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# Working Paper

**Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in  
Social Economy Enterprises: Enablers and Barriers**

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**CIRIEC No. 2022/02**



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# **Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Social Economy Enterprises: Enablers and Barriers**

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**Working paper CIRIEC No. 2022/02**

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**Theme:** *Strategies of social promotion*

**Subtopic:** *Empowerment and entrepreneurship with a gender perspective, to create development models under a social solidarity economy approach.*

### **Abstract**

Women remain underrepresented in the labour market. In the EU, they earn 14,1% less than men, and they still experience barriers to access and remain at the labour market (Eurostat, 2021a). Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the gender dimension of social and economic inequalities, producing a severe gender impact and the risk of economic marginalisation of women. Why do we expect the social and solidarity economy to improve gender equality at work? Therefore, the paper will discuss the potential and limits of the SEEs in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. The analysis has referenced existing literature and available information on the sector, including interviews with experts and illustrative cases within DIESIS Network<sup>2</sup>, one of the broadest European networks supporting the social economy and social enterprise development. The aim is to show impactful solutions of SEEs and bring social and solidarity economy closer to the gender perspective to increase their impact in supporting inclusive and sustainable growth.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, Gender Gap, Economic Growth, Social Economy, Social Economy Enterprise, Cooperative, Labour Market, Social Innovation, Sustainable Development

**JEL Codes:** J16, O33, O35

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<sup>2</sup> DIESIS Network covers 25 European countries with 50 members that represent 90.000+ organisations and 1.2 million workers through major national federations and national support networks. For more info, please visit [www.diesis.coop](http://www.diesis.coop) [accessed 25 August 2022].

## 1. Introduction

The EU's score in the domain of work of the Gender Equality index is showing slow progress: it increased from 70 in 2005 to 72.2 in 2020 (EIGE, 2020c). In 2019 79% of men were employed compared to 63.3% of women<sup>3</sup> with a gender employment gap for the EU27 of 11.7 percentage points (Eurostat, 2020)<sup>4</sup>. Parenthood remains a crucial determining factor for women employment: being the parent of one child under six years of age reduces women's employment rate by 14.3 percentage points, increasing men's employment rate by 9.6 percentage points (EC, 2020b). The gender gaps are even wider amongst women in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations, such as young and older women, women with disabilities, single mothers with dependent children, women with a minority racial or ethnic background, and migrant communities or other minority groups (EC, 2020b). Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the gender dimension of social and economic inequalities, producing a severe gender impact and the risk of economic marginalisation of women. The economic sectors that predominantly employ women have been the most disrupted by nationwide lockdowns (such as education, hospitality, childcare, recreation, and tourism). About 33% of women have taken a career break of at least six months for childcare reasons compared with just over 1% of men (Eurostat, 2021b); unemployment amongst women grew from 6.9% in April to 7.9% in September 2020, while male unemployment rose from 6.5% to 7.1% in the same period (Eurostat, 2021d). Women have also faced additional demands due to school closures and informal care, which has significantly increased within households.

Furthermore, 44% of Europeans still think that the most critical role of women is to take care of their home and family (EC, 2017). The figures that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic could underpin the traditional gender roles. Persisting inequalities come at a high cost for our society and leaving behind a large amount of the existing pool of female skills and talent. By 2050, improving gender equality could increase the EU GDP per capita by 6.1 to 9.6% and lead to an additional 10.5 million jobs in 2050 for both women and men. (EIGE, 2017a).

Gender imbalances also concern green and digital transition. Women are still less likely to have specialist digital skills and work in this field compared to men, as only 18% of ICT specialists in the EU are women (EC, 2020d). Even if females represent 57.9% of green jobs, many of them are in jobs that are valued less,

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<sup>3</sup> The EU Member States have set the objective of a 75% employment rate for women and men under the Europe 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Taking into account part-time work the gender gap for full time equivalent employment in 2019 amounts to 17.4 percentage points (EIGE, 2020).

where the pay gap is more than double on average for women in green jobs (20.9%) than women in brown ones (9.9%) (Kapetaniou and McIvor, 2020).

Thus, evidence shows the importance of achieving gender equality and fitting gender discrimination to improve financial performance and social impact. The Gender Equality Strategy<sup>5</sup> presented by the European Commission is based on the dual approach of key actions combined with gender mainstreaming in all EU policies and significant initiatives to achieve gender equality. The European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>6</sup> provides a strong basis to ensure gender mainstreaming across the socio-economic policies, in particular, towards the principle 2: "*Equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men must be ensured and fostered in all areas, including regarding participation in the labour market, terms and conditions of employment and career progression. Furthermore, women and men have the right to equal pay for work of equal value.*" In March 2021, the Commission adopted an Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, which sets the ambitious goal to halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019. The Action Plan puts gender equality at its core. It establishes, amongst others, ambitious targets for women's participation in the labour market and the provision of early childhood education and care. Every organisation should include a gender perspective in their process and activities to maximise the potential of women and men in all their diversity.

