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# Gender Equality and Empowerment in the Social and Solidarity Economy

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# Gender Equality and Empowerment in the Social and Solidarity Economy

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## Abstract

The social and solidarity economy (SSE) has been successful in providing millions of women with good incomes and dignified working conditions, social services and protections, and sources of affiliation and solidarity that have positive effects upon their health and wellbeing. In the future, the SSE must engage with other persistent challenges to gender inequality, including women's underrepresentation in leadership roles, their inability to access land and property rights and to participate in politics at par with men, and the fact that women all over the world continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of household maintenance and caregiving activities. The SSE must also engage with the fact that not all men are beneficiaries of patriarchal privilege just as not all women are victims of patriarchal oppression. Moving beyond the "gender equals women" conceptualization of gender inequality will enable the SSE to recognize and rectify other forms of social oppression and inequality based on race, ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, and dis/ability.

## Keywords

women; gender equality; race; ethnicity; class; disability; sexuality

## **Introduction**

How can we build economic systems that recognize and work within the biophysical limits of our finite planet while simultaneously reducing poverty and inequality? This has become a defining question of our time and the social and solidarity economy (SSE) is increasingly considered a vehicle via which we might address this “trilemma.” Attempts to build economic alternatives to capitalism have been made all over the world for well over a century, in industrialized, emerging and developing economies. Some such efforts started from very idealistic roots (such as a desire to align the economy more closely with the workings of the natural environment) while others were more ideologically driven (such as a desire to demonstrate an alternative to capitalism that centers the safety and wellbeing of workers). Others, such as collective farms, non-profit daycare facilities or community based economic developments evolved out of sheer necessity to meet the survival needs of millions of people whose demands were either ignored or unfulfilled in capitalist economies.

This entry provides an overview of the SSE’s engagement with gender equality and empowerment. Why did the SSE sector adopt gender equality as a core value? How successful has the sector been in addressing the root causes of gender inequality? What are the key challenges and obstacles to gender equality the SSE sector must contend with now and in the future?

### **1. Reconciling shared goals: the feminist movement and the SSE**

The feminist movement and the SSE may not have started out with a common goal of gender equality (See the entry “Feminist Economics and SSE”). In the early years of the feminist movement, its primary focus was on empowering women to achieve equality with men within the existing global capitalist system via activities such as documenting the existence of male bias in economic systems and advocating for equal rights and opportunities for women. Feminist organizing and mobilizing within the capitalist system also involved documenting the value to the global economy of unpaid care work and informal work as well as advocating for policies aimed at enabling women and girls to gain equitable access to education and employment opportunities within capitalist economic systems. Over time, different voices and experiences helped strengthen feminism as a movement of diverse groups of people who wanted to restructure society globally along with principles of economic, political, and social justice rather than simply as a movement of women seeking socioeconomic equality with men. The feminist movement’s interest in, and active engagement with, the SSE grew in part out of the realization that succeeding within the existing global capitalist system would require women and other socio-economically disadvantaged groups to adopt the values espoused by it. In other words, they would be narrowly self-interested, competitive, individualistic, and mercenary (Matthaei 2009). They would also be expected to consume goods and services conspicuously and to participate in socially and environmentally irresponsible consumerism fueled by the creation of unnecessary needs, cost externalization, and planned obsolescence. Simply put, they would be compelled to adopt and reproduce a system that causes harm to the environment and exacerbates inequality. As the heavy human and environmental costs of playing the capitalist game became more evident, even feminists who had previously focused their energy on achieving gender equality within the global “zero-sum game” capitalist system began to welcome the possibility of alternative economies based on solidarity, cooperation, and collective socio-economic empowerment rather than individualism, competition, and elimination. The opportunity to participate in a creative, “win-win” production process which seeks to benefit all stakeholders (workers, consumers, business owners and entrepreneurs, local and distant communities, environment, government, suppliers, and competitors), and which is supported by socially responsible consumers, workers, and investors, and inclusive public

policy was welcomed by millions of people around the world; people whose needs had previously been marginalized in capitalist economies.

