

The Establishment of Gender Quotas for Leadership Positions in Cooperatives to Promote the Principle of Voluntary and Open Membership

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Abstract: The present work aims to understand whether the establishment of gender quotas for the composition of management positions in Brazilian and Portuguese cooperatives would have the power to fully promote the principle of voluntary and open membership. Therefore, an approach to the roles imposed by society on men and women and propagated by patriarchy is essential to understand why women created the feminist movement and how important it is to achieve equality. In addition, it is essential to understand the characteristics of cooperatives, as well as its first principle - voluntary and open membership - in order to verify the reasons why cooperatives become an ideal model for promoting gender equality. Despite this, in the Brazilian and Portuguese cases, the data show that there is a disparity between men and women from entry, but that it is more relevant when observing the managerial positions. Thus, based on this information and in view of the barriers that keep women away from leadership positions, understanding the conditions for implementing affirmative action such as quotas is essential to verify the possibility of its implementation in the case of cooperatives, in respect for the principles that govern them. In this way, the use of the focus-group methodology seeks to fill in the information collected by the doctrinal, legal and statistical study, based on the empirical analysis of the opinions of jurists and directors of cooperatives on the feasibility of the implementation and of alternatives capable of leading to parity.

Keywords: Gender inclusion, Quotas, Cooperatives, Leadership positions, Voluntary and open membership principle, Feminism

1. Introduction

Although women make up for just over half of the world's population, they are considered a minority group in society because they have a reduced degree of power compared to men, especially in political representation, being constantly discriminated in labour market due to their biological and social conditions (Ferreira, 2021; Calil, 2007).

This condition originates from the roles imposed on women by the patriarchy, which have made them struggle to achieve equal rights. Despite the great advances made by the feminist movement, there is still a long path for equal opportunities to be effectively achieved, especially with regard to leadership positions.

In this search, cooperatives is shown to be a viable alternative for women to climb up these positions, due to the values and principles that govern that movement.

However, current reality shows that even in cooperatives there are barriers for women to reach top positions, which is why the implementation of gender quotas is a possibility to change the current situation, once laws that ensure equal treatment at this ambience can be a capable measure to modify realities and cultures. Thus, the aim of this study is to glimpse whether the imposition of quotas is in accordance with the principle of voluntary and open membership.

2. The Search for Women's Rights

Gender concept began to be studied by feminists in the early 1970s from the perspective that the word sex refers to the biological differences between male and female according to their sexual organs and their reproductive functions, while gender is considered a cultural issue, as it refers to male and female social classification (Levet, 2014).

Gender ideas are maintained by social and political structures, defining behaviours considered appropriate for the sexes, imposing roles to be followed by men and women. Through these roles, discrimination based on ideal archetypes of women emerges (Delap, 2022; Ghodsee, 2018; Lerner, 2019).

As the historical-cultural configuration of female roles in societies gives a partial record of history, usually told by men, the marginalization of women's participation in historical construction generates their segregation and, even though they are the majority of the population, they are considered a minority social group (Lerner, 2019). As a consequence, the arbitrary division of the sexes becomes naturalized, legitimizing the social division

through the use of symbolic representations that create an artificial nature for women, the result of forced repression or unnatural simulation (Bourdieu, 2021; Stuart Mill & Taylor, 2021)

This female subjection in societies is called patriarchy or institutionalized sexism, a system that maintains and sustains male domination, based on institutions such as family, religion, school and laws. It is an ideology that teaches that women are naturally inferior due to biological determinism, prioritising men and sustaining their power. As an historical imposition, it can be extinguished by the same historical process that created it by changing consciousness and actions to feminist thoughts and actions (Lerner, 2019; Tiburi, 2019; Hooks, 2018).

It appears, therefore, that male domination, despite being built from a biological factor, became a structure forged and culturally reinforced over time, consequently being a historical phenomenon that curtailed rights and guarantees that would allow women to live on equal terms with men.

The search for rights that were restricted to them gave rise to the feminist movement, which, in the words of bell hooks (2018) must be understood as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression, allowing women to acquire equal rights with men.

Lucy Delap (2022) corroborates this understanding by pointing out that feminism can be considered as the set of actions, questions and intertwined and internally complex demands that have been formulated since the 18th century, or even before, allowing the awareness that women occupy a disadvantageous position in relation to men, demanding struggles to reach equivalence.