Due to their nature, the social economy enterprises<sup>7</sup> (SEEs) can be exemplary in this regard. They are built on values such as inclusiveness, solidarity, and equality. Even if not explicitly targeting women, social enterprises aim to develop environments sensitive to people's economic and social needs, creating services facilitating women and men's access to the labour market. Flexible employment opportunities or specific services developed within social economy enterprises are innovative solutions designed to encourage work-life balance. The active participation in social economy enterprises has significant spill over effects on women's emancipation and claims-making in the public and domestic spheres. Therefore, the paper will discuss the potential and limits of the SEEs in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. The analysis has referenced existing literature and available information on the sector, including interviews with experts and two illustrative cases within DIESIS Network, one of

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<sup>5</sup> For more info please visit [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en) [accessed 11 June 2021].

<sup>6</sup> For more info [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights_en) [accessed 11 June 2021].

<sup>7</sup> This study uses the definition of social economy enterprise set out by the Social Business Initiative. <https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/36684> [accessed 11 June 2021].

the broadest European networks supporting the social economy and social enterprise development. The aim is to show impactful solutions of SEEs and bring social and solidarity economy closer to the gender perspective to increase their impact in supporting inclusive and sustainable growth.

## 2. Methodology

After the analysis of the existing literature and available information on the sector and a collection of 10 cases, two exploratory case studies have been selected to realise a deeper analysis. The cases presented, would explore the role of social economy enterprises in fostering gender equality and women empowerment. The cases selected are not statistically representative, but they have been selected due to their potential to add knowledge to the phenomenon studied. They have been built from data gathered through different techniques. Semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders of the two case studies were conducted. Moreover, some of the interviews have been used to realise a dissemination video<sup>8</sup> about the topic. The criteria established to select the cases were the following: they have a female leadership; they are social economy enterprises; they are established organisations, i.e., they have been in operation for more than five years; they have within their goals the women empowerment, gender equality and the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Furthermore, secondary sources such as national statistics, previous research reports and presentations were gathered. Most of the material used is qualitative, although some quantitative statistical data was used to enrich the case studies. Moreover, in January 2021, a masterclass<sup>9</sup> on Gender equality and women empowerment in the social economy enterprise has been realised by DIESIS Network with the participation of Simel Esim, Head of Cooperatives Unit at International Labour Organisation. The results of the masterclass have been integrated into the paper.

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<sup>8</sup> To watch the video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJEkUqZjsqA> [accessed 11 June 2021].

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/news/WCMS\\_767391/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/news/WCMS_767391/lang--en/index.htm) [accessed 11 June 2021].

### **3. Why do we expect the social and solidarity economy to improve gender equality at work?**

While men outnumber women in entrepreneurship rates, the gender gap decreases in social economy enterprises (Nicolás and Rubio, 2016). In Belgium, females comprise 70% of the workforce in the social economy, while in France, they comprise 67%. Women represent about 61% of Italian social cooperatives' nonseasonal part-time employees, compared with 47% in other enterprises. In some countries, social enterprises' creation of flexible jobs is regarded as a positive trend (e.g., Czech Republic, Italy, Lithuania, Turkey) that can significantly benefit women. This is the case for both social enterprises led by women and social enterprises that mainly employ women. The high share of women employed is related to social enterprises' engagement, which also typically accounts for a high percentage of women when public agencies manage them (Borzaga et al., 2019). A Spanish study conducted an impact analysis showing that the principles that distinguish SE from profit firms contribute directly to the achievement of 5,8 and 10 SDGs. For example, the SE offers higher female participation levels and lower vertical segregation by sex than profit companies. In addition, SE generates more resilient employment and shows, in global terms, a smaller gender gap in terms of stability where the labour conditions are closer to the concept of decent employment (Castro Nunez et al., 2020). The cooperative model offers women, particularly but not exclusively, in rural areas, informal economy and low-income essential opportunities for employment, enhanced livelihoods, and access to productive resources and services (ILO coop, 2014). They usually develop resources to deliver quality and socially valuable services and goods, improving the quality of life of the entire community. In this way, they contribute to women's capability in terms of skills and employment, considering their specific situation. Access to employment is being indirectly facilitated by cooperatives in fields such as housing, healthcare, childcare, and eldercare, which provide women with affordable, voluntary and open membership and democratic control – are well-placed to address many of the issues that negatively impact women (CopacCoop, 2015).

Cooperatives are increasingly providing a way for domestic workers to organize and help bring new work opportunities while protecting their terms and conditions of work. This is what emerged in a survey conducted by ILO in 2015 around the world on cooperative movement and gender equality. 80% of survey respondents stated that cooperatives are better than other types of private business in advancing gender equality. Similarly, 70% consider the cooperatives better than government-owned businesses in advancing gender equality. Compared to other economic models, cooperatives are more effective in providing local development, community wealth, social inclusion,

women's empowerment. Many other respondents stated that they are involved in cooperatives because cooperatives are a more inclusive form of business than other private and government-owned models. They gave the example of the high number of women in leadership positions. However, the findings also identify various obstacles to women's empowerment and gaps in gender equality that persist within the cooperative movement. Several interviewees discussed ways in which cultural norms, social roles and expectations, economic factors, and political environments disadvantage women across the globe. According to 65% of the survey respondents, cultural barriers impose limitations on women in everyday life that hinder their access to opportunities (ILO, 2015).