Today, the SSE has come to represent a persistent challenge to capitalist economies around the world. New solidaristic ways of being economic and doing economic life have been developing and spreading, creating new economic practices and institutions. These new ways of economic being and doing have been propelled by late-twentieth-century social justice movements, including feminist, anti-racist, indigenous, LGBTQ, environmental, worker, peasant, and anti-corporate globalization movements (Matthaei 2009)(see the entries “Activism, social movement and SSE”, “SSE and LGBTQI+”, and “Black social economy and SSE”). The growth of more solidaristic economic values, practices and institutions have also been propelled by the severe and cross-cutting economic, environmental, and human health crises that have been experienced around the world in recent decades. The recognition that “business as usual” and “trickle-down economies” will not deliver better lives for most of humanity or lead to better environmental stewardship is the backdrop against which more just, democratic, and sustainable economic values, practices, and institutions - and revitalized forms of pre- or non-capitalist alternatives - have begun to sprout, spread, and cross-pollinate across the world (ibid).

The major objectives of the global SSE, namely fulfilment of human needs, dismantling of oppressive socioeconomic hierarchies, optimal development of human potential, and preservation of the environment, are entirely consistent with feminist goals of women’s empowerment and solidarity, not least because women constitute more than 50 per cent of the global population. Feminist scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds have demonstrated the commonalities between global aspirations of gender equality and social justice and the aspirations of SSEs. For example, feminist scholars such as Waring (1988), Nedelsky (2014), Malleson (2015) and Folbre (2012) have written extensively not just about what care work and caregiving contributes to the economy, but also how vital it is for everyone to perform some form of care work to experience being fully human. Like feminism, the SSE visibilizes and values nonmarket economic activities such as (women’s traditional) unpaid reproductive work and community-building work (see the entry “Care and Home Support Services and SSE”).

In a similar vein, scholars of the informal economy have drawn our attention not just to the economic contributions made by informal sector workers but also to the ways in which formal and informal economies are mutually constitutive (Baruah 2004, Chen 2008, Jhabvala 1994, de Soto 2000). Furthermore, scholars working from Black, racialized, postcolonial, queer, working class and disabled perspectives have drawn our attention to the importance of subverting and dismantling intersecting oppressions and social hierarchies (Hooks 2000, Mohanty 2003, Garland-Thomson 2014). Ecofeminists and other scholars of the environment have emphasized the mutual inclusivity of goals of women’s empowerment and environmental protection (Agarwal 2010, Shiva 2016, Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangari 1996). Cooperation, equity, economic democracy, local community control, interdependence and sustainability are values and aspirations common to both the feminist movement and the SSE.

The compatibility between feminism and the SSE is not serendipitous. Advocates of gender equality and women’s empowerment have historically played important roles in shaping the values and practices of diverse institutions such as cooperatives, mutual associations, self-help groups, community forestry groups, associations of informal sector workers, social enterprises, fair trade organizations and networks, and community banks, as well as various forms of solidarity finance: organizations that are collectively referred to as the SSE today. Globally, women also constitute the majority of people in the SSE: in Europe, women account for 66 percent of people involved in SSE; in Canada, this figure rises to 70 per cent; and it is 80 per

cent in Africa (Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy 2012). Given the high visibility of women in the SSE and the well-established recognition of the value of engaging with gender equality as a core organizing principle of the SSE, efforts have been made around the world to systematically take stock of the opportunities and constraints experienced by the SSE sector in advancing global goals of women's empowerment, reform of gender relations, and social change. What are the major accomplishments of the SSE sector when it comes to gender equality? What are some persistent and emerging challenges and criticisms the sector must contend with? The following paragraphs attempt to present an overview.

