

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE ON WOMEN CO-OPERATIVES, 2026 CALL FOR PAPERS

Abuja – Nigeria
6th – 7th February, 2026

Submission of Abstracts **April 15, 2025**
Notification of Acceptance **June 15, 2025**
Early Bird Registration **December 15, 2025**

Women Participation in Co-operatives

Conference Objectives:

She-Coops will host an International Research Conference on 6th – 7th February, 2026 in Abuja, Nigeria to precede the Women Co-operatives World Conference. The Conference will bring together researchers, academics, students, practitioners, advocates, policy makers and representatives of Women Co-operatives and organizations working in areas of Co-operative enterprises and social and solidarity economy organizations as well as Women empowerment and themes related to Women.

The International Research Conference on Women Co-operatives will be an opportunity among others to:

- Raise visibility and interest in qualitative and quantitative research on Women Co-operatives among researchers.
- To provide a forum for the productive exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences among researchers and practitioners.
- To create opportunities for presentation of current results of findings in the field of Co-operative enterprises and social and solidarity economy
- Establish contacts and potentially a research network around Women Co-operatives for a mutually beneficial partnership

Conference Background:

The Co-operative business model has been a dynamic private sector engine for economic opportunity and stability around the world used by generations in empowering people in their businesses and communities. Co-operative membership is universal and its activities span the breadth of human need. Its fundamental values are not the preserve of any tribe, and can be found in every culture and region around the world. Co-operatives promote social and economic opportunity in a way that leads to increased economic and social well-being of the people providing an unprecedented opportunity to tremendously drive job creation and change the economic and social

trajectory of societies, while continuing to address significant market failures offering an inclusive model of employment and business ownership.

The Co-operative model continues to generate global interest and attention now more than ever before and it's receiving very serious considerations from Governments, Global Development Institutions and Non-governmental Organizations either directly or indirectly as an influencing variable towards achieving the SDG's. Given the unprecedented recognition of Co-operatives in UN Development Policy, which according to its flagship report secures one-third of the livelihood of the world's population, it is an indispensable and integral part of the global social economy.

Co-operatives directly contribute to the attainment of Goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) as well as Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and Goals 10 (Reduce Inequalities) of the SDG Agenda of the United Nations. Indeed Co-operatives are entering a period of renewal and growth globally as pivotal institutions for bringing about socio-economic development, making visible and significant contributions to national development. In jurisdictions around the world, Countries have successfully incorporated Co-operatives as part of the new economic system by increasing public awareness and have developed a brand for the Women's Co-operative model that is unique and inspiring.

Several others have made Co-operatives central to their economic policies and a meaningful pathway to resilience. Women Co-operatives is an economic example found in every part of the world especially in its rural communities where they are formed to meet Women's social and economic needs, providing sustainable livelihoods across societies. Women Co-operatives have continued to inspire legions of Women across the world unto the ladder of economic activities where they gain new skills and training, access higher quality raw materials and encourage savings. Millions of Women are being empowered through Co-operatives daily around the world, raising their incomes, becoming self-reliant and in the process overcoming stereotypes.

Co-operatives are humanity's most effective tool for Women development and empowerment. It is important to note that despite various flagship schemes carried out for the cause of Women empowerment around the world, the Co-operatives model stands out as one enduring even during times of crisis. This measurable difference that Co-operatives can make has positioned it as the fastest growing form of enterprises at a pace and speed like we have never seen before in the world. Co-operatives are uniquely positioned organizations that keep the doors of empowerment and opportunity open for Women and can rapidly enhance a Woman's dignity/ quality of life. Addressing Women's economic empowerment through Co-operatives can be life-changing for Women, and a very important step in advancing a poverty-free world, as this not only yields positive multiplier effects for households and communities but also contribute to greater social cohesion.

Women Co-operatives has been the quintessential foothold into the mainstream economy for Women especially in the areas of economic participation and opportunity.