The social economy and social entrepreneurship, in particular the Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE), have proven to be an essential and effective tool for the development and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups in a path of C-VET. The European project "PRESS: PRomotion European Social Economy Strategies and social entrepreneurship for inclusion of disadvantaged women in the labour market" collected successful good practices of WISE in Europe that helped women at risk of social exclusion (particularly women of the Roma minority) access in the labour market. Thus, SEEs organisations help address gender gaps in employment by hiring women and providing services that directly impact women's well-being and their ability to gain stable employment. This includes childcare and other services that can help overcome household commitments, allowing women to join the labour market (United Nations, 2014) and training programme and action that can contribute to women's empowerment.

Chocolates Artesanos Isabel (<https://chocolatesartesanosisabel.com/>) is a small chocolate bakery in Alcorisa, in Aragón (Spain). They are a small social enterprise committed to creating quality employment for women and reconciling family and work life. They work with fair trade and ecological raw materials such as cocoa and sugar cane and local products like extra virgin olive oil and Marcona almonds. In addition, they run a training course to teach a sustainable way to produce chocolate for single-parent families, with particular attention to vulnerable women in risking social exclusion. The Women's Institute of Sapin has recognised the social enterprise as a "*Collaborating Company for Equal Opportunities for Women*".

The reconciliation of work, family and private life is recognised at the EU level as a priority for achieving gender equality, fostering equal labour participation, equal leadership opportunities, and equal job stability between women and men. CADIAI (<https://www.cadiai.it/>), a category A social cooperative, was founded in Bologna in 1974 and is a registered ONLUS (non-profit

social organization). It provides social, healthcare, and educational services to the public (often in cooperation with public bodies), and healthcare surveillance, occupational health services, and safety training programmes to companies. It endorses the competencies of the workers and grant them equal opportunity and realize work and life reconciliation policies as maternity protection. CADIAI is strongly committed to gender equality in its cooperative and over the years has implemented several initiatives such as consultancy and process evaluation for the empowerment of women's potential in the cooperative; Training on women empowerment and development of skills; Observatory on career paths; Investment in the development of empowerment.

The working environment that those human resource policies might create seems more attractive to women than to men, who traditionally respond to economic incentives such as higher wages. In contrast, women are closer to pursuing social values (Nicolás and Rubio, 2016; Castro Nunez et al., 2020). Moreover, the organization of women through social and solidarity economy networks can contribute significantly to their emancipation and empowerment, as they enable them to gain a voice and hone their advocacy skills (United Nations, 2014).

Some recent studies point out that social economy through digital platforms help women overcome cultural barriers related to labour market exclusion in certain areas, allow stay-at-home mothers to work and monetize their free time, and thus constitute a crucial element in the further improvement of women's participation in labour markets (Gagliardi et al., 2020; Codagnone et al., 2016; Dettling, 2017). Digital social economy platforms are used as vehicles for empowering their users (both workers and customers/beneficiaries) and respect women's employment specificities. They are based on participatory governance where users are ultimately in (partial) control over the platform/technology or bound by a statutory purpose asserting the priority of social and environmental goals before financial returns.

Rethink coop (<https://www.rethinkcoop.de/>) is a new platform cooperative, supported by Platform Co-op Development Kit<sup>10</sup>, that brings refugee women together to establish their cooperatives in the care services. In addition, the women receive professional training that certifies them to work as professionals in the childcare and eldercare sectors. By establishing their cooperative, refugee women can overcome the obstacles to access the labour market, generate sustainable and fair incomes, and accelerate their integration. Finally, the cooperative supports establishing similar childcare and eldercare centres

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<sup>10</sup> For more info, please visit <https://platform.coop/> [accessed 11 June 2021].

in refugee women's home countries by sharing job training skills, resources, and the other means necessary to build a cooperative network of women workers.

By offering financial, legal, and marketing services specifically tailored for women, cooperatives enable women to start and grow their own businesses. In addition, when women establish a cooperative, they gain access to (self-) employment and provide jobs to other women (and men) as employees (Wanyama, 2016).

Improving gender equality and empowering female entrepreneurship can be an enabler to accelerating and fortifying European recovery. Women's participation in the labour market and their entrepreneurship creates new jobs and boost the EU economy.

