

(In)Equality and commitments: Women on cooperatives' boards of directors in Belgium

Abstract

This paper explores women's commitment as members of cooperative boards and the gender-based tensions they experience, based on the analysis of interviews with women directors in Belgium. While the under-representation of women in decision-making bodies of social economy enterprises has been noted by some authors, women's involvement in cooperative boards remains rather unexplored. This is surprising since cooperatives, as social economy enterprises, claim to pursue (gender) equality and democratic governance. Our sample mainly includes male-dominated sectors with boards showing varied female representation. The results indicate that there is apparent equality on the boards, although little has been done to address this issue. However, under-representation of women and their absence from the presidency is a regular pattern. The study also reveals tensions between women's commitment to the board and family responsibilities. These systemic tensions reflect that cooperatives are products of patriarchal ontology and remain part of the system – provided their embeddedness in the capitalist economy. This research contributes to a better understanding of the different profiles of women who sit on cooperative boards and to explaining the tensions and inequalities they encounter. Additionally, it helps to identify factors that promote their commitment and thus combat their under-representation on boards.

KEYWORDS

Cooperatives; gender relations; boards of directors; care work; women

1. INTRODUCTION

More than fifty years after the initial movements advocating for the recognition of domestic work or opposing the double working day, work-related gender inequalities persist. Despite ranking 5th in the European Union on the Gender Inequality Index in 2023 (EIGE, 2023), Belgium still faces a lower employment rate of women (66% compared with 74% for men) (Statbel, 2023a), their greater occupation of part-time jobs (42% versus 11% for men) (Statbel, 2023b), their absence from managerial positions (33% of women vs. 67% of men) (Nautet & Piton, 2021) and their lower salary (23.1% without adjustment for working hours in Belgium) (IEFH, 2021). Bringing a gendered dimension to the study of work seems therefore inevitable. Indeed, *"any sociology that fails to address the gendered dimension of social processes would be doomed to offer only a partial view, not anchored in reality and its complexity, and consequently an erroneous view of the development of a society"* (Daune-Richard & Devreux, 1992: 7).

Amidst these persisting gender disparities in the conventional labour market, cooperatives, with a history spanning almost two centuries, and more broadly social economy enterprises are currently experiencing a resurgence of interest driven by contemporary economic and social tensions (Boivin & Stokkink, 2016). Indeed, social economy enterprises, as an alternative to the dominant capitalist enterprises (Cauwet, 2020), are generally perceived as a *"place of female emancipation"* and as *"a constantly renewed and extended social experimentation"* (Cauwet, 2020: 151). Nevertheless, recently, some authors have questioned the emancipatory function of these enterprises and have shown that many challenges still exist (Bastida et al., 2023; Dessy, 2022; Guérin, 2017; Guérin et al., 2021; Hersent & Laville, 2017; Lestien et al., 2019).

More specifically, one of the criticisms of the social economy in this regard concerns the inconsistency between the over-representation of women among employees and volunteers and their low presence in administrative and governing bodies. Indeed, it has been shown that women are more present among workers than in management bodies (Conseil supérieur de l'économie sociale et solidaire, 2021; Lodhia, 2009; Parente & Martinho, 2018) or, in other words, that there exists a glass ceiling (Conseil supérieur de l'économie sociale et solidaire, 2021; Observatoire national d'ESS France, 2022; Olivier, 2017). Research has identified several factors that may explain this inequality of place/position, such as unequal access to speaking out, self-censorship, motherhood or gender stereotypes (Huchet et al., 2015). Other

factors are directly related to the lack of resources available to enterprises, including a lack of time, financial constraints, the absence of a formal HR department, and so forth (Huchet et al., 2015). Studies on this topic have shown a contradiction; women have limited access to important positions - they are in a *non-place* -, yet women occupy invisible positions that are essential to the daily organization (Parente & Martinho, 2018). Although social economy is generally presented as an egalitarian space, inequalities persist. Furthermore, gender issues are not prioritised in these organisations, rendering these inequalities invisible (Parente & Martinho, 2018).

Despite these gender inequalities and the link between feminist theories and social economy in their opposition to the capitalist paradigm, as well as the relevance - even the urgency - of research investigating social economy with a feminist lens, there is little work bridging the two streams of literature (Dessy, 2022; Hillenkamp et al., 2014). Against this backdrop, this article addresses the following research question: *How do the tensions between gender and work encountered by women directors of Belgian cooperatives exist, unfold and articulate?*

Hence, this article aims to explore the relationship between gender and work in the context of cooperative governance. To achieve this, the concepts of care work and gender relations are used as a bridge between unpaid domestic work and professional work.

By studying women's commitment in the governance bodies of cooperatives from a gender perspective, this article makes two main contributions. First, it contributes to understanding the contemporary gender and labour issues and singularly the inequalities that exist within the governance of cooperatives. The study reveals that far from fully congruent with value of equality on which they rest, cooperatives do not escape tensions between women's different commitments: paid professional work, voluntary professional work and free domestic work.

Second, this paper shows that we cannot understand the tensions between gender and work without considering *gender relations* and *care work*. These concepts complicate the understanding of cooperatives by highlighting that, despite their egalitarian values and principles, they are part of a system, of a *patriarchal ontology*. Thus, while gender relations are usually used to study the relationship between the professional and the family sphere, this concept also allows for the study of the relationship between gender and voluntary commitment. On the other hand, care is traditionally not put into perspective with this type of work, i.e., unpaid and not framed by a labour contract. To understand the relationship of cooperative governance with patriarchy, which can be described as *"the institutionalized system of male*

dominance [...] a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Sultana, 2010: 3), it is essential to consider the invisible and consequential work of women in their domestic sphere, their paid work and the ways in which it interacts with their voluntary work. In essence, this article promotes a systemic view of phenomena including gender inequalities and emphasizes the importance of integrating the influence of representations, processes and events that exist outside the organization itself such as the social, cultural, and economic environment.