We are very encouraged to work towards advancing Women's participation in Co-operatives to attain gender parity in Co-operatives in this Decade of Action as set by the UN. In today's age of economic insecurity and rapid changes in technology, there is now the opportunity to re-invent democratic self-help for the 21st century and Women active participation is the language the Co-operative movement must rediscover and promote in order to thrive (remain relevant) in the twenty-first century

This transformational moment calls upon us to not only continue to advance gender parity in the Co-operative sector but to accelerate it, as it provides an opportunity to advance our efforts to close the gender divide for a more united and inclusive Co-operative movement. We need to put the spotlight on Women increased participation in Co-operatives as they're the spark that ignites cooperation. Now, It is required that we research, develop and implement with a sense of urgency gender parity initiatives in Co-operatives, and this Decade of Action is our best chance to reverse this.

Participation is one of the Co-operative sectors most valuable assets and a major of the five pillars of the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) blue-print 2020 agenda. However, this goal has not translated into policies and programmes in the Co-operative movement. She-Coops work contributes concretely in advancing this legitimate goal of the ICA in the Women sub-sector and it is undeniable that Women's parity is key to achieving the overarching vision of the ICA 2020 – 2030.

As the world's biggest voice championing Women participation in Co-operatives, She-Coops is an international movement that gives Women around the world opportunity to join Co-operatives and go into businesses for themselves on the basis of economic democracy. Its objectives amongst others include to promote the equitable participation of Women in Co-operatives with the aim of achieving gender parity such as the **She-Coops 50/50 BY 2050** Agenda (A Global Action Plan for attaining Gender Parity in the Co-operative Movement). Women are a non-negotiable value in the development of the Co-operative sector and the **She-Coops 50/50 BY 2050** is a great opportunity to advance Women Co-operatives from a strategic perspective. We are no longer sugar-coating the conversation about equity in Co-operatives but deliberately building and promoting the Women's-only Co-operative Model.

Therefore we must continue raising awareness on the emerging importance of Co-operatives as a veritable tool and effective avenue for the empowerment of the worlds Women. This will lead to catalytic and crescive growth of the Co-operative sector and we cannot afford to lose such vital connection and richness Women combined contributions have created and exposed in the sector locally, nationally and internationally. It is time for the Co-operative movement to move towards Women, not Women towards Co-operatives. Women's engagement and involvement are critical in attaining the full potential of cooperation and why we advocate that Women participation should go beyond numerical representation to full, equal and effective participation.

The Co-operative gender divide is one of the largest gender divides by any sector. We "cannot afford" so few Women in Co-operatives and create a movement where Women

are squeezed into just over 24% of the space. This is a market failure that must be addressed and reason why the Co-operative movement is regarded a sleeping giant, because the people who can make the movement the best version of itself have been silent. Women are the heart of the Co-operative movement and its future depends on the opportunity it gives Women and Girls for greater prosperity. Increasing Women participation in Co-operative is therefore an important step to achieving parity and it is increasingly necessary to the Co-operative movement's effectiveness, impact and credibility.

A new analysis by the International Campaign for Women's Right-to-Join Co-operatives (ICWR-C) shows that, though Women comprise more than 50% of the world's population if they are supported to participate equally like men in Co-operatives, their participation in Co-operatives as members and workers can be much higher than overall labour force participation in most Countries. This could raise the global Co-operative value by \$2.5 trillion to \$5 trillion. Women represent a growth market bigger than India and China combined as the business case for widening Women participation in Co-operatives is clear. Closing the gender gap is a massive economic opportunity and a key to unlocking over 1 billion more potential.

