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THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETIES

Papers
presented to the Conference of the
International Co-operative Women's Guild,
Vienna, 1930

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Pamphlet

Published by the International Co-operative Women's Guild,
Stanfield House, Prince Arthur Road, Hampstead, London, N.W. 3.

Price 2d.

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The Rights of Women in Co-operative Societies.

The two following papers express the views of the writers and not necessarily of the International Guild Committee.

I.—OPEN MEMBERSHIP.

BY P. HARDSTAFF, J.P.

(President, Scottish Women's Co-operative Guild).

IT can be said, quite truly, that women have not yet taken their rightful place in the Co-operative movement.

The material progress of Co-operation, depending upon the purchasing power and the *will to purchase* from Co-operative societies, lies largely with women, whether as wives of members or as members in their own right.

This proves that women determine the rate of progress of the Co-operative movement, although they have a very small share in the administrative work of Co-operation, either because they are not admitted as full members with all membership rights and responsibilities or because they fail to take advantage and are content to take a back seat.

The question of open or restricted membership in Co-operative societies is one that should engage the attention of all women interested in the progress and development of Co-operation.

Usually, where restriction of membership prevails, it is women who are debarred from membership rights, and, as it is largely the women who control the purchases, it follows that for societies to place any obstacle in the way of women becoming members would be to hinder their own progress and development.

No matter how sincere men may be as Co-operators, they cannot force their wives to be enthusiastic supporters and loyal purchasers. Women *must* be part of the movement.

In Great Britain there are few societies that place any restrictions upon membership, and, with few exceptions, women are admitted as freely as men. There are instances, however, where some restrictions prevail. Some societies admit only one member from a family, who is nearly always the man, and some

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have what is termed *dual membership*, which is supposed to admit both husband and wife as members.

Dual membership, however, is a misnomer. There is only *one* member, namely, the person whose name stands first in the book, who can be either husband or wife. The second name carries with it no rights of membership. Only one of the two can attend the general meetings of the society, and that is usually the one whose name is first in the book. Only if he sends a written guarantee that he cannot attend is the second member allowed to attend in his stead.

In some countries there is a system of real dual membership, by which both husband and wife can attend and vote at the society's meetings on one share. This is much to be preferred to other forms of restricted membership. Nevertheless, open, i.e., unrestricted, membership seems to be the only democratic method that societies can adopt if they are to carry into practice the principles and ideals of Co-operation.

One argument used against open membership is that, while it increases the membership of a society, it decreases the average sales per member. While admitting this to be true, it is equally true to say that it *increases the sales per household*, because of the greater interest taken in the society by having a *family* membership, namely, parents and adult sons and daughters. There are few societies, in Britain, at any rate, which only supply foodstuffs and household commodities. Many British societies specialise in supplying the needs of young people as regards sport. They sell outfits for golf, tennis, Badminton, and hockey; and bicycles, motor-cycles, and a thousand and one things that go towards the sports' requirements of the present day. Our young men and young women, if members of a Co-operative society, will, as a matter of course, get these things from the society. Further, different sports demand a variety of articles of dress. Co-operative societies cater in this respect also.

Where there are sons and daughters coming to an age when they buy their clothes, they should be encouraged to get the *Co-operative habit*. They should be induced to become members in their own right, and encouraged to buy *all* their requirements from the Co-operative society. If our young people get the Co-operative habit early, they rarely depart from it. This is in itself a big thing, and, when we count the influence of additional men and women interested in the *principles* of Co-operation, we cannot measure the ultimate good that may accrue. Again, young people should be encouraged in the habit of thrift, and should use the Co-operative society as a small savings bank. Many young people, when thinking of marriage, begin to save towards that happy event, and, if they are members of a society,

quite naturally they deposit their savings with the society, this being of mutual benefit to the depositor and the society.

Open membership is good for the societies because it brings in increased share capital, thus enabling societies to develop and increase their departments, and so extend their usefulness. Societies cannot develop and open new departments unless they have the necessary capital, and dual membership, giving two votes on one share, is of no assistance to societies in this respect. Few societies have chemist's shops or hairdressing establishments, and these are everyday necessities, and societies should be encouraged to develop on these lines. In isolated cases societies have gone in for undertaking and funeral requirements, and have been able to reduce the prices considerably in their area. Capital is needed for developments of this kind. With open membership there follows an increase of share capital.

Then the question arises: How is this share capital to be raised? The usual method is, first, the husband is the member, and the dividend is allowed to accumulate until his shares—the minimum, as per society's rule—are paid up; then the wife takes out a book in her own name, and *divides the purchases*, and again the dividend gradually pays up the shares.