In the next section, we present the literature on the concepts of gender relations and care work. Then, we explain the followed methodology and describe the research setting. Thereafter, we present the findings, in which we highlight the nuanced situations faced by women directors. Our focus is on the unique characteristics of the cooperative model, as well as women's commitment to cooperatives and their governing bodies, the factors that restrict women's access to decision-making, and the tensions they face in reconciling their various commitments. Finally, we discuss our results in light of the concepts of care and gender relations as well as the patriarchal ontology at play in and around the boards of directors of cooperatives.

2. GENDER RELATIONS, CARE WORK AND SOCIAL ECONOMY GOVERNANCE

2.1. Gender and work: towards gender relations

The (feminist) research on gender and work brings professional work and domestic work, which is often free and dependent on women, closer together. This work began, at the end of the 1970s, with an interest in the sexual division of labour, but also in the idea of an "*interweaving of the professional and family spheres*" (Maruani, 2011: 44).

The question of the sexual division of labour led to the concept of gender relations, which comes from French literature (*Rapports sociaux de sexe*) and more particularly from the work of Danièle Kergoat, a sociologist who has studied women, gender and work and on the sexual division of labour. This concept postulates that gender is a social construct, resulting from tensions, particularly around work (Kergoat, 2010) This is a "*power relationship, a 'class' relationship - not a simple principle of 'classification'*". (Kergoat, 2010: 87-88). Gender

relations are also characterised by different practices due to gender (Kergoat, 2000). It is indeed a hierarchical relationship, which brings into play power and domination, on a material and ideological basis (Kergoat, 2000). In the analysis of work, this makes it possible to grasp that *"organisational constraints are compounded by the experience of constraints linked to the ideal and concrete context that accompanies the existence of a social gender relationship"* (Bercot, 2014: 20).

Kergoat (Galerand & Kergoat, 2013; Kergoat, 2001) and other researchers have thus made it possible to articulate the family and professional spheres. Based on their research, scholars like Delphy (2012, 2020) have enabled a renewed reflection on work by highlighting the two dimensions of which it is composed: professional and domestic. Since then, a connection has been established; work and *'out-of-work activities'* now go hand in hand, the sociology of family is linked to the sociology of work. Both workplaces, domestic and professional, are marked by unequal social relations based on gender, the social relations of gender.

These inequalities are not limited to everyday workplace dynamics; they also extend to the highest levels of corporate decision-making. One critical area where these gendered inequalities persist is in leadership and corporate governance, particularly in the composition of boards of directors.

2.2. (Absence of) Women on boards

Research on women's presence in boards of directors highlights their persistent under-representation and the obstacles they face, often grouped under the term "glass ceiling", which refers to women's limited access to leadership positions (Hillman et al., 2007; Rebérioux & Roudaut, 2017; Toé, 2014). Specifically, some research focuses on business-related factors. Firstly, gender discrimination continues to shape access to opportunities (G. S. Becker, 1957; Burke & Mattis, 2000), while challenges related to tokenism and the critical mass effect arise when women are underrepresented in leadership roles (Kanter, 1977, 1987; Torchia et al., 2011). Societal expectations rooted in traditional gender roles further influence perceptions and opportunities (Anca & Gabaldon, 2014; Eagly, 1987), and the psychological impact of stereotype threat can hinder performance and confidence in male-dominated environments (Roberson & Kulik, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995). These barriers are reinforced by broader environmental factors, such as political and socio-economic structures (Terjesen & Singh, 2008), workplace cultures like the "Old Boys' Club," recruitment biases, and limited access to

networks, as well as organizational characteristics like board size, industry, and company size (St-Onge & Magnan, 2013; Toé, 2014). Together, these elements create a system that perpetuates existing inequalities.

Another strand of the literature focuses on the personal factors that limit women's involvement in leadership roles. These studies emphasize how women's decisions regarding labour market participation, human capital investment, and career paths contribute to a relatively limited pool of qualified candidates for board positions (Bygren & Gähler, 2012). Early supply-side barriers include the persistent work-family conflict and work-life balance, which affects women disproportionately and constrains their career progression (Adisa et al., 2019; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Venkatesan, 2021). Additionally, gender differences in values, attitudes, and behaviours further shape women's career trajectories, influencing their representation in leadership roles (Eagly, 2005). Together, these factors highlight how personal decisions and constraints intersect with broader systemic barriers to limit women's access to top positions.

If women manage to break through this initial glass ceiling, they then face a second one, even within boards of directors, as they remain underrepresented in key positions (Rebérioux & Roudaut, 2017). Therefore, the authors invite us to take a closer look at the distribution of positions and the functional division of labour within boards of directors (Nielsen & Huse, 2010; Rebérioux & Roudaut, 2017).

However, much of this literature risks essentializing gender roles by attributing social behaviors to biological determinants, obscuring the socially constructed nature of gender and the power dynamics it embodies (Parini, 2007). Furthermore, overemphasizing individual factors can divert attention from the broader systemic issues that shape gender inequalities – a perspective we will critically nuance in the remainder of this article.

While barriers to leadership highlight gendered inequalities in professional settings, these disparities extend beyond paid work. The unequal distribution of unpaid domestic labour, particularly in the realm of care work, further reinforces gender-based hierarchies.

2.3. Family solidarity and work: (social) care

The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s raised new questions, singularly due to the greater presence of women - and mothers - in the workforce. These questions mainly concern the sharing of family obligations, which used to fall largely on women - now occupied with

paid work. These concerns are not just about families, but also about the more macro level of "*sharing between the state, the family, the market and civil society*" (Letablier, 2001: 19).