However, while women constitute 52% of the total European population, only 34.4% of the EU self-employed, and 30% of start-up entrepreneurs are women (Fackelmann and De Concini, 2020). Female entrepreneurship is still facing structural and operational barriers. To name a few: access to finance; lack of confidence when women come to their careers; childcare and unpaid care work. Several studies underline potential obstacles to women access to finance for their enterprises. One of them is a lack of interest from the investors in sectors that women dominate, such as health, personal services, cleaning, catering. These businesses tend to be of lower value and lower growth. Secondly, women are less confident in their abilities and therefore reluctant to make applications that they fear will fail. Finally, women experience certain constraints within the family commitments that also hinder their business potential (McCracken et al., 2015). For example, women are the predominant providers of childcare or care for other family dependents, which would hinder them from running a business. Overall, there is less of a gender gap regarding people working in the social enterprise sector. One of the most exciting findings of the WEstart survey is the extent to which women-led social enterprise contributes to women's empowerment, both for themselves and for the community they serve. Among surveyed women, 85% reported that they feel like they empower women with their social entrepreneurship activity. An additional 90% think that their experience with social entrepreneurship has empowered them or is empowering them as a woman. According to the survey's results, there is a strong correlation between economic power and personal power: "*If women can make money through running a business that gives them a position of power and influence that they wouldn't have if you were shouting outside the gates.*"

Some evidence also indicates that gender equality leads to higher income equality improving economic growth sustainability (Castro Nunez et al., 2020).

The gender balance is looking better than in the corporate world, where the statistics show that there is still a considerable pay gap, gender unbalance, and still, women are leading in unpaid care. Even if 13.6% of leadership positions in the cooperative and mutual insurance sector are held by women, compared to only 2.5% in the world's top 500 companies (United Nations, 2014), these data are not enough. However, many social and cultural barriers still prevent women from enjoying all the benefits of the cooperative model (ILO, 2015). Women remain under-represented in governance bodies, particularly in Presidency positions depending on the structures' size and sector of activity. A recent survey conducted in France shows that 51% of presidents in school cooperatives, 39% of presidents in associations, 27% of presidents of federations, 13% of presidents in mutual societies, and between 11 and 35% of presidents and directors in cooperative banks, are women. Moving to the question, "What are the obstacles you identify to achieve parity in the bodies and facilitate access to elected positions of responsibility for women?" Most respondents said that there are no brakes. The two other most selected items are "the availability of women" and "the self-censorship of women" (CNCRESS, 2019). It, therefore, seems more straightforward to place the responsibility on people rather than questioning the systems and organisations themselves.

Existing literature reviews affirm that women recognise an initial predisposition towards the principles of cooperatives, as well as their effects (e.g., quality of labour relationships, adjustment to individual circumstances and financial needs). The findings reveal that among the most important exogenous factors is the availability of supplemental provisions in the creation of cooperatives, such as lower capital requirements and tax and counselling advantages (Bastida et al., 2020). The cooperative women seem to have redefined a new meaning of success in their work by putting forward collective results and prioritising people over financial gains (Bastida et al., 2020; Wilhoit, 2014).

Therefore, there are various assumptions made within the Social Economic Ecosystem. The priorities of SEEs are social and environmental objectives and principles over profits and democratic governance. In addition, through their participation in the governance of these organisations, women have brought topics such as children, family, women's health, gender violence and discrimination into the social agenda.

## **4. Case studies**

The results of both case studies will be presented in three stages. Initially, it will be described a brief overview of the national context. This will be followed by the description of the good practice and its main activities. Finally. It will be showed the gender perspective and how those organisations contribute to gender equality and women empowerment in the labour market.

### **4.1. The Italian case: CoopCulture**

In Europe, Italy, together with Greece, has the worst rate of female employment in the EU (it does not exceed 50%). After the Covid-19 pandemic, in Italy, out of 101,000 new unemployed, 99,000 are women. The cooperatives may proudly affirm that 61% of employees, 40.5% of members and 25.6% of governance are women (Confcooperative data in 2019). "*Women find in cooperatives the ideal habitat to transform ideas into business, reconcile life and work and achieve full socio-economic emancipation.*" Maurizio Gardini, president of the Confederation of Italian Cooperatives (Confcooperative).

Regarding employment, the figures available show that, within Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane (ACI) women's percentage is significantly higher than that registered in the cooperative movement. This phenomenon can be mainly attributed to the composition of the Alliance's membership, where the enterprises working in the sectors with higher female employment are more numerous and vital. According to the last available report, "The Women in Cooperatives" (Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane, 2016), women make up 52.1% of the total of employees in cooperatives, a percentage significantly higher than the number recorded for the overall sum of Italian companies, whatever their legal status, working in the macro-sectors considered in this study. Among the latter, except for retailing, transportation and logistics, and hospitality and catering, in cooperatives, compared to companies, the percentage of women employees is higher. Among Confcooperative employees (525,000), women are 60.7%. In social cooperatives they reach 71.1%, in health cooperatives, 68.7%, followed by consumer and user cooperation with 58.2%, production of work and services with 52.1%, culture, tourism and sport with 43.8, the habitat with 40.9%, the agri-food industry with 39%, closes fishing with 19.8%. Female employment is directly proportional to the company's size: 64.6% in large cooperatives, 60.3% in medium-sized ones, 54.4% in small ones. Among the shareholders of Confcooperative (3.2 million), women are 40.5%. Leading the ranking are social cooperatives with 64.7% of members, followed by