Women will never take their rightful place in Co-operative administration until we get open membership. It is very essential, where there are thousands of female employees, that a percentage of the directors should be women. Again, where the needs of women and children have to be catered for by Co-operative societies, it is absolutely necessary that women's knowledge of household requirements, the thousand and one things needed for the well-being of women and children, should be taken advantage of, and that the *special knowledge* they possess should be used in connection with the stocking of our shops, &c.

Most boards of directors are very onesided, comprised either of *all men* or nearly so, and they would be equally onesided if comprised of all women. While admitting that a real dual membership would make it possible for wives to have equal rights and opportunities to serve as directors, &c., it is still *restricted* membership. It would keep out adult sons and daughters, who may never marry and set up homes of their own, although they may *keep* themselves as regards buying their own food, clothing, and other requisites. They would thus be debarred from election, although their services as directors might be valuable to the society. Further, restricted membership is undemocratic, and does not make for progress.

The truly democratic and really progressive Co-operative movement will be one in which equal privileges, equal rights,

and equal responsibilities will be recognised, and no one shut out from the opportunity of service. Open membership will be one step in the direction of accomplishing this.

When the rights of women are fully recognised by Co-operative societies in all countries, and women's intelligence and influence brought to bear upon the many problems and perplexities that vex and hinder our progress; when we recognise that one sex cannot advance alone, that we must work together, and go forward as men and women linked in one co-operation, then we shall make international progress.

II.—TWO VOTES PER FAMILY.

BY DR. MARJA ORSETTI (Poland).

THE point at issue is to account and find a remedy for the situation, so undesirable socially, in which, with certain exceptions, those in whose hands lies the purchasing power of the family—namely, women as a whole—play only a secondary and unimportant part in the Co-operative movement.

There are two explanations of this phenomenon, and two distinct remedies, according as one views the Co-operative society from an individualistic or sociological standpoint. From the former standpoint the Co-operative society is an aggregate of individuals because everyone is a consumer; the second maintains, on the contrary, that not the individual but the household is the real member of the society. This conception is based on the fact that it is the family as an economic unit, that is to say, the household, which is the germ, the primary unit of society as a community of consumers. In spite of the present individualistic character of society as a whole, the satisfaction of the principal needs of the individual—food, shelter, washing, &c.—is conducted collectively within the four walls of the home.

Therefore, each individual who is registered in a Co-operative society becomes a member not in his personal capacity, but as the representative of his household.

If we agree that this is a fact—and, as far as I know, no theorist of Co-operation has ever denied it—it is easy to show that women do not possess equal rights with men in the Co-operative movement.

The tremendous majority of men shown by the registers of Co-operative societies is explained simply by the fact that the husband appears as the official representative of the family, the structure of which is still far from democratic, in spite of marked and undeniable progress in this direction. Although paternal rights have been gradually curtailed, and continue to be so, still the husband remains the sole official representative of the family, and because of this the membership book is usually taken out in his name.

This gives rise to completely paradoxical situations. It is the woman who comes to register her husband as a member of the society and pays in the share. True, in the majority of cases this money has perhaps been earned by the husband, but in every case it has been saved through economies effected by the woman in the running of her household. It is the woman, too,

who all the year through makes the purchases from the society, and yet, when the time comes for the elections and general meetings, she is excluded, and it is the husband who has the deciding voice on matters of which, not being in his province, he is seldom competent to judge, and in the details of which he has very little interest.

As is always the case with a false principle, this contradiction brings evils in its train. The so-called democratic basis on which the Co-operative movement is supposed to rest becomes an illusion, because the democratic principle of equal rights and equal responsibilities for all is thrown over completely.

It is natural that this state of things should offend that sense of justice which is innate in everyone, and there is good cause to believe that it is one of the principal reasons for the lukewarm interest taken by the majority of women in Co-operative work.

The fact that, with certain exceptions, attempts to gain women for the movement have not as yet met with the desired results is explained by this very circumstance—that justice has not been done to them in the internal organisation of Co-operative societies. Here we find the reason why those ideals of social reform, for which the Co-operative movement stands, have not appeared so evident to women as to arouse their enthusiasm. Yet if it fails to do this the Co-operative cause will never achieve victory.