Care is unpaid work, which for a long time has been invisible and considered as "*family mutual aid or family obligations*" (Letablier, 2001: 19). Nevertheless, care "*made women largely dependent of their husbands*" (Knijn & Kremer, 1997: 329). This gendered conception has influenced the construction of national social protection systems (Knijn & Kremer, 1997), with men and women being perceived as complementary in this *male breadwinner* model (Letablier, 2001). The concept of care thus comes from an interest in the daily reproductive work of households and the material importance of women's domestic work (Daly & Lewis, 1998). Care is most often routine, low-valued and discreet - even invisible - work largely assigned to women who perform it for free, especially within their families (Benelli & Modak, 2010). A more political analysis of care is proposed by Vergès (2019), based on an interview with Graeber. According to these authors, care corresponds to work that allows another person - often a man - to increase or maintain their freedom (Vergès, 2019). Care goes beyond the individual, it touches on the collective and the institutional level.

Overall, *care* is a concept that has emerged from feminist research and that links several levels of analysis, micro and macro, around the issues of work, family, free and domestic/reproductive work. The concept of care work emphasises the social and systemic element of unpaid and unacknowledged labour in the patriarchal and capitalist system. Furthermore, care work makes it possible to think about changes in the area of work-life balance (Nakano Glenn, 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data collection and analysis

Considering the exploratory character of the research question and in line with our interpretivist epistemological stance, this study follows an abductive approach using qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews. This data collection method is selected as it provides participants with the opportunity to voice their opinions and describe their realities (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The interviews were conducted with two different sets of actors. On the one hand, we interviewed five experts (support workers, experts and researchers) that have an external view

of the board of directors. These interviews – conducted in French – allowed for a global understanding of the governance bodies of cooperatives. On the other hand, 24 interviews were conducted with directors of 21 different Belgian cooperatives. The cooperatives were chosen following a theoretical sampling strategy (Schreier, 2018), aiming to ensure diversity in terms of size, as it was expected to influence women’s involvement in governance.

Sectoral gender composition was also considered. The perception of a sector as masculine or feminine is influenced by the gender makeup of the cooperative. For instance, the agricultural sector is generally regarded as masculine (in 2021, men held 68% of agricultural salaried jobs in the social economy in Wallonia), whereas the retail sector is perceived as having a female component (women represent 76% of retail employees in the cooperatives of social economy in Wallonia in 2021) (Helleputte et al., 2024).

In our sample, 19% of the interviews were conducted in cooperatives operating in female-dominated sectors. While this may appear low, it accurately reflects the broader economic and cooperative landscape in Belgium. Cross-referencing Statbel data on sectoral gender composition (Statbel, 2024) with the Belgian Cooperative Monitor (Staessens et al., 2021) reveals that only 18.75% of the sectors in which cooperatives operate are female-dominated. The fact that our sample mirrors the broader gendered structure of the cooperative economy – where female-dominated sectors are underrepresented – allows us to directly observe how patriarchal dynamics manifest within governance structures. Moreover, by largely focusing on cooperatives operating in male-dominated sectors, our study provides a unique lens through which to examine the relationship between cooperative governance and patriarchy.

Beyond sectoral representation, our sample also reveals a less expected but significant form of diversity: the proportion of women on boards of directors. This proportion ranges from 13% to 67%, and notably, four boards are chaired by women - all of which operate in male-dominated sectors. This highlights a diversity of experiences and leadership pathways for women, even within predominantly masculine environments.

All female directors who volunteered as respondent were interviewed within the chosen cooperatives, with consideration given to age and status (employee or volunteer). These criteria were selected due to their potential influence on the experiences of women in these cooperatives. Overall, our respondents were aged between 30 and 70, with an average of 43, and just over half of the interviewees have children but only three have children under the age of 12. It should be noted that other factors, like ethnicity, sexual orientation, or level of

education, were not prioritized similarly due to their limited diversity in cooperatives. These data allow us to understand and describe the situations and profiles of women cooperative directors, but also the different processes that exist in the governance spaces. The theoretical construction of our sample fits our aim of providing an in-depth and contextual understanding of a specific phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) rather than generalizability based on statistical representativeness. This approach aligns with Becker's (1998, 2014) argument that sociological inquiry prioritizes the illumination of processes over statistical representativity.

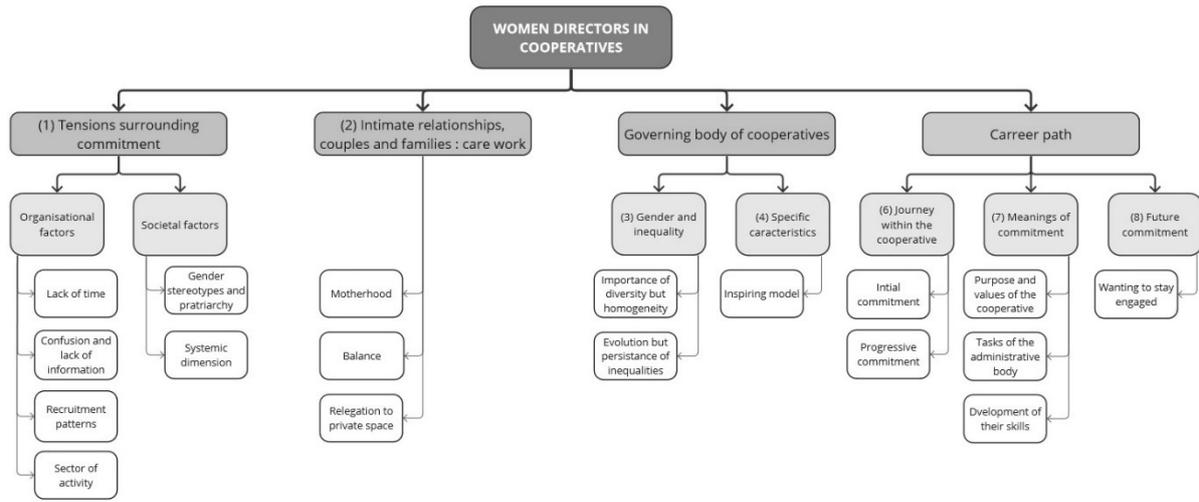
Table 1. Profiles of the women directors interviewed and their cooperative.