## **2. Accomplishments and accolades**

The accomplishments of the SSE sector in advancing gender equality and social justice have been documented by scholars, practitioners, and activists in various world regional settings. The SSE in its various forms and iterations has provided women and other socially and economically disadvantaged groups including, in some contexts, low-income men, racialized and ethnic minorities, people with physical and intellectual disabilities, sexual minorities, refugees, and migrants with access to incomes and dignified livelihoods. Being part of the SSE has relieved millions of people around the world, including in some instances people who lack formal education or even basic literacy skills, from abusive working conditions or physically strenuous and unsafe work. As an example, an SSE organization called Technology Informatics Design Endeavour (TIDE) has successfully trained rural women in India, who formerly worked for daily wages as manual laborers, to build smokeless stoves from locally available materials. The training provided by organizations like TIDE includes practical technical modules and business-operation components. These organizations have been able to break down the training into components that are not intimidating, even for women who are not literate. The demonstration effect of women with limited education and social privilege earning a living by constructing stoves for a fee frequently motivates other women to pursue the training. Upon completion of training, some women have chosen to organize themselves in solidaristic ways to optimize their earning potential. For example, a group of women trained by TIDE to construct biogas cookstoves formed a cooperative. They travel in groups of two or more to build stoves in distant rural areas (Baruah 2015). Other SSE organizations and enterprises (SSEOs) have also created livelihood opportunities for women by providing training in skills and services that are often weak or absent in remote or rural communities. Examples include: the “master trainers” of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (Pakistan) who help women transition from subsistence farming activities to commercial production; the “barefoot” doctors, vets, and lawyers of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Bangladesh); the literacy workers of Proshika (Bangladesh); and the health and childcare providers of the Self-Employed Women's Association (India) (Baruah 2004). Such initiatives have enabled many people to transition from poorly paid, unskilled or menial activities, which have few or no barriers to entry, into activities which demand improved technical skills and, in some instances, increased amounts of capital, yet provide higher returns due to greater market demand.

The successes enjoyed by organizations like SEWA and BRAC in organizing and mobilizing millions of informal sector workers to achieve higher incomes and better working conditions are well known. Perhaps less well known are the successes such organizations have enjoyed in enabling their members to access stronger social security and protection via their housing, health care, childcare, education, and insurance programs. As an example, through the National Insurance Vimo SEWA Cooperative, SEWA provides financial protection to thousands of self-employed women workers and their families. When Vimo SEWA was registered in 2009 under the Multi-State Co-operative Societies Act, it was the first cooperative working in the field of

microinsurance in which both insurance policyholders and shareholders are women. More than 12,000 women from 5 states (Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan) are individual shareholders and 13 membership-based organizations of the SEWA movement are institutional shareholders. In addition to offering insurance services, Vimo SEWA prioritizes member education and awareness about various aspects of social security and financial risk management. Vimo SEWA members are also integrated into the much wider SEWA movement and have access to a wide range of services, including banking services, housing microfinance, childcare, medical care, and pharmacy services that are offered through SEWA's sister organizations. SEWA's joint strategy of unionization and formation of cooperatives in different sectors has been especially effective in addressing the needs of informal sector workers. In addition to raising public awareness about the importance of the informal economy and demonstrating its connection to the formal economy, organizations like SEWA and BRAC have successfully advocated for its members via the legal and labor machineries of national, state and municipal governments; they have demonstrated the need for social services and social protection to optimize the benefits of employment; and they have influenced the formulation of responsive policies and regulations at local/municipal, national, and international levels. As examples, the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Convention on Home Workers, and the Supreme Court of India's recognition of the right to vend as a basic human right, alongside the right to a just licensing policy for street vendors, came about largely because of SEWA's advocacy. SEWA's founder, Ela Bhatt, spearheaded the establishment of Women's World Banking, based in the Netherlands and the United States, with an aim to empower low-income rural and urban women by improving their participation in sustainable livelihood activities, through access to financial services. It was also largely SEWA's work that inspired the inception of Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), a global research-policy network based at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The network seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy through better statistics, research, programs, and policies, and through increased organization and representation of informal workers (Baruah 2010a).

Other opportunities created, and possibilities enabled by SSEOEs in various parts of the world that have helped reduce gender inequality include: combining resources for the group ownership of assets and means of production; building forums in which people can cooperate rather than compete for economic opportunities; accessing new markets, associations, subsidies, and sources of financing; and creating new sources of affiliation and solidarity. The opportunity to associate with collectives beyond those represented by the family have been identified repeatedly as a major benefit of women's participation in SSEOEs (Schuler and Hashemi 1993, Carr, Chen and Jhabvala 1996, Baruah 2021). Not having to rely upon natal or marital families as the sole source of affiliation has been associated with other positive outcomes for women, including reduction in domestic and other forms of gender-based violence, alongside increases in self-confidence, awareness of rights and entitlements, and personal agency (Baruah 2021).