healthcare with 48.6%, consumption and users with 45.7%, work and services with 44.2%, agri-food with 24%, closed fishing with 12.9%. As the company's size grows, the presence of women among shareholders increases 54.4% in large companies, 45.8% in medium-sized companies and 35.6% in small ones. They represent a model of equal opportunities in the panorama of Italian companies: 25.6% of the cooperatives belonging to Confcooperative have a woman at the top. A percentage is higher of about 10 points than partnerships and capital (srl, spa, snc, etc.). The Islands with 33.5% and the South with 30.8% are the territories where the cooperatives have the highest figure. In the Center 26.3%, while in the Northwest, it drops to 22.8% and in the Northeast, it slips to 19.3%. Social economy enterprises make an important contribution to inclusive economic growth in Italy.<sup>11</sup> They are vehicles for social inclusion and can help to regenerate a new collective dimension and above all are able to valorise diversity and address social transformations which promote inclusive communities.

One of the interesting examples of a female-driven cooperative in Italy is CoopCulture (<https://www.CoopCulture.it/>). CoopCulture is the largest cooperative operating in the cultural sector in Italy. It offers solutions to the increasingly complex needs of a continuously evolving sector, from integrating cultural heritage and territory and between culture, tourism, and local economy. CoopCulture is specialised in promoting cultural heritage and creating regional networks. They design and offer services devised especially for museums, exhibitions, libraries, and archives. They also trial methods and languages characterised by the most innovative audience development and community engagement strategies. With the intention of bringing diverse audiences closer to art, it has developed user paths differentiated by language and method, taking advantage of the potentials offered by new technologies and paying particular attention to local communities in all their aspects, families, young people, children, the elderly, and immigrant communities.

CoopCulture was founded in 2010 by merging the Pierreci and Codess Cultura cooperatives, resulting in integrating two successful businesses. Codess Cultura worked for many years to protect, preserve, and promote Italy's artistic, historical, and environmental heritage, working alongside public and private organisations in northern and central Italy. Starting from the 1990s,

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<sup>11</sup> Based on recent data from the CIRIEC report, there are more than 350,000 social economy enterprises across the country, with more than 19,600,000 members. In 2015 social economy enterprises and similar entities provided 1,923,743 jobs. They make up almost 8.8% of total employment in Italy. ('Recent Evolutions of the Social Economy in the European Union'. CIRIEC International/European Economic and Social Committee, 2017. Available at [http://www.ciriec.uliege.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/RecentEvolutionsSEinEU\\_Study2017.pdf](http://www.ciriec.uliege.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/RecentEvolutionsSEinEU_Study2017.pdf) [accessed June 10, 2021].

Pierreci offered integrated services in the most important museums and archaeological sites in Rome, Lazio, and Campania.

In 2017, after working in partnership for several years, the merger with Copat was launched, a Turin-based cooperative that provided services for libraries, museums, and archives in many regions of Italy for over thirty years. The synergy between social economy values and culture makes CoopCulture devotes to inclusion and social participation as strategic factors in the development of territories. They believe in cooperation as a sustainable business approach and the basis of an economic model founded on collaboration and dignified work as a tool to improve quality of life, local communities, and the world.

CoopCulture - Areas of work	
EDUCATION:	Training and professional growth have always been at the heart of the activity, with a powerful and innovative application of the training system, which combines a unique combination of ideas, content, organisation, methodology, professionalism, and people.
WELCOME:	The visitor welcome experience is pivotal to effectively providing services at artistic and cultural sites focusing on visitors' needs, guiding them, and offering advice for a rewarding and memorable visit.
TICKETING:	CoopCulture's system can provide access to different user types through the contact centre, the website, the smartphone ticketing app and the online booking system for significant clients with the option of flexible bookings.
EVENTS:	Designing and running cultural events as part of structured programmes promotes and enhances the region and its unique characteristics. Thanks to innovative co-creation and co-management strategies, the cooperative focuses on encouraging interaction between cultural operators and communities, creating moments for engagement, dialogue and growth.
MARKETING:	CoopCulture devises integrated tourism services, promotes different regions' unique characteristics and products, and raises quality standards by developing positioning strategies.
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS:	CoopCulture lends its know-how and experience in the tourism and cultural sector to projects that focus on the sustainable development of communities and regions at a national and international level.

#### Gender perspective in CoopCulture starts from the governance

Gender equality in CoopCulture does not only mean the protection of female employment (73%) but ensuring also guaranteeing the presence of women in top positions and the trend towards a collaborative and inclusive approach to the sector. In CoopCulture, the President, the Vice-President, and all

members of board are women (3 persons); 2 out of 4 sector managers are women, 24 out of 28 order contract managers are women. In total, 70% of the workers are women. This female-led governance is characterised by transversal and complementary skills and extensive experience in the culture and cooperation sector.