| # | Economic sector of activity | Board size | Share of women on the board | Gender of the presidency | Age (rounded) | Single? | Child(ren)? | Degree | Male or female-dominated sector |
|----|---|------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 18 | Energy | 8 | 13% | Man | 40 | Single | More than 12 years old | Master | Male-dominated sector |
| 2 | Construction | 6 | 17% | Man | 40 | Single | More than 12 years old | Master | Male-dominated sector |
| 12 | Human health and social action | 6 | 17% | Man | 55 | In a relationship | More than 12 years old | Several master's degrees | Female-dominated sector |
| 1 | Construction | 5 | 20% | Man | 35 | Single | No | Master | Male-dominated sector |
| 3 | Information and communication | 4 | 25% | Man | 40 | Single | More than 12 years old | Master | Male-dominated sector |
| 23 | Retail | 7 | 29% | Man | 40 | In a relationship | Less than 12 years old | Bachelor | Female-dominated sector |
| 5 | Professional, scientific and technical activities | 10 | 30% | Man | 55 | Single | No | Master | Male-dominated sector |
| 7 | Professional, scientific and technical activities | 10 | 30% | Man | 50 | Single | More than 12 years old | Several master's degrees | Male-dominated sector |
| 11 | Financial and insurance activities | 23 | 30% | Man | 55 | In a relationship | More than 12 years old | Several master's degrees | Male-dominated sector |
| 17 | Retail | 6 | 33% | Man | 50 | Single | More than 12 years old | Master | Female-dominated sector |
| 4 | Financial and insurance activities | 10 | 40% | Woman | 50 | In a relationship | More than 12 years old | Doctorate | Male-dominated sector |
| 20 | Energy | 10 | 40% | Man | 35 | Single | No | Several master's degrees | Male-dominated sector |
| 8 | Financial and insurance activities | 12 | 42% | Man | 45 | In a relationship | More than 12 years old | Several master's degrees | Male-dominated sector |
| 12 | Financial and insurance activities | 12 | 42% | Man | 45 | In a relationship | No | Several master's degrees | Male-dominated sector |
| 6 | Energy | 7 | 43% | Woman | 40 | In a relationship | Less than 12 years old | Doctorate | Male-dominated sector |
| 24 | Information and communication | 7 | 43% | Man | 35 | In a relationship | No | Master | Male-dominated sector |
| 22 | Information and communication | 7 | 57% | Man | 35 | In a relationship | No | Master | Male-dominated sector |
| 16 | Energy | 6 | 50% | Man | 70 | In a relationship | More than 18 years old | Master | Male-dominated sector |
| 26 | Agriculture | 4 | 50% | Woman | 30 | In a relationship | No | Doctorate | Male-dominated sector |
| 9 | Construction | 9 | 56% | Woman | 30 | In a relationship | No | Several master's degrees | Male-dominated sector |
| 25 | Retail | 6 | 67% | Man | 40 | In a relationship | Less than 12 years old | Master | Female-dominated sector |

The interview guide was designed based on the themes relating to women's experiences of cooperatives that were identified in the literature, ensuring a reliable framework for data collection. The interviews facilitated an exploration of the career path both within and beyond the cooperative, the operational procedures of the governing body, and particularly the gender-related encounters (power dynamics, women's [under]representation, diversity-promoting initiatives, etc.). They also shed light on the connections among diverse commitments and their articulation (unpaid commitment, household activities, paid labour), among other aspects. To ensure that the discussions with the participants fully covered the key issues in the context of the study, the previously identified themes were carefully incorporated into the interview guide.

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed following a *thematic approach* (Tuckett, 2005). The study identified eight themes, covering a broad range of topics. These included the tensions surrounding commitment (1), intimate relationships, couples and families (2), gender and inequality (3), specific characteristics of the cooperative (4), career (5), journey within the cooperative (6), meanings of commitment (7) and future commitments (8). The transcripts underwent rigorous coding (see Figure 1) to categorize relevant sections based on the eight predefined themes. The 8 main themes mentioned above have been identified through the literature and some exploratory exchanges with the field. They made it possible to structure the interview guide and the rest of the data collection. The other categories are derived from the qualitative and comprehensive analysis of the data from the interviews and are the most essential elements of these exchanges. The chosen analytical approach was deeply *comprehensive*, with the underlying aim of capturing the richness of the interviewees' experiences, focusing on the meaning they ascribed to their commitments and taking into account their feelings. Such an approach allowed for a holistic understanding of the nuances and meanings inherent in women's experiences within cooperatives.

Figure 1. Coding tree.



To summarize, the research used a systematic and methodical approach to conduct a content analysis with a solid theoretical foundation. The interview guide was thoughtfully designed, and meaningful insights were extracted through the systematic analysis of the transcripts, providing valuable context for the findings.

3.2. Research context

Cooperatives have an important place in the Belgian, but also in the European and global economy (Staessens et al., 2021). At the global level, they represent a turnover of more than 2,200 billion US dollars, but also more than 250 million workers and 10% of the active population (Swaton & de Poorter, 2015). On the other hand, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) counts more than 160,000 cooperatives on the European continent, with a total of 5.4 million workers (Boivin & Stokkink, 2016; Swaton & de Poorter, 2015). Finally, cooperative enterprises represent 1% of Belgian enterprises and 3% of the country's GDP, i.e. (in 2021) 19,607 cooperative societies (Staessens et al., 2021).

Statistical data on gender-related issues in cooperatives, including the proportion of women in various positions, is limited (Dessy, 2022; International Labour Organization, 2015; Kaur et al., 2022) and this is no exception in the Belgian context (Dessy, 2022) where collecting reliable data on cooperatives is difficult provided the political institutional complexity and, until recently, vagueness of the boundaries of the cooperative legal form of enterprises (Staessens et al., 2021). As we have seen, there is an under-representation of women in the governing bodies of cooperatives, and more broadly of social economy enterprises, while they are over-

represented in non-decision-making positions (Conseil National des Cress, 2019; Degavre & Saussey, 2017; Désert, 2014; Guérin et al., 2021; Nippierd, 2012; Observatoire national d'ESS France, 2022; Olivier, 2017). Our sample, though not statistically representative, also reflects this smaller relative presence of women on the board of directors. Further, in our sample, only less than a quarter of the presidents of the cooperatives in our sample are women. Also, in total, more than three quarters of the board of directors we met are composed of less than half of women.