However, the challenges faced by the female audience depend on the historical moment, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, nationality and age divisions, stating that the use of the term feminism is a gateway to understanding how issues involving this group have common points of connection (Delap, 2022).

That is why the intersectionality theory must be taken into account, because systems of domination, such as patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, colonialism, affect personal identity in ways that go beyond these systems, due to their interactions and impacts caused by reciprocal relationships, facilitating the recognition and understanding that experiences are intersectional and identifying the invisible experiences of subordination and privilege, or even the resistance and oppression that intrinsically affect a given location (Crenshaw, 1989; Cabrera, Belloso, & Prieto, 2020).

As the legal subordination between the sexes is a mistake and one of the main obstacles to human development, in order to achieve the material equality between men and women, it is necessary to develop a cultural change, redefining their possible roles, either through inclusive public policies, or through social movements that provide equal treatment (Araújo, 2018; Stuart Mill & Taylor, 2021; Siqueira, 2020).

In this sense, mechanisms have been created to promote gender equality at the global, national, regional and local levels, in order to insert women in the labour market, raise awareness about acts of violence and prejudice against women, empowering them to take control of their bodies and their careers. They have been promoted especially by international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), which require the commitment of governments around the world to engage and create local means to achieve the proposed global goals.

3. The Observance of the Principle of Voluntary and Open Membership in Cooperative Boards

Cooperatives emerged as a reaction against the deplorable conditions perpetrated by the Industrial Revolution, proving to be an important tool for granting freedom and independence to man, by combining common work and solidarity in the pursuit of social well-being (Miranda, 2017)

As its structuring value is solidarity (Meira, 2020), cooperatives embodies a superior ideal of justice, which can be translated into respect for the human person, fair remuneration for the work performed, valuing property, love of freedom and the abolition of pursuit of profit-making, as long as they are guided by responsibility and mutual help to improve the economic situation of its members, who become owners of the business and obtain independence, ownership and free disposal of the fruits of their work (Franke, 1973; Gide, 2008).

Deolinda Meira (2022) states that cooperatives are organizations of an atypical business nature, evidenced by the primacy of the individual and social objectives over capital, for democratic governance by members, combining the interests of the members and the general interest; for the defence and application of the values of solidarity and responsibility, as well as the reinvestment of surplus funds in long-term development objectives

or in the provision of services of interest to members or services of general interest, voluntary and free membership; autonomous and independent management.

In this sense, ICA defines cooperatives as 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.

Values and principles have guided cooperatives activity since its landmark in 1844 and, over time, the ICA promotes a review of these guidelines, in order to maintain the essence of cooperatives, aiming to help co-operators run their cooperatives more efficiently and effectively. It becomes as well a worldwide resource to understand how the principles are to be applied in practice (ICA, 2017), as the principles are more than commandments of greater value for the legal system, they are guidelines for disciplined conduct to judge behaviours and take decisions (Becho, 2002; MacPherson, 1996).

The first cooperative principle is voluntary and open membership, as cooperatives are voluntary organizations open to anyone interested in participating and who is able to use the services, accepting, therefore, the associative responsibilities, without any gender, racial, social, political or religious discrimination.

Ian MacPherson (1996) explains that this principle reaffirms a fundamental commitment of cooperatives by recognizing the fundamental dignity of individuals, without propagating any type of discrimination. In this way, these entities must promote affirmative actions to ensure that there are no impediments to affiliation for gender reasons, as well as that there is participation in equal numbers of women and men in education and leadership programs.

This occurs because the cooperatives dogma is centred on the idea that cooperation cannot be governed by ideologies of any kind, nor should it lose its character as a voluntary movement or, even, forget the recognition of the fundamental dignity of individuals, allowing all population groups and minorities to benefit from the constituted society. It is a principle closely linked to the principles of education and democratic member control, as the participation of members is only possible based on the degree of information given to them (Miranda, 2017).

As cooperatives are legal entities, by means of democratic control, representatives are elected to conduct their activities. However, despite the need to observe the principles, women represent around 40% of the members of Brazilian and Portuguese cooperatives, while in leadership positions, about 24% of Portuguese cooperative female members held management positions, against 20% of Brazilian women in positions of president and vice president (Pedroso, 2019; Organização das Cooperativas Brasileiras, 2022).