According to President Giovanna Barni, there are three main success factors for the involvement of women in the organisation.

- First, having a Board of Directors made up entirely of women allows the needs of female employees to be considered and the decision, including the political one, to respond to these needs by organising work according to objectives, with flexible working hours and the possibility of smart-working long before the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Therefore, this type of work organisation is the second key point for ensuring the involvement of women at all levels. Strengthening a work that provides decent jobs, a sustainable working environment and condition, flexible working arrangements and solutions that can help address parents and other carer difficulties, are key factors for gender empowerment within workplaces and through workplace.
- The third point concerns the cultural sector, which has always been one of the sectors most open to women's involvement. The cultural sector is closely linked to training courses that are strongly characterised by the presence of women (humanities faculties such as literature, cultural heritage, etc.) and because it is a flexible sector in terms of work organisation.

Culture and creativity are efficient tools for promoting gender equality; their message directly influences gender awareness among society. It is no coincidence that women's enterprises are increasing in the creative and cultural sector. There are 52,391 of them or 18% of the enterprises in the enterprises in the Culture Core. The presence of women is exceptionally high in the heritage (31.8%), in high-yielding fashion cooperatives are made up of 95% women members, while it is lower in the architecture and design (6.5%) and video games and software (9.6%) sectors.

Participation and experience of women are fundamental for promoting processes of social inclusion. CoopCulture recognises in cooperatives a form of a sustainable enterprise founded on democracy and people, defending their dignity and safety in the workplace, rooted in territories by activating original forms of interaction and exchange for the growth of the populace, and always forming relations with the different actors in the logic of sharing and networking.

## **4.2. The Spanish case: Famylias**

According to the research carried out by the Confederación Española de Cooperativas de Trabajo Asociado (COCTEA) in 2019, the process of work inclusion for women in Spain has advanced rapidly and keeps on growing. Spain is one of the European countries where women have a situation closer to men in the labour market, although the differences between regions are still relevant. However, after the economic crisis of 2008, women have become poorer, to a greater extent than men. The economic recovery in Spain has had a more significant impact on men than on women, with a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion for women in 2017. Since the beginning of the crisis recovery, men find employment more efficiently, and women's average annual salary is almost 6,000 euros lower than men.

Moreover, as the research notices, the limited presence of women in managerial positions remains one of the most significant gender gaps in the Spanish labour market. "There are almost 2.2 male managers for every woman. Only 3.8% work as managers compared to 7.5% of men". However, those figures seem to be mitigated within the cooperative sector. In Spain, more than 50% of the enterprises that form the Social Economy are cooperatives. 50.1% of the employees who form cooperatives are women, and 54% of the management and leadership positions in cooperatives are held by women. In terms of women's relationship with the cooperative, 78.7% are working members. Besides, the average number of children per cooperative woman has increased. The age of the women is between 35 and 44 years old, women under 25 years of age are low, which leads to considering that actions should be taken to disseminate the "cooperative" model among young women. In the last 15 years, women have joined or created cooperatives and social economy enterprises with higher training levels than in the previous 10 years. From the Social Economy and the equality cooperatives, carrying out equality plans has become a priority objective, even though it is not a legal obligation: risk prevention plans exist in 90% of the cooperatives, and equality plans exist in 51% of the cooperatives. Through these plans, it is possible to eliminate and establish measures to remove the obstacles that prevent or hinder effective equality between women and men and eliminate gender discrimination in companies.

To sum up, considering the overall Spanish socio-economic context, cooperatives can be considered an example of gender equity. Still, this context shows a favourable scenario for women working in cooperatives with

numbers more aligned with the European purposes and the Sustainable Development Goal number 5 adopted by the United Nations.

One of the examples of cooperative that contribute to achieving the SDG5 in Spain is Famylias (<https://www.famylias.org/>). Famylias, formalised in April 2013 as a Social Initiative Cooperative, is a non-profit that works to make visible and value the different family models that coexist today in our society. Famylias aims to consolidate the organisation as a reference for public and private organisations that defend diversity in society due to their management capacity and innovative spirit to generate resources that cover current social needs. Famylias contributes to the visibility of diversity in all areas of life as a source of wealth. Creativity and creative thinking are alternative approaches to solve problems and to generate transformation in women's life. It is a bond that ties all women. Since the opening, Famylias founds it necessary and always emphasise to them that they all have resources. "*Nobody arrives at Famylias space or any space with an empty backpack.*" Famylias represents a second chance for women to get out of the perverse circle of precariousness in which unskilled work, unemployment, dependence on subsidies and the black economy alternate. They generate resources for families and professionals that allow the visibility, manifestation, and care of all forms of diversity, developing social innovation initiatives through products, services and processes that create value for society. They harness the potential and opportunities of different expressions of diversity that contribute to creating more inclusive societies. Their main objective is to achieve a more equitable and sustainable society contributing to the integration, visibility, and enhancement of diversity in all areas of life, especially the different families that do not respond to the established norm.