There is an urgent need to build a critical mass of Women Cooperators if we are to play an active role and our voices heard in the sector, because the higher you go up the leadership ladder across the Co-operative movement, the fewer the Women you meet. Women suffer a disproportionately low representation in Co-operatives representing below 27% of its entire movement, and it was Women who made Co-operatives to thrive in the UK. Women constitute 79% of the Consumer base of Co-operatives worldwide and more importantly, according to the World Bank, by 2028 Women are projected to control nearly 75 percent of consumer discretionary spending worldwide. They represent more than 50% of the talent pool from whom we recruit our workforce, and constitute ½ the agricultural labour force in developing Countries. Also the ILO estimates, there are over 60 million domestic workers in the world and 80% are Women, they dominate the informal sector.

Women Co-operatives constitute 22% of the total number of Women-owned SME's. One-third of formal SME's in the world report Women ownership with higher than average start-up rates. Therefore we anticipate that by 2030 Women would see Co-operatives as a Woman's favorite company and catalyst for Women's economic empowerment. Where Co-operatives will go depends on us as Women, so let's expand the space for more Women and create a world where any Woman can decide when to join/start a Co-operative, and has the information, education, and means to do so. We need to bring Women's participation to the front burner and change the global narrative about their under-representation in Co-operatives as there is no better time than now in communicating this sense of urgency.

There is need to also contribute to improving the governance efficiency and performance of Women Co-operatives and their higher level structures in order to strengthen their capacity to access markets, create jobs, generate income, reduce

poverty, provide social protection and give Women a voice and representation in society. This will accelerate efforts in addressing critical capacity issues that hinders their growth across the movement on an international scale as most of our Women Co-operatives are still living in the past. It takes a tremendous re-educational effort to bring people into a culture that carries the responsibilities of running a business and sharing in a democratic process.

One of the most pervasive reasons why Women-owned Co-operatives fail is because the appropriate skills to set-up, operate, scale and manage the Co-operatives are not taught and understood and this goes beyond the statutory responsibility of regulators of the sector. Developing this strategic missing link of promoting sustainable development of Women Co-operatives is a key objective for organizing this Conference. The failure to provide Women Co-operatives the right, early years support has enormous negative impact on its development creating a dysfunctional sector inefficient to improve incomes, job creation, and revenue generation. There are numerous difficulties which might have been avoided through better interventions in the early stages of their development.

Having keenly and cautiously observed its pattern of growth across national boundaries, it has become expedient to implement a global comprehensive effort to efficiently transform poorly organized Women Co-operatives across the world. Without a crucial support to Women Co-operatives at this time, a generation of Women Co-operatives will be lost, and both their individual (members) prospects as well as larger community goals of cohesion, resilience, and equity may never be achieved. According to the Centre for Entrepreneurship & Co-operatives Development in Africa (CECODA) about 35% of Women-owned Co-operatives in Africa fail during the first two years, 55% during within the first five years and 70% during the first ten years. Only about 25% make it to fifteen years or more. These statistics haven't changed much over time and have been fairly consistent since the 2000's.

In our collective push to propel Women Co-operatives to greater height and reshape the world of cooperation, there is need for initiatives that can truly support Women Co-operatives to rise to its true potential. While Women and girls still earn less, own less and wield much less economic power, gender equality will never be achieved with Women having fewer economic rights, less control over economic resources, and less access to economic opportunities than men. Neither markets nor governments have been able to reduce inequality or increase inclusion; we have a third option – Co-operatives.

If the world truly wants to deliver on well-being and dignity for Women, it must keep its focus on promoting and advancing the idea of cooperation (solidarity) among Women as it is crucial towards supporting Women's emotional health and wellbeing. We cannot ignore the critical role of Women Co-operatives as it brings new life opportunities, greater economic independence, social connections and voice. Co-operatives offer a pathway to the economy for the historically excluded and Women are over-represented in this category.

She-Coops supports the development of a more gender equitable model of Co-operative that advances Women's participation at both household and community levels. It aims to meaningfully contribute in helping Women develop the confidence to participate more actively in Co-operatives by improving their level of knowledge and awareness which will ultimately motivate and increase their involvement.