4. The Establishment of Gender Quotas

The difficulty for women to gain access to positions of authority is due to the fact that the concept of these positions includes all types of training and aptitudes linked to male virility and, for women to conquer this position, they must, in addition to possessing all the requirements described explicitly by the position, present physical structure, voice and aptitudes such as aggressiveness, assertiveness, typically masculine natural authority, which generates a situation called double bind: if they present these characteristics, women lose the attributes of femininity and threaten the natural right of men in positions of power and if they act like women, they will be seen as incapable and unfit for the position (Bourdieu, 2021).

Therefore, stereotypes rooted in society configure a challenging position for women, who will have to break through these invisible barriers, despite having behavioural patterns that stand out more for the position than men, in addition to high levels of education and experience. Kristen Ghodsee (2018) points out that despite female activism in the last forty years, in the corporate and political environment little has been done to break male hegemony.

Across the globe, the proportion of men accessing positions of power is ten times greater than that of women, resulting in what Lucy Delap calls “patriarchal dividends” (Delap, 2022), which are nothing more than the advantages granted and enjoyed by men, fulfilling the pillar of contemporary gender policy, which makes it difficult to organize everyday life in an equitable way between men and women and is intrinsically related to issues not only of gender, but also of class and race (Marques & Oliveira, 2017).

Although it is essential that women participate in decision-making on an equal basis with men, according to UN data, this reality is still far from happening, since women represent 26.4% of members in the national parliaments, 34.3% of local governments and 28.3% of managerial positions (United Nations, 2022). These

percentages are a reflection of the glass ceiling, which, in the words of Monica Machado (2016, p. 29), “is a metaphor that seeks to elucidate the prohibition of women’s access to the highest positions in the occupational pyramid”, demonstrating the existence of a rigidity in the organizational hierarchy.

For Kristen Ghodsee (2018), discrimination against women in leadership positions is related to social attitudes towards women in positions of power and not to skills, which represents the unconscious gender stereotype that men lead and women follow them.

According to the UN, gender discrimination allows the subordination of women and girls to men at work, in politics and at home and, to eradicate it, it is necessary to create laws and frameworks to promote, enforce and monitor equality sought in all areas, including to ensure equal rights to competition and occupation of public and economic positions (United Nations, 2022).

As the social function of laws is to ensure fundamental rights, guaranteeing the inclusion of minority groups, it is essential to promote affirmative actions to assure the equality between men and women.

The function of affirmative action is to achieve the equality desired by historically underprivileged minority groups, based on the implementation of state social policies that seek to compensate and balance rights, allowing everyone to have the same starting point. Therefore, in addition to being temporary and exceptional, they must be committed to justice, so that they do not create unjustified forms of discrimination (Araújo, 2018).

Affirmative actions, such as quotas, seek to provide equal opportunities to minority groups in the enjoyment of human rights and individual freedoms, accelerating the process of equality between genders to condition gender proportionality in the election of representatives, at the same time that promotes social awareness of this need (Araújo, 2018; Macedo, 2014).

Legislative change that brings devices that force or strongly encourage gender parity in leadership positions is, for Kristen Ghodsee (2018), the only way to change the reality of male domination in this area and, in places where quotas were legally implemented, as in Iceland, Norway and France, studies show that this was an extremely effective measure, as there was a significant increase in women in positions of authority.

For the UN (2022), the implementation of gender quotas to reduce disparities in political and managerial positions is the way to meet the deadline stipulated by SDG No.5 regarding leadership, because without this type of public policy, gender parity in parliaments will only be achieved in 2062, while in managerial positions it will take 140 years for it to be achieved.

With regard to cooperatives, in a survey jointly promoted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the ICA, it was found that female representation in management positions is less than fifty percent, with a quarter of respondents pointing out that this participation is less than ten percent, although female members represent a higher proportion than these (ILO, 2016), coinciding with data obtained from Brazilian and Portuguese cooperatives. Then, it is imperative that cooperatives work to increase female participation in governance and management roles in society.

Although women have reached managerial positions, this process has been extremely slow, since female participation in cooperatives reflects social reality, with women facing difficulties in reaching positions of greater corporate representation, despite being members, demonstrating the existence of a vertical segregation despite the entity having inclusive characteristics (Senent Vidal, 2019).

This reality demonstrates one of the greatest contradictions between cooperative theory and practice, because female participation in governing bodies is an important milestone in achieving equal opportunities and, if cooperatives do not meet one of their main objectives, their credibility is lost, since the lack of female representation in these positions ceases to take into account their interests and needs when taking decisions, making them illegitimate, since they were not proposed and debated on equal footing (Cemborian, 2006).