Famylias - Areas of work	
EDUCATION:	Training aimed at diverse families, to improve their skills in the field of child rearing and the visibility and dignification of their reality. Specialized training of professionals in the field of family diversity to train them allowing a specialized intervention according to the peculiarities of each family model.
VULNERABLE GROUPS:	Direct intervention with vulnerable populations developing in parallel professional training in the field of sewing, empowerment, and the development of entrepreneurship scenarios. Playful and therapeutic spaces that allow the expression of feelings and emotions and social and cultural integration.

EVENTS:	Edition of workshops, seminars and conferences aimed at improving the quality of life of children and young people, coming from realities of family diversity.
INNOVATIVE INTERVENTIONS:	Developing methodologies for innovative programs, of high social importance. Experimentation of these methodologies and promotion of interoperation spaces: Gkoop, interfamilial, creative textile coworking.
MENTORING:	Assisted management to accompany the creation and consolidation of cooperatives of initiative and social integration, apply design thinking techniques, canvas model, business mentoring, and so on.

### Gender prospective for developing a new social integration cooperative: Customizando

In 2016 Famylias launched a “tailored” enterprise Customizando (<https://customizando.org/>), a non-profit Social Integration Cooperative to work in the sector of creative design and artisanal textile transformation giving a second life to clothing already in disuse, dignifying textile work, and as a labour alternative for different women. Furthermore, production workshop, training space and professional entrepreneurship focusing on sustainable and ethical fashion are also combined with empowerment and cooperative entrepreneurship. The workshop comprises consolidated and amateur professionals who teach economic sustainability, promote environmental culture, and develop social projects.

The Customizando cooperative implement three main activities:

1. **Textile workshop at the service of professionals and corporations.** They design, patronage, prototype, make and offer technical advice in the textile field to retail, entrepreneurs, third sector entities, public administrations, and consolidated companies.
2. **Professional training in the field of sewing.** They offer ongoing training at different competence levels for those who want to develop in the sector. The line of subsidised training aimed at women in a situation of vulnerability and without economic resources stands out.
3. **Own brand development:** Customizing We design, make and market our collection based on textile recycling. Artisan garments made with surplus fabrics or reused textiles provide a unique and exclusive value to our pieces.

The project allows women to set up their own business and the economic independence in decision-making that they gain. This is the key to make

women empowered. Women who mostly interrupt their professional career during the formative stage take care of reproduction tasks or migrate to more promising destinations. The return to the labour market is marked by the pressing need for income for subsistence and too often involves entering a vicious circle system in which periods of unemployment alternate with periods of underemployment. That is why it is essential to rethink education with a more inclusive approach like the ARACNE model (<https://www.aracneplus.famylia.org/>), which avoids the traditional method of encapsulated and decontextualised training.

Instead, the model starts from users' existing knowledge and skills and continues by developing these according to their interests and professional goals. 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. Promoting education and training can contribute to women's empowerment in terms of capacity building and employment taking into account their specific situation.

## 5. Conclusion

In the last decade, particular attention has been given to women's labour market participation, and valuable progress has been made; nevertheless, the persistency of inequalities such as the gender pay gap, access to labour markets, and balance in leadership positions are still present.

This working paper provides an overview of the potential effectiveness of SSEs in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, showing evidence from the literature reviews and various examples in Europe highlighting why and how SEEs can improve gender equality at work.

Social and solidarity economy is guided by principles of cooperation, solidarity, and democratic self-management. These prioritise social and, often, environmental objectives beyond the profit motive—have a strong local component and characteristics that can foster transformative change (UNRISD, 2017). Based on their values and principles, they should be at the forefront of moving towards greater gender balance in leadership and senior management positions. (ILO, 2014).

Flexible employment opportunities or specific services developed within the enterprise are examples of innovative solutions designed by the SEEs to encourage work-life balance and achieve the SDGs related to gender equality and women empowerment (SDG 5, 8, 10).

The case studies presented suggest that there are many opportunities for the SEEs of promoting women leadership and advancing gender equality through internal measures. However, this phenomenon is underrepresented. What is the problem?

Even if women constitute nearly 60% of Europe's employment in social and solidarity economy, they are not visible. They need the support of civil society and recognition by governments. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen gender mainstreaming. Still, there are various outstanding issues such as:

1. Access to quality work.
2. Access to decision-making roles – underrepresentation in boards, leadership positions.
3. Difficult to access finance.
4. No access or limited access to some specific sectors (green sector, the digital sector, etc.) compared to other less attractive sectors such as health, personal services, cleaning, catering.
5. Lack of confidence in their careers.
6. Unshared charge of childcare and unpaid family care work.

Moreover, female creativity and entrepreneurial potential are under-exploited sources of economic growth that should be further developed. It has been noted, for example, that putting more income in the hands of women yields beneficial results for general human development, as they tend to invest more in children's nutrition, health, and education (World Bank, 2012).

It could be perhaps worth underlining that SEEs are at the forefront of the sector like the green economy, creative industry where some women are leading on SEEs, and the gender approach should be mainstreamed and emphasised in these sectors.

