

WOMEN AT THE HEART OF THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

The aim of *Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy* is to bring together women from every part of the world to share experiences and feminist perspectives on the social and solidarity economy. These discussions will help us identify future avenues and solutions.

Our goal is to think together about how the social and solidarity economy can support women's security and financial autonomy, in particular, the conditions required for this to happen. We do not want to have a debate about the social and solidarity economy or simply define its principles. Our definition of the social and solidarity economy closely resembles that proposed by Relais-femmes¹ (see box). Their document presents the principles of social economy from a women's perspective and facilitates the implementation of projects motivated by aspirations of justice and equity.

The social and solidarity economy is alive and well. It is a key dimension of local development strategies in urban and rural settings, community development and socioeconomic revitalization efforts. It is one of the strategies employed by women as a means of survival and is an increasingly important public policy tool. Unquestionably, we have made great strides in terms of our societies' recognition of this economic form, but much remains to be done. Among other things, we must identify the challenges to be collectively overcome to ensure that the social and solidarity

Principles and Values of Social and Solidarity Economy

❖ Purpose

Work with and for one's members rather than solely for profit or financial returns, and this, within a social change perspective.

Consolidate and develop resources to deliver quality and socially useful services and goods, using a popular education approach aimed at improving quality of life and sustainable development.

❖ Independently operated (as opposed to State run)

Organizations emerge when a community identifies a need in a particular sector. They are formed on the initiative of community members and are supported by that community. The autonomy of both groups and individuals is required before this can occur, which does not relieve the State of its responsibility.

❖ Democracy

Democratic decision-making process involving users, participants, members and paid and unpaid workers. This process must be integrated into the constitution and by-laws, practices, interventions and labour relations management.

❖ People first

Primacy of people and work over capital with regard to the distribution of surpluses and revenues. When there are revenues and surpluses these should be equitably distributed in the community.

❖ Sustainable jobs

Provide sustainable employment, decent working conditions and remuneration that will at least allow people to live above the poverty line. When establishing remuneration, take into account the principle of pay equity. No substitution of public or community sector jobs. Ensure that all jobs are accessible to women and people targeted by multiple forms of discrimination.

❖ Accessibility

Accessibility of goods and services. There is no obligation to pay fees.

Definition inspired by the document *L'économie sociale du point de vue des femmes* (1997) Relais-femmes, December, Montréal.

¹ Platform entitled *L'économie sociale du point de vue des femmes* (Women's perspective on the social economy) adopted during a conference held on December 3, 1997. This platform contains a number of principles, most of them inspired by the Chantier de l'économie sociale. The conference was a chance for women to incorporate their concerns.

economy is as inclusive as possible and takes into account women's contributions and specific conditions. We must also identify the necessary conditions to achieve this goal, especially in terms of public policy.

Here are a few suggestions to kick off our discussion. We're relying on your ideas also to nourish this process.

Women's Economic Security and Autonomy: What Does it Mean?

What do we mean when we refer to women's economic security and autonomy? When Québec women were conducting their campaign for women's economic autonomy as part of Québec's participation in the World March of Women of 2008, they defined these terms as follows:

“Economic security refers to the possibility of planning and ensuring the means to cover one's basic needs.²

Women's economic autonomy:

Women's capacity, during the different cycles of their life, to obtain access to economic means and resources (employment, services and sufficient income) to meet their needs and those of their dependants; and the capacity to make economic choices and influence the economic structures of our societies.

The concept is therefore quite broad and refers to a right that encompasses the attainment of many other rights, for instance, the rights to health, education, a healthy environment that is free of violence, the right to citizenship and the right to employment.

Economic autonomy also includes access to the full range of social policies and social security programs, for example, care when we are ill and an income when we are unemployed. In short, it implies securing the means that we have created as a society to collectively insure and protect ourselves from the risks of day to day living.”³

For example, economic autonomy guarantees women the ability to make important decisions in their lives, such as:

- “choosing to live alone;
- ending a relationship that is no longer satisfying;
- disposing of their money based on their own priorities;
- making their own choices about recreational or other activities, food, housing, etc.”⁴

2 Certain definitions and uses of the concept of economic security also encompass the question of access to rights.

3 Québec Coordinating Body for the World March of Women, *Sortir de la pauvreté, un choix de société. Campagne pour l'autonomie économique des femmes*, 2008.

4 Drawn from: Canadian Council on Social Development: http://www.ccsd.ca/pccy/2006/pdf/pccy_portrait.pdf

Federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for the status of women, *Women's Economic Independence and Security: A Federal/Provincial/Territorial Strategic Framework*, Government of Canada, 2001, Secrétariat à la condition féminine, *L'avenir des Québécoises, Les suites des consultations de mars 2003*, Québec, Gouvernement du Québec, 2004.

Why Focus Specifically on Women in the Social and Solidarity Economy?

♀ Throughout the world women are at the heart of social and solidarity economy organizations. They play a major role as workers, members, participants and users. Their contributions, whether remunerated or non-remunerated, are inestimable. In many countries, the social and solidarity economy is primarily addressed to poor, marginalized and discriminated groups and so it is not surprising that women are in the majority. The growth of precarious employment is gendered. Women hold the vast majority of precarious, part-time and minimum wage jobs. Analysis of the growing precariousness of the labour market and the consequences for women should therefore also be developed within the social and solidarity economy.