She-Coops work is fitting with the mandate for Co-operative development outlined in the ILO's Promotion of Co-operatives Recommendation No. 193 (2002) which also states that ***"special considerations should be given to increasing the participation of Women in the Co-operatives movement at all levels particularly at management/leadership levels"*** It remains unapologetically committed to increasing Women participation in Co-operatives around the world to a whole new level. The overarching goal is to sensitize Women the world over, to actively participate in Co-operatives and pursue opportunities to drastically improve their means of livelihood and gain a resounding influence over economic and social affairs that directly affect them.

We understand Women's Co-operative to mean... Women who come together for a common cause to raise and manage resources for the benefit of their lives both economically, socially and for the welfare of their families, while accepting a fair share of the risk and benefit of the undertaking. It brings to members the benefits of joining forces to champion their own successes by working together and become autonomous and self reliant, individually and collectively, and in terms of their decision making ability. It brings to Women greater economic security, enhanced status and voice in the community and society in general. Thus, the value of Co-operatives in improving Women's lives and livelihoods cannot be over-emphasized as it remains an important agency to improve their well-being, build positive identity and fulfillment of self, necessary to exert positive, social and economic influence at household and community levels..

The Co-operative Charter for Women and Girls states that...**No Woman and Girl, no matter where they live, where they grow up, or where they work should be left out in a Co-operative, whether in the work place, organization, household or community including the marginalized and most vulnerable in our society.** We believe a world where Women are economically empowered will be a fairer, happier, and more prosperous place to live. **Empowered Women are the future of the world.**

We are aware that in the last three years, many Women around the world lost their jobs due to the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic, and many also saw loss of household incomes. In an effort to get income to support themselves and their families, many Women quickly joined Co-operatives for the first time. Today, a good number of those Women earn a fair income from Co-operatives, controlling their own economic resources, and dictating the course of their own lives. Evidence from around the world shows a rich tapestry of the invaluable contributions Women Co-operatives are making to Women's economic security, well-being, and happiness. The social connection Co-operatives provides matters to Women's health and wellbeing and is a vital lifeline for millions across the world before, during and after the pandemic.

As communities of true belonging, Co-operatives has become a form of social protection for Women. When Women are enabled to join and effectively participate in Co-operatives, the gains in terms of economic, social or psychological effects are significant. Co-operatives empower Women economically by enhancing their collective power and enabling them to leverage enhanced market opportunities and a critical link to the formal economy. It is also a vehicle to enable Women become leaders, unite in solidarity and provide a network of mutual support to overcome restrictions to pursue commercial or economic activities. Co-operatives can make Women's voices to be heard from an under-represented silence to an amplified level and we cannot overemphasize the need to optimize potentials of the model to pursue more roles for Women, harnessing new scopes and opportunities, especially in areas of economic participation, social inclusion and opportunity.

It is estimated that 55% of Women across the global south aged 25 – 55 are bound as a dependent member of the household and cannot make their own economic decisions, as they have no incomes, no jobs or assets. Today, a quarter of adult Women across the world have less than 500,000, a fifth less than 100,000, two in eight not saving at all. More than 25% of Women have no savings to fall back on. It is common knowledge that the savings of the population are closely connected to their well-being, and working together in a Co-operative is one of the cost effective ways to stimulate savings. The Co-operative model has an ambition to help move people to save and will help Women learn how to save, while giving them a platform to help each other.

While we know it can be hard for people to put money away especially with rising living cost, high commodity prices, and in a low interest environment, we must pay systematic attention to the underlying challenges of Women being over-dependent, poor and isolated by helping them build more secure and sustainable lives for themselves and children. Women everywhere are known to have a lower socio-economic set up and face wide gaps in economic opportunity due to many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy. The proposed Lift Her In-a-Coops Global Initiative is a project to lift 1 Billion Women out of poverty within 10 years through Co-operatives. This project is inspired by **“The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World”** a book written in 2019 by Melinda French Gates, Co-founder of Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The initiative is aimed at ensuring Co-operatives secures the livelihood of one-third of the world's Women population.