4. RESULTS: EQUALITY, COMMITMENTS AND TENSIONS

Based on women's experiences, we highlight the processes specific to the governance of cooperatives faced by women directors. The following analysis shows that these women's experiences are complex, but also multifaceted. Indeed, they involve various actors (partners, children, other administrators, etc.), but also different forms of commitment (voluntary, reproductive, domestic, paid, etc.).

4.1. Specificities of cooperatives: diversity and (in)equality

In general, the interviewed women directors consider that women occupy relatively equivalent positions to men on the board of directors of cooperatives. Women do not feel discriminated. On the contrary, their conditions would even be better than in the classical economy. The propensity of cooperatives for social values would influence the conditions of women and, thus, people working in cooperatives would be less predisposed to act in a discriminatory way, since values such as equality are dear to them.

"The values of cooperatives may contribute to a better situation for women. The people I work with are often open to change, I think that gender issues and inclusion are part of the values. This is also possible in other types of companies, but it is true that principles such as "one person = one vote" apply, because everyone has a say.
(Interview 25)

Therefore, women directors describe the board of directors as spaces in which power is not central. These elements seem to distinguish the board of cooperatives from those of more traditional enterprises. Beyond the relationship to power, the situation of women is, according

to them, rather correct. It is in this sense that some of them perceive cooperatives as inspiring models for reducing inequalities.

"There is a difference between men and women in the professional world. Cooperatives are undoubtedly one of the solutions, it's an inspiring model"
(Interview 25)

The benefits of diversity on the board of directors, including better representation of workers or complementarity of approaches and points of view, were highlighted by the women directors. Despite this, they acknowledge a lack of gender diversity in most boards. This is not surprising given that most cooperatives in our sample operate in male-dominated sectors. Indeed, most of the cooperative boards we met are largely made up of white, university-educated men in their fifties, from a middle or even upper social class background.

"We don't always have the same way of seeing things as men, but it's complementary. Egos are less important than in men, we also look more at the collateral impacts of a decision. [...] The presence of women makes it possible to have different points of view, to talk about the well-being of employees, the societal impact of the company, more than the numerical analysis for example." (Interview 11)

"There are 5 of us on this board: there are only men, people who have very advanced levels of education, often in technical sectors. There is little cultural diversity [...]. I think there is a lack of women on boards [...]. But we need other profiles [...]. That's why we need women, younger people, other cultural backgrounds..." (Interview 2)

Women directors acknowledge that some men speak up more or that they don't always feel listened to by their peers.

"Also, sometimes I feel like what I've said isn't picked up, I don't always get heard... [...] I'm not looking for recognition... I've already reported that I didn't feel heard, and at that moment, I felt heard. But the way of working hasn't changed." (Interview 7)

Several respondents indicated a recent change in the composition of the board of directors. It seems that women are increasingly present. However, in most cases, this evolution is due to chance, to a 'natural' phenomenon or to the will of the members, especially women. It is therefore rarely a question of structural actions to combat the under-representation of women in the power bodies of cooperatives. Nevertheless, women highlighted another element specific to the functioning of many boards: the consideration of parenthood. Thus, several of these bodies adapt the meeting times in order to allow parents to be present. This could be a part of explanation for the evolution of women's representation.

"It's hard to put your finger on it, but yes, men have more opportunities. When you give them to women, it's a very conscious process - "we need to work on that"." (Interview 4)

One of the reasons why it is '*hard to put your finger*' on the inequalities that exist within the board of directors of cooperatives is that, because things are done and the situation is better than elsewhere, there is an illusion that *everything is fine*. This, together with the weight of the patriarchal system, from which cooperatives cannot fully escape, hides certain unequal processes such as the low presence of women in the position of president. Even if cooperatives present themselves as an alternative, they are part of a system in which men have more opportunities than women. Therefore, the board of directors, since they cannot extract themselves from this system, cannot be completely egalitarian spaces. Inequalities are thus due more to the persistence of a system of domination than to individual behaviour. Yet, the presence of women in leadership roles within these male-dominated sectors suggests that cooperatives may still foster more inclusive governance dynamics. This potential for inclusivity, even in structurally unequal environments, reinforces the idea that cooperatives - while not exempt from broader societal patterns - can offer more egalitarian spaces than the mainstream capitalist enterprises.

4.2. Women's commitment on the board and in the cooperative: pathways and meanings

Looking at the meanings that women directors give to their commitments allows us to better understand their profiles, which, despite obvious differences, are rather homogeneous.

The women directors we met have very different backgrounds within the cooperatives and their board of directors. However, two distinct commitment pathways were identified: *progressive* and '*founding*' commitments. A first and large part of these women became involved gradually. They usually started as cooperators and, after several years, joined the board. Women directors who take this route often have more doubts about their competence and ability to occupy a space such as the board of directors, especially because they have a vague vision of what happens there. A second category has been committed since the foundation of the cooperative and is directly involved in the board. These situations concern mainly the youngest cooperatives, as the board has not yet been renewed.

Women choose to invest in these spaces for several reasons. The first category of reasons is linked to the values promoted by cooperatives and the way they operate. This relates to democracy and the human side of these enterprises. For these women, getting committed in the board was a way of finding meaning in their work, even when it is unpaid, but also of getting closer to the values they hold as individuals. Another factor that influenced their willingness to get committed was the content and tasks of the governing body. Thus, several women directors mentioned their interest in the strategic aspects of the work. The third motivation highlighted during the interviews concerns the project pursued by the cooperative itself. In this sense, the sector of activity as well as the missions of the cooperative are elements that can 'seduce' potential female directors. Finally, for some women, commitment in the board of directors is a way of enhancing their skills and thus of feeling useful to the cooperative and/or to society.

