# Perceptions of female leadership from three co-ops in British Columbia

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## Introduction

This paper presents research on existing female leaders of co-operatives and their perceptions of differences between their leadership styles and that of men. It is an early exploration with a small empirical base. Women contemplating careers in co-ops need to see or read other female leaders in order to see themselves as potential leaders. The research will also be relevant to women from groups who face multiple barriers such as differently-abled people, visible minorities, lesbians and First Nations.

## Why is this research necessary if women have already made it to the top?

Women aspiring to leadership positions face a double standard in a double bind," claimed Deborah Rhode, Stanford Professor of Law. "The central problem, is the lack of consensus that there is a serious problem. There is a widespread belief that full equality is just around the corner." Rhode (2001) claims that at the current rate at which women are gaining leadership jobs, it will be three centuries before women achieve equal representation in corporations as men.

Five female leaders agreed to participate in this un-funded research into female leadership in co-operatives in British Columbia. These leaders ranged from early to mid career, were university educated, and worked in resource-linked community co-ops that were less than ten years old. In one case the group that formed the co-op had been established decades earlier. One co-op is using the multi-stakeholder model.

These leaders wanted to know how female leadership and management issues are handled in established co-ops and wanted positive examples of female leadership to manage change in their own co-ops. According to Monopoli (2002) knowing that you are not the only one experiencing resistance can help you persist in your goals. The leaders interviewed have experienced barriers to their leadership that they feel should be included in co-operative start up manuals.

## Women in co-operative leadership

Co-operatives portray themselves as agents of economic and social transformation. As such, they must have effective management based on member involvement and leadership accountability and equity and equality in democratic and management structure (Theis and Ketilson, 1995). Rather than equality, reports show that women hold 30% of lowly paid junior management positions in English-speaking Canadian co-operatives and their salaries as a percentage of men's are 77% (Conn et al., 1999).

While half (51.4%) of the top 500 companies in Canada have no women board members; 68% of Canada's largest co-ops have at least one female board member. The

number is higher for small and medium-sized co-ops (78% have at least one woman), housing (65% have greater than 50% women) and childcare co-ops (87% have more than 50% women) (Standberg, 2002).

In October 1998 the conference "*Women Work in Co-ops*" was organized by WomenFutures and co-sponsored by OXFAM-Canada and Devco (Conn et al., 1999). The participants revealed that despite the contribution women make to community economic development they are invisible actors. Participants revealed some of the challenges for women's participation: incompatibility of roles, lack of confidence about expressing opinions and different perspectives on power (working collectively rather than competitively). Additionally women were left out of informal networks and lacked role models.

There have been attempts to promote female leadership. The West Kootenay Women's Association (WKWA) developed and ran a free course for twelve women called *Women's Cooperative Ventures* from March to June 2003. The course consisted of modules that focussed on management, marketing, business and financial planning, customer relations, labour relations and co-operative matters.

**Gender roles and work**

The social process of gender construction shifts very gradually to accommodate changing social norms. However there is an emotional investment in gender difference that maintains unequal social relations between men and women (Starr, 2000). This inequality means that women leaders are seen as women first rather than authority figures. Some men perceive gender equity in a competitive way; blaming feminism for men and boys current 'disadvantage' (Starr, 2000).

Female leaders experience oppositional behaviours at the workplace because of this competitive view (Starr, 2000). These behaviours range from sexualised attention, hostility and aggression, threatened violence or threats of negative professional consequences, professional sabotage and the continual undermining of their work. As female leaders climb higher up the organisational ladder these behaviours increase incrementally and have physical, psychological, behavioural and emotional effects on women (Starr, 2000). Men acting in these ways are too focussed on their own self-interest for the system to operate in a co-operative way (Starr, 2000).

**The research on female leadership**

The views on female leadership in three BC co-operatives were derived from interviews conducted in the summer of 2003. Results include various factors that limit women's participation in co-operatives at decision-making levels.

A pre-determined list of respondents was developed based on case studies and literature at the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies. One co-operative was visited and unstructured interviews were conducted with leaders and staff members. The other interviews were conducted at a co-operative conference held in Victoria, BC in 2003. The

research questions below served as an interview guide, however the interviews were qualitative and open-ended.

1.      Do women participate in regular, business or minor activities of the co-operative sector? Are meetings scheduled at times when women are available and are child care facilities made available?
3.      Do female members run for election as office holders?
4.      What is the ratio of men to women on the board of directors or management committees and how does it change over time?
5.      How many women hold leadership or managerial positions compared to men?
6.      Are there any legal, traditional or customary constraints to women's participation in co-operatives?
7.      Are there more women leaders in co-operatives with more female members?

**Preliminary results**

The statements below reflect the opinions of the female leaders interviewed.
One female leader claimed that some women do not give the necessary 9-to-5 commitment to co-ops if they have children due to their perception of the flexibility of the co-op model. This comment may reflect a mismatch between what women with children were hoping for from the co-op model and the female leader's previous experience in the traditional business sector. Two co-ops with female leaders made decisions in their start-up phases that were not compatible with family or partner-friendly policies. They suggested that only co-ops with greater revenues and profits could have job sharing programs. This situation reflects the argument made by Rhode (2001) that women face two major workplace barriers in career advancement (that are not co-op specific): lack of opportunity and lack of social or supportive network for woman with children.