In line with this position, Itziar Villafañez Pérez (2017) points out that gender equality is a fundamental legal obligation and an integral part of the cooperative values and principles and, therefore, closely linked to the social interest of the cooperative. Thus, if in practice such entities do not respect the principles and do not apply them correctly on a daily basis, seeking gender equality in all dimensions of the cooperative, there will be no adequate governance.

Hence, for inequalities to be eliminated within the scope of cooperatives, concretely applying their principles, it is imperative that these entities promote concrete measures to combat discrimination through internal public policies that encourage female participation in management positions, promoting the principle of voluntary and

open membership to eliminate discrimination in the governing bodies of cooperatives, generating reflections on democratic management.

That is why the imposition of rules that stipulate quotas to achieve gender parity in management positions is a promotion of the principle of equality, so valued by the cooperative movement, in order to balance representation in leadership positions, in fact promoting the interests of its members.

5. Empirical Analysis

By means of a focus group study carried out with two mixed groups of men and women, one of five lawyers and the other of five directors, it sought to understand whether quotas would be viable in cooperatives, in view of the data on female participation in the management positions in Brazilian and Portuguese cooperatives.

After discussing the data, the possibility of implementing quotas, the relationship established between quotas and the principle of voluntary and open membership, and more effective and faster ways to achieve parity in leadership positions in cooperatives, it was possible to reach the following conclusions:

The concern with gender inclusion is real and essential, as well as mechanisms that encourage greater female participation in cooperative leadership positions, since this difficulty in accessing these positions stems from a structural problem rooted in patriarchal social culture, corroborating what was envisioned by the literature review.

To overcome the barriers imposed on women in the professional sphere by cultural impositions, the promotion of education so that there is awareness and training of women and men, showing the importance of diversity for the growth of the organization in order to allow women to feel empowered to taking on the burden of leadership is the most effective and lasting path to achieving parity.

The debate on the imposition of quotas was a controversial topic in both groups and positions were obtained both in favour and against. Those who expressed themselves unfavourably pointed out that it is a limitation, whose application tends not to be something permanent, which can lead to discriminatory situations and questions regarding the capacity of the beneficiaries of the measure. On the other hand, those who favoured the institution stated that, in the short term, there would be no other way to change the very disparate reality of female representation in leadership positions, as it would encourage the participation and entry of more women into these positions.

It should be noted that questioning the capacity of women who entered by quotas and the use of the maxim that it is enough to show interest to reach such positions demonstrates that institutionalized sexism is not widely perceived, in addition to disregarding that Brazilian and Portuguese women have a higher level of professional training than men, or that these women are not members of cooperatives.

Despite the controversy, everyone agrees that there would be no impediment or violation of the principle of voluntary and open membership, since, in the first place, women would already be members and, therefore, there would be an encouragement to the participation of all members, in addition to being a change in the will of society, with respect for decision-making autonomy and democracy, emphasizing that respect for the characteristics of cooperatives should prevail, so that there is no male exclusion or an imposition for female participation of facade.

In view of this, it can be said, even in the face of the divergence of opinions established in the groups, that the statutory implementation of gender quotas has the power to give these qualified women the opportunity to exercise an activity for which they were formed over the years, being an important driver to promote equity, in addition to providing visibility for other women to consider this possibility in the future.

6. Conclusion

Although cooperatives have at their core all the conditions for promoting equality and non-discrimination, the disparity between men and women is notorious, especially when it comes to leadership positions.

This stems from the fact that the establishment of female and male roles is defined by the patriarchal structure rooted in the most diverse societies and worshipped for centuries around the world, imposing the submission of women in relation to men in the most diverse spheres of public and private life, demonstrating that cooperatives also suffer the effects of institutionalized sexism over many centuries of world population formation.

For this reason, the promotion of affirmative actions, as provided by the principle of voluntary and open membership, is a way of ensuring that cooperatives respect the values of equality and equity in their activity and in the actions promoted in relation to members.

In this sense, the implementation of quotas is a plausible way to achieve gender parity in management positions, as it is an affirmative action capable of generating female inclusion in leadership positions in a shorter period of time than if equity were achieved naturally, thus fulfilling one of the objectives proposed by the principle of voluntary and open membership.

However, for them to be temporary, it is essential that, together with the implementation of quotas, an educational program be created to promote awareness among all members of the need to achieve parity at all levels of the organization.

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