♀ We are living in a context characterized by globalization and economic and social crises that affect women in a specific way. Consequently, it is appropriate to examine how the social and solidarity economy should position itself on these issues and contribute to solutions and alternatives to the dominant and traditional models. In this regard, it is important not only to consider working conditions, but also the international and sexual division of labour.

♀ When we think about public policy to foster the social and solidarity economy and the creation of stable jobs, we should consider the broader public policy vision, and feminist analysis can contribute enormously to such reflection. These policies will not be the only solution. They must be part of a broad economic policy and comprehensive action to counter precarious employment. It is useful to examine this question from the perspective of the stakes for women.

♀ Women are at the forefront of economic, social and political projects and, as actors of their day-to-day initiatives, are helping to construct and enact a social vision. Historically, caring has been one of women's main tasks. In the social sector, they have developed specific and very valuable expertise that contributes to our societies' economies. These forms of expertise should become tools enabling women to achieve economic and political security and autonomy. The social and solidarity economy can be a vehicle for this if the necessary conditions are implemented.

♀ Women represent over 50% of humanity and supply 67% of the work hours, yet earn only 10% of the global revenue and own less than 1% of the global wealth.⁵ They are the first to be affected by economic globalization and crises. Poverty and job precariousness are therefore gendered. Women have suffered from systemic inequality and discrimination for millennia. They continue to engage with concerns, practices and struggles that extend beyond their specific interests.

♀ Women have contributed greatly to developing the social and solidarity economy everywhere in the world by providing essential services to their community, creating businesses and trades and conducting economic activities that meet our societies' current needs. Whether in the form of local or regional development or organizational innovation, women make a major contribution on the ground (in both mixed and women's groups). Their involvement in the development of the social economy as a social movement is indispensable. We need to highlight the specific experiences of women's groups in the social and solidarity economy throughout the world.

⁵ World March of Women, *Letter to the Leaders of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank*, October 2000, page 7.

What Conditions will Ensure that the Social and Solidarity Economy Supports Women's Economic Security and Autonomy?

To stimulate the reflection process, we have come up with a few discussion questions. During our discussions we can draw on experiences in different settings, territories, regions and countries and look for possible future avenues that will foster our social, political and economic innovation. These questions will be discussed during the workshop on women.

Questions

- 1. From a feminist perspective, what kinds of public policies are needed to support the development of the social and solidarity economy?**
- 2. What are the financial or other levers that would foster the development of the social and solidarity economy and how can we ensure that these levers also serve to improve the economic security and autonomy of women engaged in the social and solidarity economy?**
- 3. What funders should be targeted to foster the sustainable and autonomous development of the social and solidarity economy, in countries of the North and South? What issues confront women specifically when it comes to choosing funding sources?**
- 4. Is the social and solidarity economy an avenue for all categories of women, particularly, those facing additional barriers and exclusion? Are there specific conditions required to ensure them a role in the social and solidarity economy, specifically, from an anti-poverty perspective?**
- 5. Can the social and solidarity economy serve as a tool for implementing an innovative, egalitarian and non-hierarchical approach to work organization and management within a feminist perspective that recognizes and values women's experience? What practical steps can we take to avoid reproducing the dominant model?**

- 6.** What progress has been made in the production of gendered statistics that highlight the specific conditions of women, especially with regard to the evolution of their working conditions, employment status and role in the social economy (leadership, for example)? These statistics would both make women's contribution visible and highlight future issues and challenges.
- 7.** The improvement of working conditions in terms of pay, fringe benefits, health and safety and job stability could have an impact on the sexual and international division of work. Valuing certain types of jobs could help to curb the ghettoization women's work. Should these actions be prioritized?
- 8.** Can the social and solidarity economy serve as a vehicle to address the problems of inequality and wealth distribution? Specifically, can it provide solutions that would make it possible, not only to create paid jobs, but also to increase the recognition of unpaid work? Can it foster the development of sources of indirect income, such as self-sufficiency and access to public services?
- 9.** As in other areas, women are under-represented in the management of social and solidarity economy enterprises. How can we reduce the barriers and encourage the equitable representation of women and their full participation in enterprises of all sizes? How can we shatter the glass ceiling?
- 10.** Would networking among women involved in the social and solidarity economy be a good idea? At what level (local, national, international), in what sectors and for what purposes?
- 11.** What other conditions are necessary to guarantee that the social and solidarity economy can truly act as a vehicle for women's economic security and autonomy?

CONCLUSION

Throughout the world women have experimented, innovated and come up with countless initiatives. Unquestionably, they are still faced with numerous challenges and issues.

What can we learn from these experiences? How can we make use of the knowledge generated by these practices to join our efforts, question our approaches and reinvest in shaping public policy with a view to achieving our objectives of economic security and autonomy?

We are eager to share our experiences and analysis and discuss the questions and issues we have raised in this paper as well as others that will arise during *Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy*. It's a date. See you on October 17th!



Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy will take place before the evening opening ceremony of the International Forum on the Social and Solidarity Economy. It is an opportunity for women from every part of the world to share their experiences and feminist perspectives on the social and solidarity economy.

Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy is co-coordinated by Relais-femmes (www.relais-femmes.qc.ca) and the Chantier de l'économie sociale (www.chantier.qc.ca).

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