Through this landmark initiative, we aim to raise one million more Women Co-operatives. Although membership is a source of massive strength in the Co-operative sector, growth in Co-operatives is defined by expansion in membership, and at first glance this looks positive as the goal is to double the number of Women Co-operatives globally by 2035. Our ambition is bold, to support Women participation in Co-operatives for a more united and cooperating world. We need to change the narrative at this pivotal point in history as we are determined to drive Women participation in Co-operatives to an unprecedented level. Women are the backbone of every family, of our communities and are nation builders, thus supporting Women to join/form Co-operatives are a key strategy to empowering them to build a better world.

Women Co-operatives offers a powerful organizational structure that responsibly stewards the data of its members, safeguarding their interest while generating collective value. According to the **30-year Marathon: How Women Can Take the Lead in Co-operatives by 2050** a book written by Idorenyin Ekpo*The global Co-operative value can be increased by 25% if barriers to Women participation in Co-operatives are removed*". If we erase the inequities (barriers) that hinder (prevent) Women from fully participating in Co-operatives and substantially build a critical mass of Women Co-operatives, we will have succeeded in unlocking human potentials and created empowerment opportunities for Women on a transformational scale, just by creating awareness about **Women Co-operatives**.

The worldwide progress in Co-operatives over the last century has not translated into proportional gains for Women. This has made one-half of the world's available talents unwilling to explore the models full diversity in the depth it deserves and why Women remain under-represented across the Co-operative movement. To turn around this inequitable situation, She-Coops had announced the first-ever global goal for gender parity in the Co-operative sector aimed towards developing a future proof diversity strategy known as **She-Coops Agenda 50/50 by 2050**. The Global Action Plan is expected to provide guidance to the implementation of a strategy and key to unlocking a billion more potentials as it remains a transformative roadmap for gender parity in the Co-operative movement.

One of such strategy is the commemoration of **International Day of Action for Women Co-operatives** observed every October 17th. Considering the unique opportunity the International Day of Action for Women Co-operatives brings and by providing the broadest possible awareness, and greater partnership. It is an important milestone for the Co-operative movement as the overall confidence index of Women participation in Co-operatives is expected to rise significantly. We must recognize that feminine values are an operating system of a modern, social, and open economy. Therefore the untapped potential of Women remains a lost opportunity for Co-operatives growth and development the sector can't ill afford.

We must unleash Women's productive potential through Co-operatives especially now that the rates of Women economic opportunity and their participation are declining at a rapid rate. As a business model that significantly contributes to increasing the social welfare of people by enabling them unite in solidarity and provide a network of mutual support to overcome restriction to pursuing commercial or economic activities, through Co-operatives Women can change the world of cooperation and have the potential to transform it in a range of important ways. There is abundant optimism that as we unlock Women's untapped economic potential through Co-operatives and lay the foundation for a robust solidarity economy, it can drive Women's economic inclusion at a scale unprecedented.

The global Co-operatives value is expected to reach USD \$3 trillion by 2030 providing numerous and enormous economic opportunities that Women globally can capture. Closing the parity gap is a massive economic opportunity not just for the Co-operative

movement but smart economics as Women remain a key demographic to unlocking billions in new revenue in the Co-operative sector. As we progressively pursue a paradigm shift in the activities of Women Co-operatives in an effort to reposition the sector into a vibrant economic entity that can inspire entrepreneurship and trade, confront the challenge of wealth creation, poverty reduction, shared prosperity and employment generation, successful Women Co-operatives offers fine example of enterprises organized around true Co-operative principles.

As Women continue to use the Co-operative model as a legitimate option for economic development to meet their collective needs, it is the most compelling and best practice examples of how to launch micro-enterprises/ income generating micro-projects of choice with clear, practical and realistic steps that will allow them work out on poverty and develop skills of further use of the Co-operative model to support themselves, improving their ability to have greater control over their work, production, consumption, or savings and their habitat.

