

Policy Brief 6



International
Labour
Organization

Enhancing the Participation of Rural Women Producers in Cooperatives in Yemen

Context¹

This policy brief aims to contribute to the ongoing debate over the role of cooperatives in generating employment and income earning opportunities for women in Yemen and elsewhere in Arab States. It is often argued that rural women in the region are more empowered than their urban counterparts as they work in the fields side by side with men. Yet their work remains mainly unpaid. Early marriage and lack of access to basic social services and land are pressing issues in rural areas, especially for young women. Economic progress for women in these settings is also hampered by lack of access to skills and training. Rural women have limited contact with agricultural extension service providers who often tend to be men, compared with rural men. Knowledge on new technologies is rarely transferred to women. Often such knowledge tends to turn a blind eye to the workload, constraints and responsibilities of rural women (Esim and Omeira, 2009).

Women work mainly in agriculture (88.1 percent) in Yemen. The majority of women in agriculture are contributing family workers, followed by own-account workers or employers and members of producers' cooperatives.

Formal and informal cooperative activities can be important in organizing rural populations to share risks, pool resources, and provide credit,



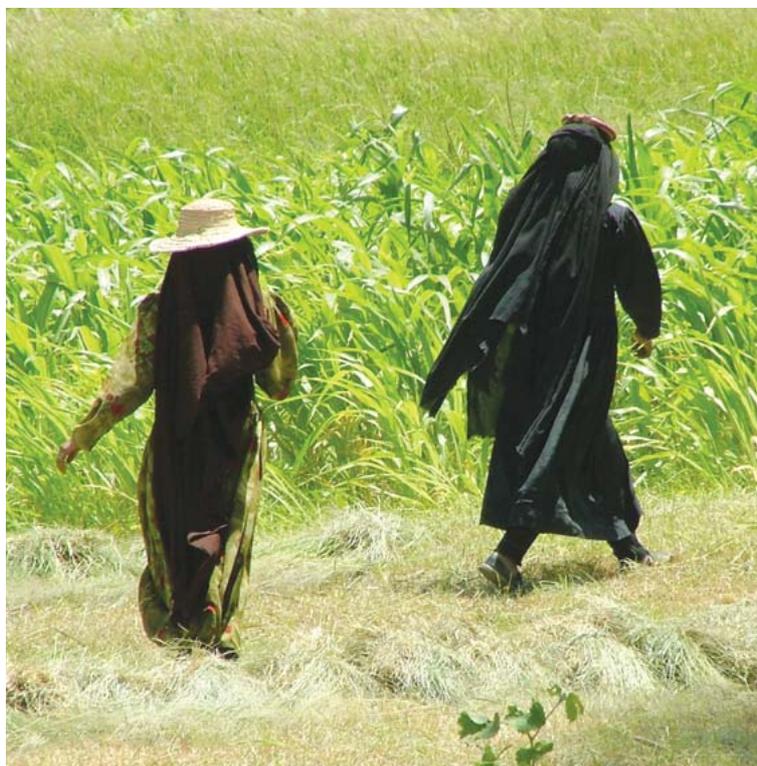
Box 1: Cooperative principles

- Voluntary and open membership
- Democratic member control
- Member economic participation
- Autonomy and independence
- Education, training and information
- Cooperation among cooperatives
- Concern for community

Source: The International Co-operative Alliance
<http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html>

¹ This brief is based on a study conducted by the ILO to assess the situation of rural women producers in cooperatives in Yemen that was drafted by Sevil Serbes in collaboration with Ali Al-Ashwal.





particularly for women who would otherwise have limited access, agency and voice in these settings. A cooperative is “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (ILO 2002). The principles of cooperatives further emphasize the open membership and economic participation aspects of institutions that can be identified as cooperative enterprises (see box 1).

As in most rural societies, Yemen has a long history of community solidarity and self-help

efforts. In the South, formal cooperatives were introduced in 1956 and in the North in 1963. The development of cooperatives was facilitated by a new cooperative law, issued in 1994 and amended in 1998, after the reunification of the country. This law defines cooperatives as “voluntary, democratic, social and economical organizations with independent legal identity”.