"It is a choice to work in cooperatives, it allows a better distribution of wealth and power, which does not depend on financial investment and is more accessible to all citizens. [...] Then, we have a social, organizational sense, we are more in a basic capitalist organization where 2 or 3% of people who have 90% of the wealth... It is a better social balance, we work collectively, we involve the human, the democratic aspect is more developed... It may be more complex... But I find it richer!" (Interview 2)

Despite their diverse experiences, we were able to identify a certain homogeneity among the female directors. Indeed, they generally have a profile of an academic from a privileged social class. This homogeneity is not particularly surprising insofar as breaking away, at least in part, from gender and care relationships requires certain basic capitals: social (a network), cultural (studies) and economic (income) capitals.

4.3. Limited access to governance spaces: organisational and societal factors

Based on the interviews with women directors, we have identified various elements that may hinder women's access to the board of directors of cooperatives.

First, time and availability are key factors for women's commitment on the board. This is especially true for mothers, who usually spend a large part of their free time on their household and children - especially when they are young. Indeed, the birth of a child and the transition to motherhood is often accompanied by a "*break in women's professional trajectories*" (Pailhé & Solaz, 2010: 33). For example, the idea of '*making a career*' is lost or simply all professional

activity is stopped (Pailhé & Solaz, 2010). In addition to the family, the women interviewed also must add their paid activities to their schedule. This combination of voluntary and paid work therefore does not seem to be trivial, especially when women must juggle productive and reproductive activities. From the interviews, we can see that women directors combine different roles and statuses, each of which requires a certain commitment, particularly in terms of time. It should also be noted that they generally have other commitments, sometimes in the social economy.

"We are three women on the board and without children. Another left because she couldn't manage her time with her family and the needs of the board. Men, 3 of the 4 have children so it doesn't seem to be a hindrance for them [...] I think I can afford that commitment since I haven't started a family." (Interview 24)

Our participants note that a change seems to be underway, thanks to certain adjustments. These are present in the cooperatives and/or the board of directors (flexibility, consideration of parenthood) but also within the households themselves (better distribution of tasks and mental load). We also noted that almost all the women administrators we met could count on their partner (and/or an external helper) to carry out household tasks and/or take care of the children. Therefore, the entourage – such as the spouse – is necessary for these women, so that they can maintain their commitment within the board of directors.

On a different note, the women directors highlighted the vagueness that generally surrounds governing bodies. They are relatively closed spaces and what happens there can seem out of reach. Sometimes the representations of the governing bodies are also tainted by experiences outside the cooperatives. Women don't identify with these representations. This lack of knowledge concerns both the profile and competences expected in a board, but also the tasks and roles that co-exist in a board.

"I used to see the directors arrived: they had white hair, a suit, they looked like they had money, they looked like they were important people. It was very blurry for me." (Interview 2)

The women directors also highlighted the effects of recruitment patterns. In their experience, women are much less likely than men to apply for a board position when one becomes available because they would not imagine themselves participating in these spaces of power, in part because of the representations they have. This is one reason why most boards look for candidates themselves. However, this form of co-optation also has its biases and does not guarantee parity in the board of directors. In male-dominated sectors, this informal recruitment

process may further reinforce existing gender imbalances, as networks tend to replicate themselves.

"Few women come forward, they don't see themselves in these positions, we have to go and get them. When you put out a call, 10 men show up for every 1 woman." (Entretien 4)

"There's a lot of 'co-optation'. Personally, I wouldn't have gone to the board if I hadn't been told about it. Men are looking in their network, so it probably plays a role in the composition." (Entretien 5)

Patriarchy still weighs heavily on women, especially when we look at the family sphere: women are most often responsible for most of the household tasks.

"The under-representation of women can be explained by patriarchy, men have more confidence in themselves, they don't prioritise the family as much, we also have to know where we are going. These are social constructs, they have to change so that we can move towards something else." (Interview 8)

Beyond individual factors, we see that there is a more global system of oppression and domination that restricts women's access to spaces of power such as the board of directors. Indeed, the factors presented above also affect individuals, the family, the cooperative or society. The interviews highlight the systemic aspect of gender and care and therefore the interdependence of the different spheres (domestic, professional and volunteer work).

4.4. Tensions between commitments: influence of care work

As mentioned above, there are tensions between women's commitment in cooperative governing bodies and their private lives, especially their family life and their role as mothers. Women directors recognise that motherhood can create tensions between their different commitments. For example, having children – especially young ones – would be difficult to reconcile with their presence on the board as it often leaves them with little time and energy to attend meetings or perform other additional tasks. As we have already highlighted, women's reproductive and domestic responsibilities place them on the margins of the cooperative business world and limit their opportunities, due to the time and burden associated with their status. As a result, many of the women interviewed chose to engage in voluntary work once their children were sufficiently autonomous. The directors found that, for many women, getting a child meant leaving the governing body. For men, however, this does not seem to be the case.

"I'm alone, my daughter is grown. Motherhood can be a hindrance, you have less time to volunteer. In any case, with young children it's not easy. Rather, my involvement began after 40 years." (Interview 5)

Women board members experience very differently the balance between their different commitments: couple, family, cooperative, job or paid activity, etc. To reduce the tensions between their commitments, the board members have put in place strategies: *separating and organising time* and *finding meaning in their commitments*. When it comes to separating time, women directors generally choose to dedicate certain moments to one of their commitments. For example, they may reserve their weekends for their family, do housework in the evening or answer emails for the cooperative two days a week. For other directors, it is imperative that they find meaning in their various commitments, that these are in line with the values they defend, so that their investment seems more legitimate.