Without doubt, the Co-operative movement is a great organization but can be greater if half of it is run by Women. When Women are enabled to join and effectively participate in Co-operatives, the gains in terms of economic, social or psychological effects are significant. **Women are a non-negotiable value in the Co-operative movement** and if we fail to raise Women participation in Co-operatives, we have failed the Co-operative movement.

While organizations like these traditionally rely on retained earnings and member contributions to fund their business plans, evidence shows that these grass-root organizations have found themselves after COVID-19 operating in a very different and more complex business environment now when they have to compete for credit. Private sector studies and several other studies consistently suggest that a hinder to greater success for Women Co-operatives is the lack of financing opportunities. For historical reasons, far too many Women Co-operatives around the world are not credit worthy and considered high risk clients by financial institutions and are treated accordingly. Thus, assessing new and improved sources of funding is made more complex by their unique business model and when choosing the method of raising capital, Women Co-operatives can no longer rely on what has worked in the past.

As the funding landscape grows increasingly diverse and complex especially at this time, financing modalities are changing. Financing for local Women-owned businesses like Co-operatives during and after the COVID crisis has remained needlessly low around the world and access to funding continues to elude Women. The last three years has arguably been the most challenging for many in small businesses as the financial sector has continued to fall short in creating growth opportunities for Women-owned businesses. Women businesses are a vast un-served and underserved segment when it comes to assessing finance for their businesses, and now facing even greater barriers raising capital for their businesses.

Assessing finance therefore is critical for Women and businesses for economic gains by enabling them take up economic activity(s) to support their families and livelihood. Access to finance is a critical determinant of any business strategy; success and sustainability. It remains a crucial pillar of WSMEs development. Like any other business Women Co-operatives need money to grow and compete and funds are less available now than ever before. According to a study by the Centre for Entrepreneurship & Co-operatives Development in Africa titled **Funding the Future: Emerging Strategies in Co-operative Financing and Capitalization**, shows that over 70% of Women Co-operatives across Sub-saharan Africa depend on loans for survival and the over-reliance on bank loans can be problematic in light of rising inflation, interest rates and regulations making them face few opportunities.

Access to funding remains a difficult and daunting prospect for Women and arguably one of the most important challenges facing Women Co-operatives. Today, Women Co-operative members face greater financial risk with many reporting credit constraint with no capital to keep business doors open with less cash to cover costs. In a **She-Coops** survey conducted on 300 of its Women Co-operatives members across Nigeria details the struggles many Women Co-operatives are facing, as over 80 percent reported a decrease in sales from May 2020, with 66 percent reporting an urgent need of working capital. The unmet demand for credit amongst Women-owned businesses would cause nearly three times the amount of time it would take to recover from impact of COVID-19. What's more is that even when the Women-owned businesses start recovering, they still find success below their historical average.

It explains why a return to business as usual is simply not enough to get these Women Co-operatives working again and has laid bare the need for urgent measures of support to cushion its consequences, unlock trapped value and rescue Women Co-operative businesses. Given the complexities and challenges of succeeding under this kind of environment, with a complete absence of a short-term Funding strategy is likely to become progressively more difficult for Women Co-operatives to operate effectively. These findings made a compelling case for including **"Finance"** as a specific component of these research themes as it is widely believed Women Co-operatives are more weakly connected to financial institutions than mainstream businesses.

Hence, the need to consider launching a Fund dedicated to strengthen the broader fields of gender equity and empowerment of Women in Co-operatives. The International Co-operatives Fund for Gender Equity & Women Empowerment unveiled in 2022 but yet to be operational is the first thematic Fund on Gender in Co-operatives history established to support ambitious projects and activities that advance gender equity for an initial period of 25 years. The International Co-operatives Fund for Gender Equity & Women Empowerment is an initiative of She-Coops aimed at pushing forward gender equity initiatives and empowerment of Women across the Co-operative movement. This is an important milestone for the Co-operative movement as it will accelerate efforts in addressing critical Women issues that hinders their growth across the Co-operative movement on a global scale.