### **3. Challenges and criticisms**

Despite these remarkable accomplishments, persistent challenges remain, especially when it comes to the SSE sector's ability to support gender equality and women's empowerment. The tendency for many women in the SSE to pursue feminized, often low-paid, and precarious economic activities such as tailoring, weaving, cooking, catering, childcare, and eldercare, is frequently emphasized in the literature (see, for example, Vadera 2013) since they normalize and entrench familial and societal gender hierarchies and divisions of labor. In recent years,



some SSEOs have attempted to break new ground by setting up cooperatives and social businesses in more skilled, non-traditional (often male-dominated) sectors such as transport services (Vadera 2013, Baruah 2021), construction (Baruah 2010b) and energy services (IRENA 2019). The early evaluations of such initiatives are generally promising, but the creation of permanent and stable sources of income and livelihoods remain a challenge. For example, women who have been trained to build, install, and repair energy technology continue to face the challenge of finding permanent employment with their newly acquired skills, as they are often only able to earn incomes on an intermittent basis through contracts and orders placed by nonprofits and government agencies (Baruah 2015) (see the entry “Energy, water and waste management sectors and SSE”). Women trained by SSE organizations to work as commercial drivers in cities in India continue to struggle with precarious employment opportunities, deep-rooted social prejudices against women drivers, balancing long working hours with family responsibilities, and lack of a sense of community beyond their peers in the program (Baruah 2021). Such limitations highlight the need for the state to provide adequate social security to protect against market vagaries, natural disasters, illness, maternity, old age, job losses, and other risks to wellbeing. Workers can gain optimal traction from their employment or entrepreneurial efforts in the SSE only if there are wider socially progressive policies in place, including state intervention to create a robust social welfare infrastructure and accessible, high-quality, public services (see the entry “Social policy and SSE”).

The limits the SSE sector has experienced in terms of guaranteeing full economic empowerment for women, as well as access to quality work and social protection, highlights how crucial it is for this sector not just to replicate and “scale up” its efforts in different settings, but also to build broader productive linkages and collaborations with the public and private sector and to demand effective social protection policies from the state. In recent years, there have been significant advancements globally in expanding and strengthening social protection policies, as more countries transition toward developing welfare systems. Some strategies that are being tried in European, African, Asian, and Central and South American countries include basic income schemes (see, for example, Hiilamo (2020), for findings from Finland’s 2017-2018 basic income experiment) as well as conditional and unconditional cash transfer programs that enable poor women to make priority decisions for themselves and their dependents. Programs like Brazil’s Bolsa Familia, Mexico’s Prospera, Mali’s Social Cash Transfer initiative, and India’s basic income pilot are hopeful developments given that structural inequality constrains individual ability to exercise rights and demand entitlements (Campello and Neri 2014, Davala et al. 2015, Mary Robinson Foundation 2016).

Another persistent criticism of the SSE sector when it comes to gender equality is that the sector has been more willing to pursue apolitical means of empowering women – for example, via employment and income-generating schemes – rather than through more controversial or politically sensitive strategies such as demanding the reform of patriarchal inheritance laws and male-biased property rights, enhancing women’s active participation in local and national politics, and challenging the gendered division of labor within households and in society at large. Several authors have emphasized that there may be less resistance to women taking part in income-generating activities because it is considered a “win-win” for the family (Agarwal 2003). While men may not challenge such activities at all, they are likely to be far more resistant to deeper economic and political demands from women (for independent land and property rights, for example) that challenge traditional patriarchal privileges and entitlements to resources. A deeper structural engagement with reforming gender relations, as opposed to just improving women’s economic status via jobs and incomes, is necessary as part of the SSE’s proactive and sustainable commitment to gender equality.

The underrepresentation of women in key leadership roles within SSEOEs is another persistent criticism of the sector. Evaluations of SSEOEs have revealed that while women make up most of the sector's workers, members, and consumers, they are often still underrepresented as managers, decision-makers and on boards of SSEOEs. In other words, the presence of women in large numbers in the SSE sector does not necessarily translate to representation of their ideas, needs and priorities at the institutional level. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that women's underrepresentation in executive or managerial positions and on boards of directors is not unique to the SSE sector. It is also true for most public and private sector organizations. However, women's underrepresentation in leadership roles in the SSE sector is particularly jarring and ironic given the sector's explicit commitment to gender equality and social justice.

