



What does social economy have to do with gender equality and women's rights?

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The economic inequalities between men and women are significant. While about 40 % of working force are women, they share only 10% of global income and own about 1% of the world's wealth. They are underrepresented in leadership positions, both in political and economic life, finally the vast majority of people living in poverty are women, but... women are also majority among social entrepreneurs. Why? It may be because due to the multiple discrimination, as women and as members of vulnerable groups (unemployed, migrants, disabled, etc) of which the majority are often women. It may also be because the social economy better answers real needs of women and their communities as well as provides them with decent employment.

Women face a number of problems in the labour market both impacting their ability to be employed as well as discrimination at the work place when they are already employees. Since they usually ensure the care work for their families at cost of their own economic activity, the lack of sufficient care system (nurseries, care institutions for older people) results in women's limited availability to be employed. Once women find some paid work it is often in the informal sector, where majority of workers are women and where they do not have access to labour rights protection as well as any social and health benefits. Women are discriminated during the recruitment process, often due to their possible motherhood. For similar reasons they are also offered precarious forms of employment: temporary contract or specific task external contracts which, again, do not guarantee social and health benefits and labour rights. Important problem is gender discrimination in the work place: lower wages, lack of equal access to higher/managing positions, access to trainings or lack of equal representation in trade unions. Finally, also women entrepreneurs who create work places for themselves and often for others, face discrimination in access to resources (incl. bank loans) or problems with reconciliation of work and private lives.

In many cases the social economy enterprises are able to address these problems and the principles they are based on are helpful in finding answers to women's needs.

First of all the fact that social enterprises should have both **economic AND social purpose** is beneficial for all involved, also women. By working with and for members rather than solely for profit, developing resources to deliver quality and socially useful services and goods, aiming at education, improving quality of life and sustainable development social enterprises create environment sensitive to economic and social needs of men and women both workers and beneficiaries. They contribute to women's empowerment in terms of capacity building and employment taking into account their specific situation.

Social enterprises **operate independently answering the real needs**. Such enterprises emerge when a community identifies a need in a particular sector or a need of particular group. They are formed on the initiative of community members and are supported by that community. Social enterprises answer real needs incl. the needs of women and men. Both women and men involved in the enterprise can be autonomous in implementing their activities which best answer their needs and do

not depend on State's or other actors priorities. They decide themselves what real needs of women are addressed.

Democracy is another important principle of social economy which contributes to diminishing gender inequalities and addressing specific needs of men and women. Democratic decision-making process involving users, participants, members and paid and unpaid workers should be integrated into the constitution and by-laws, practices, interventions and labour relations management of the social enterprises. They are based on democratic values which include gender equality. Women and men can equally participate in decision making processes. They can address their specific needs on equal basis. This contributes to empowerment of women as decision makers as well as challenges gender inequalities and stereotypes. It sets a good example for democratic and equal roles in other spheres of life public and private, for example on one hand equal influence on decision making at home and on the other in political life.

People first is a principle to be implemented in organizing the enterprises but also in sharing and using the profits it finally works out. When there are revenues and surpluses these should be equitably distributed among members of social enterprise or they should jointly decide what purpose they are going to allocate them to. Men and women have equal access to these resources as well as equal say in the decision on its allocation.

For many social enterprises the main purpose is ensuring the **sustainable jobs** for their members and beneficiaries. The social enterprises ensure decent working conditions and equality of men and women at different levels: access to employment, working conditions, wages, etc They create safe working environment for women contributing to their security and autonomy.

When social enterprises are built on and function in accordance with these principles they may successfully avoid problems faced by many women in the mainstream labour market. Social enterprises answer women's 'strategic needs' through ensuring economic and social gender equality, respect for women's rights, economic security and independence, equality in control over resources, equal participation in decision making. They are also a chance for nondiscriminatory work place by ensuring decent working conditions, eliminating gender discrimination in the recruitment process and at work place increasing equal chances for career at managerial position, providing independence and flexibility allowing better reconciliation of work and private life. Both products and services of social enterprises may answers the specific needs on women and involvement in social enterprise often means involvement in community life and gives many women from vulnerable groups a chance for coming out from isolation.

Based on 'Women at hart of social economy' by Relais-femmes and Chantier de l'économie sociale:

<http://www.fiess2011.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Preparatory-Document-WomenHeartSolidarityEconomy.pdf>