The primary objective of the Fund is to support the implementation of Agenda 50/50 by 2050 especially projects and programmes of the Global Action Plan for Attaining Gender Parity in Co-operatives. It will also serve as a granting stream to Women Co-operatives across the world r by transforming finance from diverse donors into high impact initiatives for Women (in) Co-operatives, investing in their ideas and abilities to pursue interventions closely attuned to Women and Girls. Through the Fund, She-Coops have created a vehicle to remove one of the steepest barriers to Women participation in Co-operatives – Funding their work, and shall boldly sponsor awareness programmes on the emerging importance of Co-operatives as a veritable tool and effective avenue for the empowerment of Women around the world.

It will act as additional resource of support to scale up activities of the Global Action Plan for Attaining Gender Parity in Co-operatives and shape its future by providing insights for programmes and high impact Women initiatives and strategies within the Co-operative sector that will impact Women around the world. The Fund will reflect the diversity of Co-operative cultures to make its work relevant in different regions as they plan to operate in varied and multiple jurisdictions across the world; thus making our commitment to Gender Equity and Women Empowerment in Co-operatives a broadly shared endeavour. As She-Coops lays the foundation for take-off of the **International Co-operatives Fund for Gender Equity and Women Empowerment**, in this year 2025, the next several years promise to be exciting ones for the Fund in advancing gender equity initiatives and empowering the rapidly evolving field of Women (in) Co-operatives.

As an initiative of the world's biggest voice championing Women participation in Co-operatives, we have great hopes for Women Co-operatives growth and development. The Co-operative model is a breeding ground for Women's socio-economic empowerment and remains an important vehicle that can contribute to increasing the social status of Women and Girls since they dominate the informal sector and are a linchpin in grass-root economic development. As transformative businesses, Co-operatives encourages self responsibility and present distinct advantages to Women as they remain exceptional in comparison with the increasingly common appearance of more informal Women groups.

Inspite of the business case for gender diversity, Women suffer a disproportionately low representation in Co-operatives around the world accounting for below 26% of the entire movement - a market failure that must be addressed and no longer possible to look away to magically happen. At the present rate, it will take nearly 70 - 100 years to attain parity in Co-operatives; a timeline we simply cannot accept. There is an urgent need to build a critical mass of Women Cooperators if we want to play an active role in the sector.

A study on **The State of the World's Women Co-operatives** which highlights the vast socio-economic contributions of Women Co-operatives across the world is on its fifth edition now since its first publication in 2021 at the start of this decade providing insights on the factors driving and inhibiting their advancement, addressing Women's economic

empowerment through Co-operatives, developing Countries have the potential to add billions in incremental GDP by 2028 and reach a global goal of doubling its number of Women collectives by 2030.

Participating researchers are to use their work to help unravel the world of Women Co-operatives, provide an insight into what conditions are the biggest disablers and deterrent to Women's Cooperatives around the world and track the global progress of Women Co-operatives against other WSMEs and businesses. Thousands of Women Co-operatives around the world remain invisible in official Co-operative data and statistics and joining a Co-operative should be among the most sought after for Women in the context of development as 72% of Women in Co-operatives have confronted barriers to their participation.

Our advocacies must include how to create wealth for communities through the empowerment of Women in Co-operatives to help lead more fulfilling, purposeful and pro-active lives. To put the voices of Women Co-operatives at the core of community wealth building for the wellbeing of families, the health of economies, and to ensure that in every household, a Woman is connected to a Co-operative as a source of stability and pride. This research initiative is timely and of global significance considering that 2025 marks 30 years since the adoption of the United Nations Beijing Declaration on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women. We believe this is a good opportunity for the Co-operative movement to review progress on gender equality and equity for Women with a view to informing a new global initiative that will increase Women's participation in Co-operatives around the world.