There is significant evidence from around the world that gender diversity in leadership is good for institutions, for the economy, and for society at large. In its study of almost 22,000 organizations across the globe, the Peterson Institute for International Economics discovered that companies with women making up 30 percent of leaders can add up to 6 percentage points to its net margin, compared to other organizations in the same sector. Across the economy, the percentage of women in leadership positions is positively linked to better financial performance (Noland, Moran and Kotschwar 2016). Another study found that companies with more women board members, on average, outperform those with fewer women by 53 per cent on return on investment, 42 per cent on return on sales, and 66 per cent on return on invested capital (Catalyst 2008). Similar findings have emerged for women in executive positions – organizations with higher percentages of women decision-makers financially outperform their peers. Women making up a minimum of 30 percent of executive officers and board members has been found to have the most positive impact on organizational performance. At lower than 15 percent female representation, it is not uncommon for women, because of their minority status, to be made to feel marginal and “invisible” in decision-making processes (Agarwal 2010). Establishing critical mass is important for creating more supportive institutional environments in which women can speak out on issues and concerns in the presence of colleagues. The SSE sector must aspire towards, and fulfill, this goal urgently.

Finally, there is emerging research that suggests that there are limits to what the SSE can accomplish for gender equality and empowerment. Interests, priorities and needs within the SSE sector may be too variable for cohesive solidaristic activities that produce equitable gains for all women. For example, access to microcredit or other forms of solidarity finance may reduce economic stress at the household level while entrenching, rather than subverting, familial gender hierarchies. This occurs through mechanisms including exacerbating women's work burdens and putting pressure on them to borrow large sums of money, which, in some instances, maintains existing gender hierarchies at best, and actively defeats any gender equality agenda at worst. For example, Baruah (2010) writes about SEWA members borrowing large sums of money to fund bigger dowries for their daughters and taking microcredit loans to perform sex-selective abortions of female fetuses. Such findings reveal how deeply problematic it may be to collapse economic empowerment goals with gender equality objectives. Most SSEOEs assume a causal link between women's higher economic performance and greater gender equality. They also tend to assume that what is good for one group of women will necessarily be good for all groups of women. Yet, the examples presented above represent just a few ways in which even innovative pro-women initiatives can sometimes be confounded in practice. That women have been implicated in female feticide and infanticide, in food and health biases against daughters, in exploitative relationships with other women, and in dowry deaths (as just a few examples) speaks rather poignantly and painfully to the unpredictability and subjectivity of women's agencies, priorities, and constraints. To engage meaningfully with these issues, SSEOEs must not only continue to be cognizant of the fact that

what is good for men need not also be good for women, but they must also be open to the possibility that what may serve one group of women well may not benefit, or may actively disadvantage, other women.

Other recent studies that have evaluated SSE initiatives based on intersectional identities of gender, race and ethnicity have arrived at the conclusion that identity politics based on race, ethnicity, class, and caste may, in some contexts, be more powerful than gender in limiting or enabling access to economic opportunities offered by the SSE (see, for example, Hossein's (2016) evaluation of microfinance programs in the Black Americas). Other authors (see, for example, Cornwall (2011)) have corroborated that men from disadvantaged, racialized, ethnic and caste backgrounds as well as people with disabilities and sexual minorities, irrespective of gender identity, may face greater disadvantage than able-bodied women from economically or politically dominant communities in accessing and benefiting from economic opportunities offered by the SSE. These findings confirm the need for the SSE to move beyond its present "gender equals women" framing of gender equality and empowerment toward a broader understanding of gendered, racialized, classed, and disabled experiences that produce and maintain social hierarchies and inequality. To remain true to its commitment to inclusivity and to subverting all types of oppressive social hierarchies, SSE must respond to a broader evidence base of emerging trends about what constitutes gender inequality.

## **Conclusion**

The SSE represents the possibility of reconciling equally important global goals of securing economic security for all and preventing further environmental breakdown with reducing gender inequality and other forms of social injustice. People around the world now derive all or part of their livelihoods from this sector. The SSE sector has also enjoyed significant success in providing millions of women not just with good incomes and dignified working conditions, but also with social services and protections, and with institutional sources of affiliation and solidarity that have positive effects upon their health and wellbeing.

In the future, the SSE sector must engage with deeper persistent challenges to gender inequality including women's underrepresentation in leadership roles within SSEOs, their inability to access land and property rights and to participate in politics at par with men, and the fact that women all over the world continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of household maintenance and caregiving activities. In the future, the SSE must also engage with the possibility that not all men may be beneficiaries of patriarchal privilege just as not all women are victims of patriarchal oppression. Moving beyond the "gender equals women" conceptualization of gender inequality will enable the SSE to recognize and rectify other forms of social oppression and inequality based on race, ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, and dis/ability.

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