"I try to keep my work, my personal life, in line with my values. At C., we have strong values that stick to our own values. It's a whole!" (Interview 3)

Some women manage to combine and reconcile their different commitments thanks to the way they organise their time, the meaning they give to it, but also to the support of those close to them – their husband or partner – through the sharing of household tasks. Traditionally, and because of a patriarchal society, women are responsible for (almost) all household tasks, from bringing up children to maintaining the home, including cooking and the overall organisation of the family, i.e., care work. For women, shedding some or all this burden frees up considerable time. Often, to free up time for one or other of their commitments, women directors choose to externalise certain household tasks, but this requires a certain amount of (financial) capital.

"I'm married and I have 3 children: 12, 10 and 8. Being a mom and on the board can be difficult. I was on maternity leave when we had a difficult time, it was the race, I also had my full-time job. We have a cleaning lady and a babysitter who would pick up the children, it makes life easier, not all directors do it, some manage it alone, others are helped by parents. We have divided the tasks, but also the responsibilities, we share the mental load." (Interview 4)

At present, women are still largely relegated to private space, so the family is often their priority. Indeed, invariably and systemically, women are 'exiled' to the home, to the care of others (especially their children) - to care. This relegation takes place on an ideological level, but also on an institutional level, since it is the result of social/cultural representations of women's roles, but also of public policies. There is thus a global (patriarchal) system composed of heterogeneous elements that share a common representation of women. All this constitutes what we will call an ontology. This ontology makes it possible to explain the tensions involved in

reconciling the different commitments of women directors. According to Descola, an '*ontology*' is a conception of the world that specifies how entities and relations are perceived and interpreted by a given society. This includes the beliefs, values, representations, norms, and thought patterns that determine how human beings interact with the world around them. '*Patriarchal ontology*', then, refers to deeply held beliefs, norms, and values that perpetuate women's subordination. This is expressed through systemic inequalities, stereotypes, discrimination and oppression.

5. DISCUSSION: GENDER, CARE AND ONTOLOGY

The aim of this article is to capture the systemic dimension of the processes and *tensions* that play out for women in and around the board of directors. Specifically, we examine "*How do the tensions between gender and work encountered by women directors of Belgian cooperatives exist, unfold and articulate?*". To do this, we use the concepts of *care work* and *gender relations* – which allow us to understand the articulation of spheres of activity as factors of inequality – in perspective with the experiences of 24 directors.

The cooperative model presents itself – on the economic and social aspects – as an alternative to capitalism. Therefore, some consider these enterprises as a social experiment (Cauwet, 2020) which would give women leadership opportunities and reduce gender inequalities (ILO COOP, 2014). Nevertheless, there is a gap between discourse and acts, in other words a hiatus between theory and practice, as already highlighted by some extant research focusing on whether social economy is really an empowering opportunity for women or an additional site of exploitation (Guérin et al., 2021; Hillenkamp et al., 2014).

In this study, we question the working conditions of women within the board of directors of cooperatives, particularly in terms of gender equality. Overall, these women do not feel that they have had sexist or discriminatory experiences. They report an apparent equality of conditions. However, they identified a few exceptions, notably linked to the socialisation of individuals: women take care of tidying up and washing up after meetings, some do not always feel listened to and have the impression that their ideas are taken up without paying attention to the fact that they come from them and, finally, women are often responsible for taking notes during meetings.

Some of the women interviewed drew comparisons between their current experience and their previous experience in traditional companies, thereby confirming previous findings that the situation of women in cooperatives is better than in capitalist enterprises, but that there is still a significant disparity in terms of equality with men (Observatoire national d'ESS France, 2022; Olivier, 2017; Parente & Martinho, 2018). Indeed, women encounter barriers and challenges, particularly in terms of participation in decision-making (Observatoire national d'ESS France, 2022; Olivier, 2017; Parente & Martinho, 2018).

Furthermore, the data and literature have shown the existence of a process of vertical segregation (Parente & Martinho, 2018), a phenomenon characterized by the underrepresentation of certain groups, particularly women, in high-ranking and prestigious positions, regardless of the sector (Bettio et al., 2009). These inequalities in position are reflected in the low presence of women on the board of directors and, above all, in their great absence from the position of president. This means that the democratic character of the structure is undermined and power is unequal. Nevertheless, it happens that some people, often women, carry more responsibilities in practice, but in an invisible way or, at least, with little recognition, so we speak of non-place and invisibilisation (Parente & Martinho, 2018).

In light of these dynamics, the structural context in which they unfold becomes particularly relevant. The predominance of male-dominated sectors in which Belgian cooperatives operate, reinforces the embeddedness of patriarchal norms in these organizations. Yet, the diversity observed across the cases studied - in particular, the varying degrees of female representation on boards - suggests that cooperatives may offer a space where traditional gender hierarchies can be questioned. This perspective invites us to consider how cooperative governance interacts with broader systems of patriarchy, especially in environments where gender inequalities are deeply rooted. As already noted, the concept of gender relations, since it allows for the study of the "*asymmetric division of labour between the sexes*" (Hirata, 2011: 38) can be put into perspective with our findings. This hierarchical relationship appears materially through, for example, the low presence of women in the position of president of the board or the tensions of reconciliation between their different commitments. Moreover, gender relations are also played out on a symbolic level since this system is perpetuated with little or no challenge. Indeed, cooperatives still do not put enough things in place. The work of Kergoat (2001) also makes it possible to rethink the concept of *work* by integrating its domestic dimension as well as voluntary work. This is essential because, as we have seen, women's working conditions are largely dependent on their private life and particularly on their possible role as mothers.

Therefore, the situation of women directors is not only linked to organisational constraints but also to an ideal context: it is a system, an ontology.

Care is a second concept that can be linked to the ontology presented here. Closely related to the concept of gender relations, the concept of care allows us to take a closer look at what happens in the home and the effects of this reproductive work (Nakano Glenn, 2016). Care is largely provided by women, even if our fieldwork has shown that they rely on their partners to carry part of the load. This invisible, unpaid, and little or no valued work has effects on the professional work - voluntary or otherwise - of the female directors we met. Indeed, we have seen that the burden of care work can lead to a lack of time and therefore a restriction of commitments. Therefore, while the distribution of care work limits women's access to the professional world, it facilitates access for men who have little or no responsibility for it.

