



*NRECA's Straight Talk
Cooperative Difference
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Women and cooperatives

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In honor of Women's Equality Day on August 26, let's take a look at the roles women play in cooperatives across the globe. Even though women in the U.S. and U.K. were not allowed to vote until the early 1900s, women were granted equal voting rights in the first modern era cooperative, The Rochdale Pioneers Equitable Society. Established in 1844 in Rochdale, England, the co-op's founders agreed that women should have equal voting rights. So you see, treating women equally has been baked into our cooperative DNA right from the start. And the cooperative business model continues to champion women's equality across the globe.

According to a 2015 global study conducted by the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives, co-ops have an increasingly positive impact on women and their inclusion in the labor force, and enhance women's ability to achieve positions of authority (both within and outside of the co-op).

In developing countries—where women have long suffered due to biased cultural norms, government policy and lack of opportunities—the role cooperatives play in the lives of women, as well as the role women play in cooperatives, is now more meaningful than ever.

In Paraguay, a South American country bordered by Brazil and Argentina, gender equality has transformed the Manduvira Sugarcane Cooperative.

This fair-trade sugar co-op has seen a dramatic increase in the participation of female members and leaders. Manduvira is a multi-service co-op with two types of operations: organic, fair-trade sugar

production, and savings and credit. In both of its operations, Manduvira has seen a significant increase in their success as women's participation grows.

According to several co-op leaders in Manduvira, female members are generally more likely to apply what they learn in trainings and adopt new farming techniques compared to their male counterparts. Because women are more likely to adopt new technologies and the co-op has seen a higher percentage of women in leadership roles, the co-op has become stronger and more stable.

This is just an example from one cooperative. In South Africa, women make up 60 percent of co-op members from nearly all sectors. In Japan, women make up 95 percent of co-op members in consumer cooperatives and hold key governance positions. And globally, more women join savings and credit cooperatives, giving them increased access to financial resources.