Also as the United Nations proclaims 2025 as another **International Year of Co-operatives**, it is indeed a fitting period to birth a research Conference of this magnitude especially as Women Co-operatives are playing a leading role in this critical moment for humanity, where there are enormous social, economic, and environmental challenges that urgently need to be overcome. This research Conference provides the opportunity we need to emphasize the integral role Women Co-operatives play in society, the economy and in upholding the very idea of democracy. We must work hard to create effective programs focused on Women Co-operative development and leadership around the world – and know there is more to do. Now, we've brought all our efforts together to create a unifying platform that we will use our collective knowledge, experience and convening power to push ourselves further and do our part to increase Women's participation in Co-operatives and accelerate global gender parity in the sector.

We can't change the past, but we can and we will change the future. Women (in) Co-operatives are deeply indebted to this ground breaking research initiative that will significantly change the course of cooperation. This international research conference marks a key step both organizationally, institutionally, and discursively in further repositioning the Women Co-operatives movement globally. We are determined to do our part to accelerate Women's participation in Co-operatives, and drive progress towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals particularly Goal 5.

This Conference presents us with an opportunity for a quantum leap in Women's empowerment globally. Remember, we stand on a gender precipice from which we must urgently act to transform the lives of Women and Girls around the world through Co-operatives. Let us turn our collective focus towards the future and all we still must do together to raise Women participation in Co-operatives and recommit to the unfinished business of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Conference Topics

The Conference will address, but is not limited to the following research areas:

- Women Under-representation in Co-operatives
- Mentorship and Women Participation in Co-operatives
- Women Co-operatives and Economic Empowerment
- Women Co-operatives and Access to Finance
- Women Co-operatives and Poverty
- Women Co-operatives and Economic Participation
- Women Co-operatives and Gender Equality /Equity
- Funding and Women Co-operatives
- Women Co-operatives and Livelihoods
- Women Co-operatives and Digitization
- Women Co-operatives and Trade
- Women Co-operatives and Social Protection
- Women Co-operatives and Entrepreneurship
- Women Co-operatives and Wealth Creation, Shared Prosperity,
- Women Co-operatives and Resilient Communities
- Women Co-operatives and the SDGs
- Women Co-operatives and Climate Change
- Women Co-operatives and Peace
- Women Co-operatives and Food Security
- Women Co-operatives and Inclusive Development
- Women Co-operatives and Legislations and Policies
- Women Co-operatives and Informal Workers
- Women Co-operatives and Decent Work
- Women Co-operatives and Health

- Women Co-operatives and Agriculture

Call for Papers

We invite practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in the Co-operative and social and solidarity economy to submit an abstract no longer than 500 words on the listed topics related to Women Participation in Co-operatives. Proposals for presentations or for panels (up to six participants) and sessions (three or four presenters of research papers on a common theme) are welcome.

The abstracts should be submitted by email to researchconference@womencooperativesworldconference.org no later than April 15, 2025.

The email communications should indicate IRC-WCWC2026 and the family name of the corresponding author in the subject area (eg. IRC-WCWC2026 - Elizabeth). The message should indicate clearly the type of proposal – paper abstract, panel, or a session. A panel or session proposal needs to include names of all presenters, as well as abstracts of all three (or maximum four) papers for a session.

Young Scholars Programme

Young /new researchers (graduate students, doctoral and post-doctoral students, and new scholars within two years of receiving their degrees) are invited to submit their proposals as indicated in the above Call for Papers, also indicating their wish to participate in the “Yong Scholars Programme”. Depending on the interest, a decision about the exact shape of the programme will be made with inputs from the applicants.

This may be a pre-conference workshop for new scholars, related to the themes of the Conference, or a discussion forum related to their research. The abstracts should be submitted by email to researchconference@womencooperativesworldconference.org no later than April 15, 2025. Limited space.

Young scholars will also be eligible for reduced registration fee. More details will be available on the Conference website closer to the dates