Rural women and cooperatives

Less than 0.5 per cent of total employment in Yemen is in cooperatives, although it is slightly higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Even then the majority of those employed in cooperatives, both men (82.8 per cent) and women (69.9 per cent), are employees paid in cash or in kind (see table 1). For women, the next largest type of employment in cooperatives is as contributing family workers (14.1 per cent), while for men it is as employers in cooperatives (6.8 per cent).

There are four main types of cooperatives in Yemen: agricultural, consumer, housing and handicrafts. Agricultural cooperatives appear to be the most widespread form of cooperatives in rural areas. Many agricultural cooperatives are inactive in Yemen due to lack of resources, management skills, limited government support,

Table 1. Cooperative Employment in Yemen, 2004, percentages

	Women	Men
Apprentice	8.6	2.6
Contributing family worker	14.1	4.2
Paid (in kind)	19.0	11.8
Paid (cash)	50.9	71.1
Own-account	1.2	3.2
Employer	4.9	6.8
Unspecified	1.2	0.2
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: MOPIC and CSO, 2007.

Box 2: Geographical distribution of women-only cooperatives

Nine active women-only cooperatives were identified in Sana'a, Ibb and Amran. No women-only cooperatives were found in the Dhamar governorate.

Sana'a: Al-Raid Naswayah (184 members), Sawa'an Al-Naswayah (140 members), Al-Amal Al-Naswayah (280 members) = 604

Ibb: Almar'ah Al-Reefyah (257 members), Al-Reef Al-Naswayah (54 members), Ardh Saba (480 members), Al-Salami (50 members), Al-Erfan (71 members) = 912

Amran: Kharef Al-Naswayah (144 members)

Total Number of Members: 1,660

and market access challenges. The majority of agricultural cooperatives are reported to be men-only or mixed cooperatives in which there is little participation by rural women producers.

Many institutions registered as cooperatives may not actually be cooperatives. Often private enterprises may register as cooperatives in order to take advantage of legal benefits and funds available to cooperatives. NGOs also register as cooperatives, although they are support institutions and not cooperative enterprises.

Out of 427 cooperatives registered with the Agricultural Cooperatives Union in Yemen only ten are women-only cooperatives (see box 2). Of the rural women interviewed most indicated that they prefer to be a part of women-only cooperatives. They also noted that in mixed cooperatives men tended to dominate management decisions and responsibilities. The goals for starting up a cooperative tend to be quite different for men and women. While men-only cooperatives and mixed cooperatives tend to have profit as a key reason for establishing cooperatives, women-only cooperatives tend to be more concerned with establishing solidarity and achieving empowerment among their

members. Both sets of goals are congruent with the internationally set principles of cooperatives.

Based on how small their numbers are, it may be argued that a focus on cooperatives for rural women can not be based on the actual role of formal cooperatives but on their potential. While it is important not to paint an overly optimistic picture, it is also possible to argue that if challenges to rural women's participation in cooperatives were to be alleviated, this could allow for sharing risk, pooling resources, learning together, generating income, and balancing work and family responsibilities. The labour intensive nature of cooperatives can support employment expansion, and their decision-making process can contribute to improving women's position and status (Esim and Omeira, 2009).

Challenges to rural women producers' participation in cooperatives

Legislative framework and legal rights

Box 3: Tribal law appears to be more prevalent in some governorates

Women in rural areas, tribal women in particular, appear to be subject to greater restrictions on inheritance rights. Imran, Hajja, Mahweed, Shabwa, Marib, and al-Jawf governorates are mainly ruled by tribal customary laws that may constrain rural women's access to information, services and market resources. Personal status law may also limit women's mobility especially in rural areas where they need permission from their husbands or guardians if they want to leave home to travel. This restricts their ability to move freely to sell their products, go to the bank, open bank accounts, register a business and engage in self employment. Women are either unaware of their legal rights or do not claim them because of social pressures.