It is not, therefore, as so many adherents of the individualistic theory would have us believe, either the general economic or social position of women that is entirely responsible for the present state of affairs, nor their own apathy which prevents their taking full advantage of the rights and opportunities afforded to them by the Co-operative movement. There are other legal and moral reasons arising from the fundamentally undemocratic structure of the societies themselves. Although no restrictions as to sex actually exist either in the Co-operative law or in the rules of societies, still *the principle of equal rights for both sexes has not been realised.*

It is evident that the remedies chosen will differ according as one adopts the individualistic or the sociological standpoint.

The first advocates the admission of women as individual members, either under the system of "open membership," i.e., membership open to several members of one family, or by the registration of the wife instead of the husband.

As a matter of principle, the rule of open membership does not seem to be right, because it fails to recognise the collective basis of Co-operation.

According to this system, in order to join a Co-operative society it would only be necessary to become a shareholder, as in the case of an ordinary capitalist company, quite irrespective of whether the member had the intention or necessity of dealing with the society.

It is evident that, as a general rule, the admission of an additional member from a family does not bring to the society fresh purchasing power or additional demand of any importance.

Further, from the practical point of view, the system of open membership does not supply a remedy that will be of real value to women, because the necessity of finding the money for the second share constitutes a great difficulty for those families which are not well off—that is to say the great majority. That is why it is impossible to look upon open membership as a really democratic and universally applicable solution. To advocate this method of obtaining members and at the same time desire to embrace the poorer classes of the community in the Co-operative movement appears to us a contradiction. Especially in those countries which have been impoverished by the fearful shock of the world war and its consequences—economic crises, high cost of living, unemployment—a campaign for open membership could not attain any substantial success.

The second suggestion, which advocates that the woman should be registered in the place of her husband, is equally undesirable. Although Co-operation may indeed concern women more closely, still this movement, like all great conceptions, concerns us all, both men and women. Moreover, as the victory of the Co-operative cause is not easy of achievement, the movement needs the support of the brains and the goodwill of all.

Let us look now at the remedies suggested by the sociological point of view. Here it is a matter of allocating the same rights in Co-operative societies to *both* the representatives of the home; to the husband as the chief source of its revenue, and to the wife who is the real ruler of its domestic economy.

There are two different ways of achieving this, both of which have already passed the test of experience.

The first method, adopted by the Swiss Co-operative societies, consists in giving both representatives of the household the right to deputise for each other at the elections and general meetings. Only one member from the same household is eligible for election to the governing bodies of the society, but it is immaterial whether this is the person whose name is entered in the book

or the other partner to the marriage. (The Basle Society allows any adult member of the household to act as deputy, which is certainly an excellent way of arousing the interest of the young people in Co-operative work.)

This method has the advantage of being very simple, but it is not entirely satisfactory, although an undoubted step forward.

A better and more complete solution is offered by the system of "Two votes per family," which replaces the old rule of "One member one vote" by "Every household two independent votes, one each for its two representatives."

The method has already been put into practice by the Norwegian Co-operative societies, which have the advantage of a very liberal law. Let us not forget that at one of their recent annual conferences the Norwegian Guild expressed the hope that the system of two votes per family would be adopted by all the Co-operative societies of Norway.

In Germany the pioneer of this reform is the well-known Co-operator, Bruno Zschätsch (the editor of the excellent review, *Die Gemeinwirtschaft*). The need for it is systematically advocated.

It is evident that this system means complete equality of rights for both sexes, and, apart from certain legal difficulties, there do not seem to be any serious objections to it. The consequences of this reform would probably be very far-reaching. By getting rid of the long-standing injustice towards women the movement would be assured of their loyal support, and from this it might receive that fresh and rejuvenating moral impetus which is everywhere so sorely needed. By widening the sphere of women's influence, both in the home and in the community, this reform would affect the whole of our social life.

It is undoubtedly a good omen that our idea had been conceived independently in several different minds. Cannot this be taken as a sign of its maturity?

We are led then to the necessity of modifying one of the famous rules of our honoured ancestors of Rochdale. But this modification would be, in truth, only a development of their principles in the sense of real democracy—that is to say, in their own sense. It would not mean, in fact, a modification of principle, but only in the manner of fulfilling the basic requirement of democracy that rights, responsibilities, and duties should be equal for all. The rule, "One member one vote," was, to use the words of P. J. Proudhon, "a first approximation" to the fulfilment of this demand, and in the days of the Rochdale Pioneers it constituted a great advance. Is it not time to take

another step in the same direction in order to achieve a still closer approximation?

This is exactly what the method of "Two votes per family" would do.

From the practical point of view the realisation of this reform will not be altogether easy, as it implies a revision of the laws governing Co-operative societies. These legal difficulties, however, should not prove insuperable once the significance of the question is understood.

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