands for elections
- Lack of education of many women
- Domestic and child care responsibilities

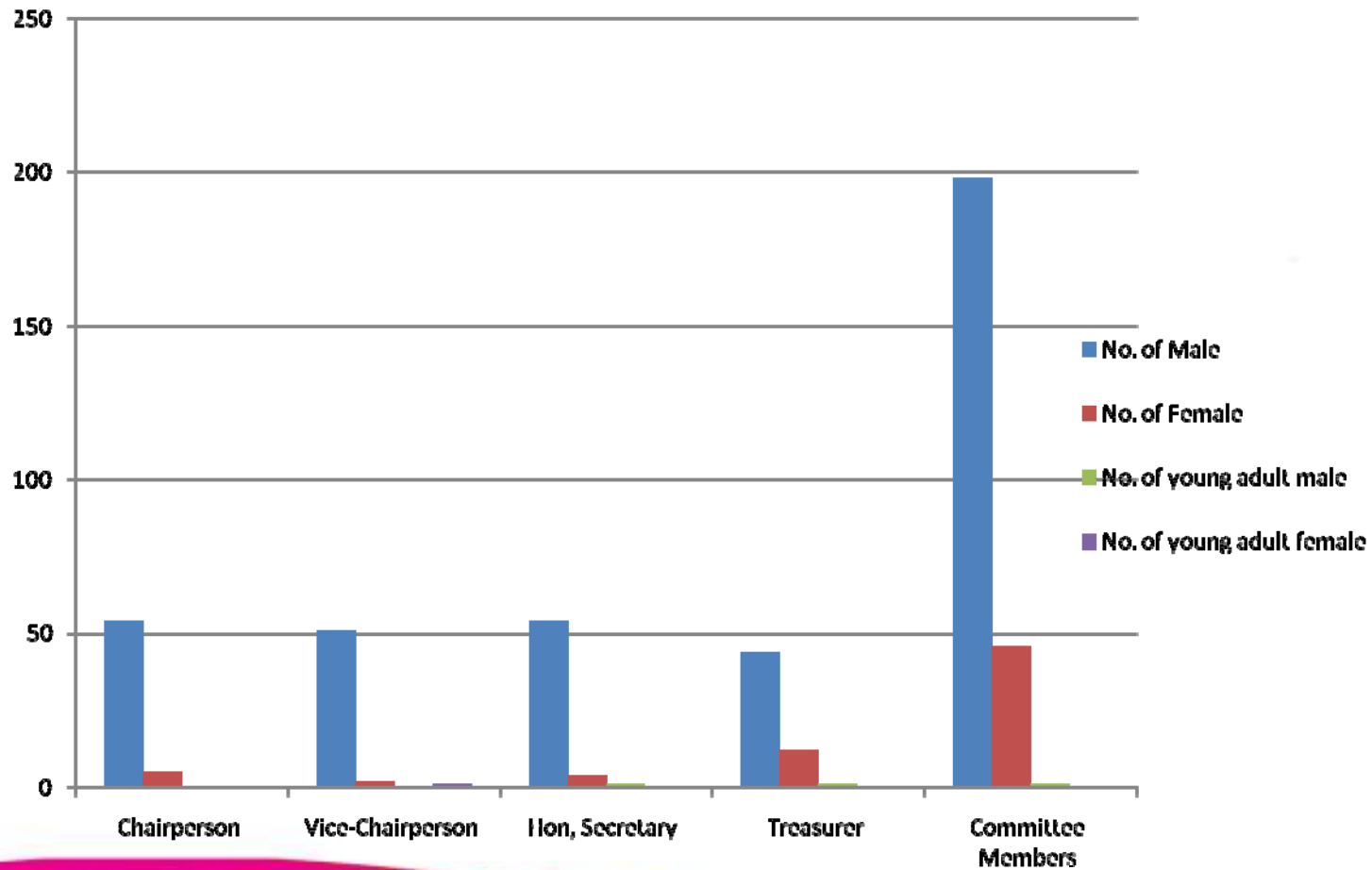


Barriers at leadership level

- Cultural constraints
- Triple roles for women
- Lack of training and support for existing and potential women leaders
- Lack of evidence on gender and leadership – no baseline figures or detailed studies



Kenya – gender bias



Strategies for change

- Women's co-operatives eg India
- Legislation on quotas – Kenyan initiative
- Changes in membership criteria to user not owner
- Education and training – the Coopergenero programme in Brazil has trained 40,000 women co-operators since 2003 (Ministry of Agriculture)
- Product certification schemes eg Fairtrade
- Internal campaigns – egs from the UK Women's Challenge and Co-operative Women's Guild
- More movement commitment, policies and targets



Latin American initiatives

- Gender mainstreaming programme within Fenacoop, Nicaragua
- Alliance for women in coffee in Nicaragua – the coffee flowers (CAFENICA case study)
- COCLA coffee union in Peru



Going forward

- A gender gap in co-operative leadership apparent in developed as well as developing countries
- Pressing need for more research and evidence – both the advantages and disadvantages for women
- Development and rolling out of women's leadership programmes
- Commitment to specific targets (and quotas?)





Given the right environment and support, co-operatives can play a major role promoting women's equality and empowerment