Box 4: Juma'a Ali's successful incense business

In order to improve her family's financial situation Juma'a Ali decided to produce incense and creatively designed incense burners at home. "Life here in the Lahji countryside is very tough. The only resource is rain and that is mainly of use to those who own and farm the land. The only choice I saw for myself was to start this incense business". In a couple of months, and with the help of her husband, Juma'a was selling her incense in the markets of Lahj. Two years later, she started receiving orders from traders in Aden because of the high quality of her products. The success of her business helped her raise and educate her children: today, her daughter is studying medicine at Aden University and her three younger children are in secondary school. Juma'a has recently bought her husband a motorcycle that he uses to contribute to family income.

Yemen is one of the countries with the highest rate of ratifications of international labour conventions among the Arab States. In 1979 the government made a formal commitment to eliminating all forms of discrimination against women. Yet, inequalities in personal status and inheritance laws and practices persist.

Although the Yemeni Labour Law and Civil Service Law prohibits gender discrimination in wages, salaries, promotions and working conditions, most rural women producers do not know about their rights working long hours in unsafe conditions, with little or no pay and no proper health or maternal care (see box 3).

The Yemeni cooperative law stipulates a minimum capital input of 500,000YR to establish women's cooperatives. Though less than what is required for men-only cooperatives, it is still too much for poor rural women to raise, yet another obstacle to develop cooperatives. While individual women enterprises do exist in

rural Yemen (see box 4), they are still quite few in numbers. Significant financial and non-financial support services are needed to increase their numbers.

Role of Social Norms

Social restrictions on mobility are often quoted as a key constraint to women's access to resources including information and markets. Such restrictions, while widespread, are not fixed and vary based on a number of factors including regional differences. Prevailing social norms are also challenged by poverty, conflict, and displacement. In addition, despite the prevalent rates of illiteracy among women especially in rural areas, there is growing access to education which brings about new aspirations among young women.

"It is frowned upon for a woman to go to the market alone to sell products. So people come to me to buy my products. Sometimes, I sell to the people in the village and to people I know". A rural woman producer

Box 5: Radhyah Al-Hajji's dreams postponed

Radhyah is a young woman who lives in the small village of Bait Al-Hajji, in the rural area of Dhammar Governorate. Radhyah quit primary school to help her family in the fields. When she turned sixteen, she got close to her dream of becoming a famous woman trader in herd. She bought 20 sheep and a cow with financial support of her father. Today Radhyah only has three sheep and a cow "I had to sell most of the cattle because my family and I needed the money. The last three years have been extremely dry farming seasons. There was no water. The wells dried up and the government has not supported us with drilling projects". In addition, training courses provided in her region are mainly in sewing and wool knitting. Radhyah says that these may be good services but "of no use to me in fulfilling my dreams".



“In mixed cooperatives, men tend to control and manage the funds and the decisions while women are confined to production only. This can cause tensions and has even led to closing of cooperatives”.
A rural woman producer

Gender mainstreaming in the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MoAI)

Access to information and resources

Budget allocations and services provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and irrigation (MoAI) are limited. Moreover, there is a lack of veterinary and agricultural services such as pesticides, fertilizers, seeds and rain-fed irrigation systems (water pumps and ploughs among others) (see box 5). Hence cooperatives depend on international outside funding sources which is a challenge to sustainability. In addition, while the lack of access to transport and basic road infrastructure in rural areas is a challenge for all producers, rural women producers are further restricted from marketing their products and networking with other cooperatives.

Cooperative management capacities

Members of women-only cooperatives have limited management skills that can enable them to run the cooperatives in an efficient manner, to promote team work, generate income and to contribute to changing the mind-sets of cooperative members to a market-oriented culture. Capacity development of cooperative management staff and members could also contribute to break the marginalisation of women-only cooperatives.

Decision making in mixed cooperatives

Consultations with members of cooperatives revealed that the lack of women’s participation in the decision making processes of mixed cooperatives discourages some women of becoming members of such cooperatives.