In comparison with the classical economy, the situation of women in cooperatives is relatively favourable, according to women directors who have experience of both. Thus, even if there is still work to be done, in terms of equality of position in particular, cooperatives and their board of directors have the merit of reflecting on and being sensitive to equality, in this case gender equality. Thus, some of the cooperatives we met aim to recognise the importance of diversity within the board, to establish statistics on their composition, to set up quotas or to be gender sensitive when recruiting new administrators and in meeting times. We can therefore highlight a certain consistency between values and actions, although gaps still exist.

Nevertheless, from a critical point of view, a sexist ontology is at play, even at the heart of cooperatives, stemming from a patriarchal system existing outside their enterprises and in which they are embedded. Its presence is '*masked*' by the positive aspects mentioned above. This finding contributes a better understanding of some of the difficulties faced by women, particularly in reconciling their commitments. Clearly, cooperatives, despite their perception as alternative organisations (Dufays et al., 2020; Ratner, 2014) cannot hope to completely eliminate the hiatus they encounter between theory and practice as long as they belong to and participate in the system - which produces unequal social relations. However, it is worth remaining optimistic by pointing out that nothing is set in stone. Indeed, the system can - or must - evolve, by modifying one or other of its components. This can be done by intervening in the sharing of care in the household, by proposing new tools in cooperatives or by introducing public policies that value domestic work.

6. CONCLUSION: THE WEIGHT OF PATRIARCHAL ONTOLOGY

The aim of this article was to study and highlight the systemic dimension of the processes and tensions that play out for women in and around cooperative board of directors. Indeed, cooperatives, because of the values they rest on and strive for, represent a relevant and strategic field to study contemporary issues related to work and gender. To reach this aim, we used the concepts of care work and gender relations, which allow us to examine the articulation of spheres of activity as factors of inequality. More specifically, we were interested in women committed on the board of directors of Belgian cooperatives, traditionally invested by '*white men over 50*'.

A key finding of this article is that cooperatives and their governing bodies are an inspiring model for approaching equality, even if some inequalities remain. Nevertheless, these enterprises are part of a patriarchal ontology that somewhat shatters the hopes of a truly egalitarian and democratic model. Indeed, it is a whole system that is in place, not all of which is played out in the cooperatives but involves women's other commitments such as care or paid professional work. However, the initiatives put in place in and by cooperatives to reduce inequalities are more than necessary to move towards a better situation and to transform this ontology.

This complexity becomes even more striking in the context of cooperatives operating within predominantly male sectors, where the proportion of women and men on boards varies considerably from one case to another. Such diversity reflects the multiple ways in which gender dynamics are shaped and negotiated within governance structures. It also prompts deeper reflection on how cooperatives, depending on their internal configurations, may either reinforce, accommodate, or challenge existing gendered power relations. From a theoretical perspective, this paper argues for the need to consider gender relations and care work to understand the tensions between gender and work. Moreover, these concepts have helped to complicate the perception and understanding of cooperatives which, despite their values, are part of the capitalist system, of a patriarchal ontology. On the other hand, the concepts of gender relations and care work have been used in a particular and original framework, that of unpaid and non-contracted work.

While this study contributes to understanding gendered dynamics within cooperative governance, it remains largely exploratory. It opens avenues for further research that could investigate more deeply the systemic nature of gender inequalities, particularly the complex

interrelation between private life and work in the social economy. By shedding light on these tensions, this research underscores the necessity of examining the structural mechanisms that sustain gender disparities in spaces that claim egalitarian values. It also reminds us that cooperatives – and other social economy enterprises – despite their ambition to oppose capitalism and its inherent mechanisms of domination, remain embedded in this system and its corollary domination patterns, such as patriarchy.

Like any study, this one is not exempt from limitations, the answer to which constitutes paths for future research. First, while focusing on Belgian cooperatives offers valuable insights, the findings should not be assumed to be directly transferable to all cooperatives in different geographical and organizational contexts. This research is rooted in a specific socio-economic and cultural framework, which shapes the observed dynamics. Although patriarchy is a global phenomenon, its manifestations vary across regions and organisations. Conducting similar studies in different parts of the world could reveal distinct challenges and strategies for addressing gender inequalities within cooperative governance.

Another limitation of this study relates to the choice of sectors analyzed. While the study does not primarily focus on sectoral differences, it is important to acknowledge that the gendered nature of specific industries could have a significant effect on the experiences of women in cooperative governance. Many of the cooperatives included in this research operate in male-dominated sectors such as construction, IT, and energy, reflecting broader labor market trends. However, cooperative activity is not uniformly distributed across sectors, and certain industries – such as care, education, and health – are traditionally more feminized. Future research could explore how sectoral composition influences gendered power dynamics within cooperative governance, examining whether women in cooperatives from female-dominated sectors experience different barriers and opportunities than those in male-dominated sectors. Such an analysis could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how industry-specific factors intersect with gender relations in cooperative governance.

Because this study purposefully focused on gender, one could consider the treatment of intersectionality as a limitation. Although it addresses gender disparities, it does not sufficiently account for the ways in which other axes of oppression – such as race, class, and disability – intersect with gender to shape women's experiences within cooperative governance. Future research should adopt a more intersectional approach to explore how multiple forms of discrimination interact within these spaces, ensuring a more nuanced and inclusive analysis.

Finally, we hope that this study will trigger further research on the revaluation and denaturalization of care work, an essential yet often overlooked issue. Care work has long been essentialized and associated with women, leading to its marginalization in discussions on labor – whether paid or unpaid. Recognizing and revalorizing care work is crucial for addressing persistent gender inequalities. Future studies could explore how cooperatives and the broader social economy influence perceptions of care work and contribute to its redefinition beyond the androcentric paradigm of labor. An ontological shift in this regard could significantly alleviate the burdens disproportionately placed on women, fostering more equitable governance structures within cooperatives and beyond.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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