Last but not least, existing literature reviews affirm that women recognise an initial predisposition towards the principles of cooperatives and their effects (e.g., quality of labour relationships, adjustment to individual circumstances and financial needs). As a result, women are often motivated to start their own business to achieve a flexible work-life balance. Therefore, how the SEEs are further contributing to promoting equality?

- i. Collective governance (collective decision-making power);
- ii. Improve working conditions;
- iii. Provision of professional training;
- iv. Boosting women's leadership;
- v. Provision of financial services.

The involvement of SEEs in groups and networks in other places and on higher spatial and hierarchical scales enables them to grasp new ideas, re-contextualise the acquired knowledge, mobilise resources (Ritcher, 2017), and promote an influential gender mainstream. Improving the ecosystem in which SEEs flourish can successfully and effectively ensure women's rights in the labour market and equality between men and women. The existing literature on the topic is limited and focuses on cooperative models compared to social enterprises or social entrepreneurship. Therefore, more research and evidence on the role of SEEs in empowering women and promoting gender equality is needed.

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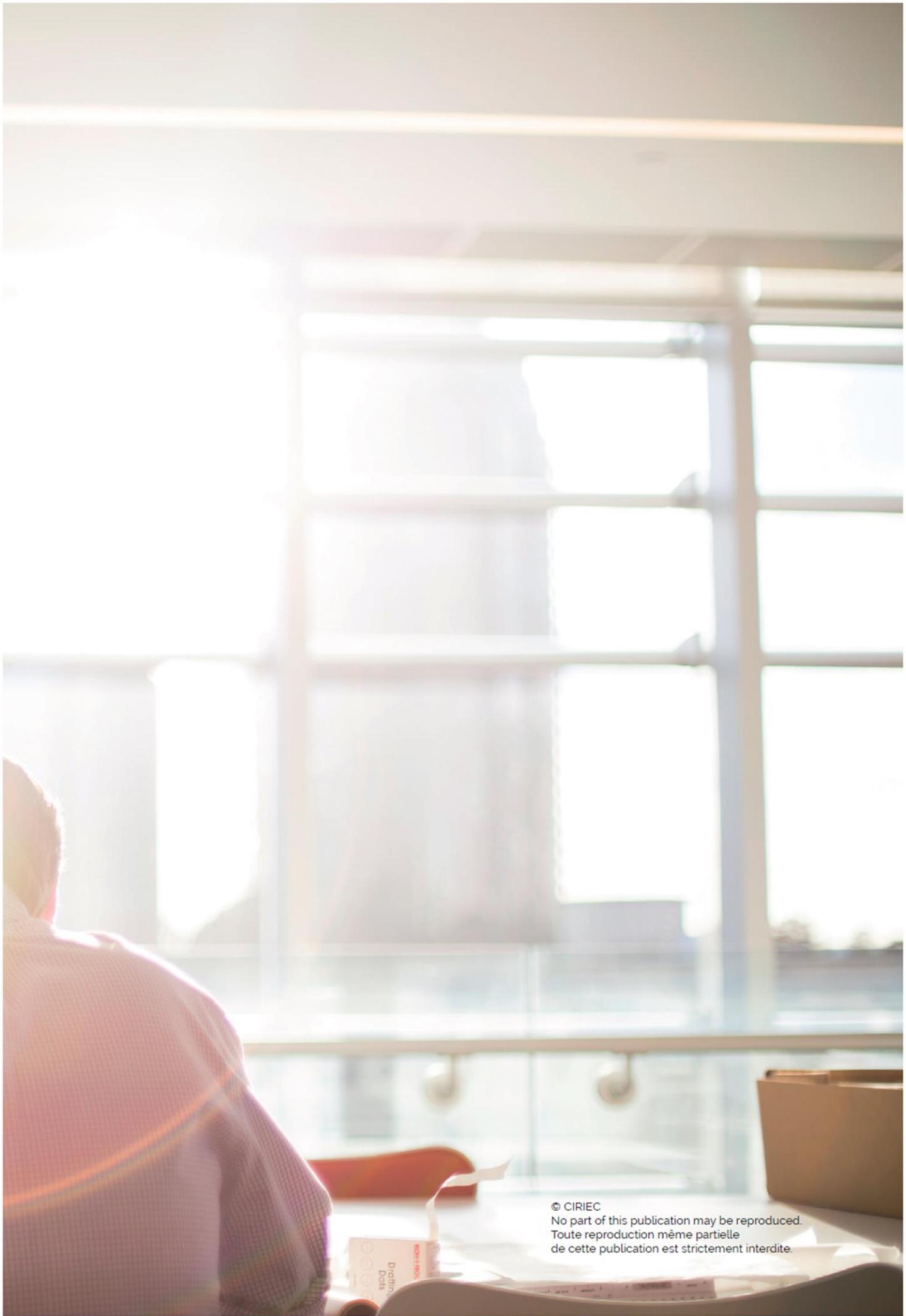
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