Studies have shown that working mothers are held to higher standards than working fathers (Rhode, 2001). Women who want flexible workplaces are said to be unprofessional. Women who seem willing to sacrifice family needs to workplace schedules are considered to be poor mothers. These mixed messages leave lots of women with the uncomfortable sense that whatever it is they're doing, they are in the wrong (Rhode, 2001).

One female leader claimed that women have to spend more time doing extra unpaid research to back up all their ideas and decisions with hard facts whereas men can just take a position and be supported. Similar claims are seen in the literature (Rhode, 2001). Women often lack the presumption of competence given to men. They are held to higher standards; their competence is rated lower and they are less likely to be viewed as leaders (Rhode, 2001).

A female leader in one resource-based co-op was considered intimidating or abrasive if she asked pertinent or hard questions. Other studies have showed that women are rated lower when they adopt so-called "masculine," authoritative styles (Rhode, 2001).

Women who were nominated to the Board by one female leader sat passively and silently at meetings. These "workhorses"' took on Secretary and Treasurer roles. This particular obstacle to women's advancement has been termed "suffering from terminal niceness" (Young, 2003). Fear of being labelled "shrill" or a "feminist" deters women from speaking out (Young, 2003). Faludi (1992, p.14) has claimed that ' … the anti-feminist backlash has been set off not by women's achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it. It is a pre-emptive strike.'

One female co-op leader claimed that a network of men meets to talk to each other about her co-op's performance and she perceived this as "second guessing" and non-confidence in her leadership. This network suggested that she should get her ideas adopted through "drinking with the boys" rather than the board structure. In the literature "drinking with the boys" is referred to as masculine homosocialisation - the mateship system of male affiliations, which excludes women from informal information sharing, decision-making and resources (Starr, 2000). These mateship activities also increase the burden of household, child or aged care responsibilities on the partners of the men involved (Starr, 2000).

The following provides a brief overview of the other concerns of female leaders.

## 1. Barriers associated with women's leadership
❑ Women don't find their voice until they are at least 28 years old.
❑ Female leaders from small communities experience difficulties because the co-op structure is perceived as entitlement to collective leadership.
❑ Women are involved in community-minded organizations that are un-funded by banks and conservative credit unions (sustainable food, fair trade, other products 'with a conscience' and food security).
❑ Women are invited to meetings as tokens - to give the appearance of democratic decision-making.
❑ When motivated by fear, men ask for repeated studies of a project or business in order to undermine or stop it.
❑ Co-ops that seek and receive external funding are more respected.
❑ Men think the co-op model appeals to women because it is associated with shopping - discrediting the co-op model.
❑ People in start-up co-ops have time: they are already established, semi-retired or empty-nesters (typically male).
❑ Women are not respected in business circles unless they "flash their MBA's."
❑ Women who advance are career bureaucrats rather than grassroots oriented.
❑ Women are not honoured by the movement.

Inter-personal barriers

❑ A strong communicator was told by a male colleague that she was not communicating things properly and was hard to understand – blocking her.
❑ In one co-op, items would be put on the Agenda for Board meetings and then the meetings would repeatedly run out of time. If the matter was left out of the Agenda in subsequent meetings and then brought up in 'other business' the men would 'talk over' the female leader.

❑      Information for members in one co-op was omitted from the newsletter or changed after the female leader included it because the directors did not think they should be answerable to the membership – top-down leadership.

❑      Directors in one co-op preferred a head table rather than a U-shape or round table.

❑      Women experienced resentment if they earned competitive salaries in small, community-based co-ops where pay scales for all staff were known.

❑      Small community populations leads to limited choices for co-op and Board members resulting in tribalism and inclusion of people who are not qualified or committed to the co-op model. Sabotage of persons and property can take place in these communities.

❑      Small communities have tremendous resistance to change, even positive change.

❑      Men bring their previous experience of delegating tasks to women to the co-op sector, they never envision themselves doing minor jobs; this undermines their female peers.

❑      Men take over co-operatives started by women as soon as they become successful. When the paid positions become available men come out of the woodwork. These men sometimes try to turn the successful co-op into a business, which then fails.

## 2. Women and men lead differently- according to the perceptions of the research participants

Men intellectualize the co-op movement rather than focus on people solving problems.
Men network informally in order to get their ideas heard.
Men show resentment if challenged on their decisions and are not always willing to discuss problems openly.
Men are said to be more likely to throw money at a problem and to want the 'biggest, brightest, shiniest, newest technology'.

Female leadership
Women actively nominate other women and youth to be directors.
Women lead from behind and encourage and support their staff.
Women are training others to gain management skills and replace themselves.
Women lead by example and don't ask others to do things they wouldn't do.
Some future female leaders with young children have already challenged ego-led Board meetings and asked for more structure.
Some women do take their children and do breast feed at Board meetings.
Female workers and workers with family commitments have sacrificed salaries or under-paid themselves in order to keep their co-ops functioning. They were not sure that men would do the same.

## Conclusion

The female leaders interviewed for this research wanted start-up manuals to go beyond the technical information and include this "fuzzy stuff" so that start-up co-ops can obtain funding to deal with these problems.  These leaders felt that funding should be made available to hire retired Credit Union experts to sit on start-up Boards.  It was expected that these retirees would be the 'power behind the throne' necessary for the female leader to stand up to her male colleagues who were not necessarily receptive to the co-

op approach but were using the model for their own short term advantage. The co-op manual also needs to provide information to female leaders on how to manage their leadership roles and their relationships. Additionally these leaders felt that start-up co-ops should obtain funding to train their staff in management so that when the paid positions do become available the women who started the co-op can fill them from within.

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