Of the 21 directorates in MoAI, only three are run by women. Among its 12,300 staff only 1,500 are women. No women are members of MoAI decision-making bodies including its main decision-making council. MoAI observers acknowledge the need for the ministry to revise its structure, human resource policies, monitoring and evaluation systems and its decision-making body to actualize its stated commitment to promoting gender equality within the Ministry.

The creation of the Rural Women’s Development General Directorate, in 1985, was largely based on the notion that promoting the participation of women in agriculture is largely a women’s issue. This has resulted in a series of isolated activities that are not well integrated into the mainstream policies and programs of the ministry. Despite some efforts to form links with other departments and to develop capacities, insufficient human resources and budget allocations have resulted in marginalizing the directorate and impeding the goal of mainstreaming of gender equality issues within the MoAI.

Looking forward: Some reflections and recommendations

The following are some reflections and recommendations for policy, programmatic and institutional changes that may enhance the work of rural women producers and their cooperatives in Yemen.



- Creating improved understanding of cooperatives and the value of collective work entailed in cooperatives among rural women producers

Modelling cooperative and skills training activities for rural Women producers

Cooperative management training and other productive skills training need to be developed and implemented targeting rural women producers. This can be done through:

Recognizing rural women producers' rights

There is a need to ensure the effective implementation of existing legislation in rural areas:

- Synchronizing and coordinating between different laws (e.g. inheritance, personal status, cooperative and water laws) through advocacy efforts toward rendering them more gender-responsive.
- Putting in place strategies that can ensure the extension of social security schemes to cover rural populations in general and rural women producers and members of their cooperatives in particular.

Raising awareness and encouraging participation of rural women producers in cooperatives

Rural women producers' enhanced knowledge of their rights, and understanding of the value of collective work entailed in cooperatives is needed. This can be done through:

- Providing basic literacy for rural women in Yemen.
- Raising awareness among rural women producers on property and ownership rights under personal status, labour and cooperative laws.

- Training rural women producers in cooperatives management, project development and implementation as well as know how in resource mobilization and accessing financial and technical services.
- Developing capacity building programmes to promote women's leadership within cooperative enterprises in rural areas.
- Training rural women producer and cooperatives members on effective leadership, negotiation, marketing and accounting skills.

Facilitating access to resources

Support of public and private sector organizations need to be generated in order to sustain and advance rural cooperatives in general and rural women cooperatives in particular. This can be done through:

- Improving access of rural women's cooperatives to resources and the wider financial service providers working in the Micro Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) and Technical Education and Vocational Training (TVET) sectors.
- Implementing water projects in order to free rural women of the time consuming and labour intensive work of carrying water for long distances.
- Encouraging banks and other financial service

providers to extend suitable credit services and establish simple and accessible lending procedures.

- Encouraging rural women producers to build their own indigenous savings and credit associations.

Networking and accessing markets

Networking and marketing coordination is needed among cooperatives and other related private sector institutions in order to ensure their access to markets. This can be done through:

- Forming strong links between women-only cooperatives and relevant private sector institutions such as Arab Women Investors Union and the Business Women's Committee of the employers' organizations in Yemen.
- Engaging with business service providers such as SMEPS (Small Micro Enterprise Promotion Service) and ACUs (Agricultural Cooperatives Union) in order to access markets beyond their existing ones.

Gender mainstreaming within the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MoAI)

There is need for further gender mainstreaming efforts within the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, including the institutional decision making bodies, human resource policies and practices, and monitoring and evaluation systems. This can be done through:

- Conducting a gender audit and developing an action plan for promoting gender equality within the ministry including revisiting staff structure and job descriptions, resource and budget allocations, decision-making procedures and monitoring and evaluation systems.
- Collaborating further with the National Women's Committee in order to ensure their participation in the Ministry's advisory board meetings.
- Revisiting the human resources and budget allocations to the Rural Women's Development General Directorate to ensure sufficient allocations are in place.
- Including the Rural Women's Development General Directorate in the decision-making process of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation and linking it directly to the Minister's Office.





ILO RO-Beirut, December 2009.
Photo credits: Lara Uhlenhaut.

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