

Final Report

April 2012



# Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy

## Report on an International Gathering

It was with great pleasure that we hosted women from over 45 countries for the event entitled "Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy," held in Montréal on October 17 2011, as part of the International Forum on the Social and Solidarity Economy (FIESS). At this gathering, 250 of us discussed the social economy and women's economic security and shared practical experiences from across the globe.

We began to organize the session in early 2011, by creating an organizing committee charged with its design and prepa-

ration. The goal was to take advantage of the presence at FIESS of women from around the world to examine together how the solidarity economy can act as a lever to improve women's economic security. The organizing committee produced a paper containing a number of questions designed to spark reflection. This paper was given to everyone who registered for the session. A video was also produced, featuring stories of women involved in the social and solidarity economy in several different regions of the world. The purpose of the video was to anchor discussions in

the practical realities confronting women in their everyday lives.

We thank everyone who participated and all the women who contributed in one way or another to the session, which was rich in discussions, creative energy and diverse perspectives and experiences. This report presents some highlights of the event. Please circulate the tools produced for "Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy" in your networks.

In solidarity,

*The Organizing Committee\*\**



*\*\*The organizing committee was composed of representatives of the Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale [Québec Association of International Solidarity Groups], Centre de recherche sociale appliqué [Centre for Applied Social Research], Chantier de l'économie sociale [Social Economy Incubator], Conseil régional de la Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec-Montréal Métropolitain [Metropolitan Montréal Regional Council of the Workers Federation of Québec], Confédération des syndicats nationaux [Confederation of National Trade Unions], Québec Native Women, Table de concertation du mouvement des femmes Centre-du-Québec [Central Québec Women's Movement Steering Committee], Relais-femmes [Relay-Women] and SUCO-Solidarité Union Coopération [Solidarity Union Cooperation].*

## A participatory process

"Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy" was designed to enable as many participants as possible to discuss and share their perspectives and experiences. It was conducted in three languages (English, French and Spanish). Breakout groups were formed for the three language groups and plenary sessions were held in all three languages with simultaneous interpretation provided. The proceedings commenced with the screening of a video that was produced especially for the occasion. This was followed by two periods of discussion in the breakout groups. The first discussion period focussed on significant obstacles to women's



participation in the social economy, and the conditions under which the social and solidarity can enhance women's economic security and autonomy. During the second discussion period, participants discussed our governments' engagement in supporting women's participation in the social and solidarity economy and women's networking activities in this field. A summary of the discussions

was then presented to the plenary. Three women panellists commented on the discussions and brought forward additional points and analysis. The members of the panel were Djakabe Kaba (president of the Réseau guinéen d'économie sociale et solidaire [Guinean Social and Solidarity Network]), Marie-Ève Bordeleau (justice coordinator for Quebec Native Women) and Magdalena Leon (an Ecuadorian member of REMTE, the Latin American Women's Network for Economic Transformation). The event concluded with a discussion among all plenary participants. ♀

## Stimulating discussions reflected a diversity of experiences, conditions, and perspectives

Increasingly, the social and solidarity economy is being recognized as an indispensable tool for satisfying people's aspirations for justice and fairness; it is a strategy used by many women to ensure their survival and financial security. The two main topics of discussion at the session were: how to support the social and solidarity economy (in general, and women's involvement, in particular); and how to ensure that the social and solidarity economy enables women to achieve financial autonomy, and under what conditions. Discussions were naturally coloured by the diversity of

women's conditions and contexts.

Here are the questions asked of participants during the breakout group discussions and a summary of participants' comments.

**1) What conditions are currently contributing, or might contribute to ensuring that the social and solidarity economy enhances women's financial security and autonomy? For example, financial, economic, political and social conditions.**

(continued on page 3)

### Paper circulated to stimulate reflection before the event

The organizing committee produced a paper to prepare women for the event of October 17, 2011. It was sent in advance to everyone who had registered for the activity. The aim was to establish some basic concepts and propose topics for further reflection. It included discussion of the principles and values of the social and solidarity economy, definitions, and a few questions to stimulate reflection on how the social and solidarity economy can be a vehicle for women's financial security and autonomy. The paper also presents reasons for highlighting women's contribution to, and role in the social and solidarity economy.

The paper is available online at the following addresses:

<http://www.relais-femmes.qc.ca/publications/11>

<http://reliess.org/fjess/related-activities/?lang=en#women>





**Financial and economic:**

- ◆ Higher pay and better working conditions in social and solidarity enterprises; notably pay equity for women.
- ◆ Development of services to give access to credit and capital.
- ◆ Affirmative action on social and solidarity economy initiatives, especially those of women, for example, in the context of government tender calls, preferential purchasing policies, etc.
- ◆ The social and solidarity economy no longer perceived as the informal economy.
- ◆ Subsidies for social and solidarity enterprises.
- ◆ Establishment of redistributive taxation measures.

**Political:**

- ◆ Establishment of legislation and public policies to stimulate training, cooperatives, access to the land, fair trade.
- ◆ Market protection



through domestic policies.

- ◆ More women, and more effective participation of women, in all levels of government.
- ◆ Heightened visibility of social and solidarity economy.
- ◆ Reinforcement of local government leadership.

**Social:**

- ◆ Promotion of sexual equality.
- ◆ Acknowledgement of the contribution of the social and solidarity economy to society in general.
- ◆ Reinforcement of women's literacy and leadership.
- ◆ Education on the social and solidarity economy.
- ◆ Development of links with other social movements.
- ◆ Development of awareness-raising and self-esteem building processes.
- ◆ Mobilization of women.

**2) From a feminist perspective, are our governments engaged (or should they be engaged) in supporting the social and solidarity economy, and women's participation in particular? How? What types of public policies are needed?**

In general, participants de-

**An international and diverse gathering**

"Women and the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy" succeeded in uniting 250 people from over 45 countries. It was attended by women from Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Swaziland, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda), the Americas (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Québec, United States, Uruguay), Asia (Bangladesh, India, Japan, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam) and Europe (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland). Over 85% of the participants were women. Participants represented diverse spheres, including autonomous women's groups, community-based organizations, social and solidarity economy enterprises, NGOs and international solidarity organizations, unions, researchers, individuals, and representatives of institutions and public agencies.

nounced the fact that governments neither acknowledge nor sufficiently invest in the social and solidarity economy and women's initiatives. Participants also criticized the capitalist system and stressed the need for more collective action.

Other means of supporting the social and solidarity economy, particularly women's participation, were mentioned:

- ◆ Training, in schools and communities, on women's contribution to society, the social and solidarity economy, workers' rights, and unions.

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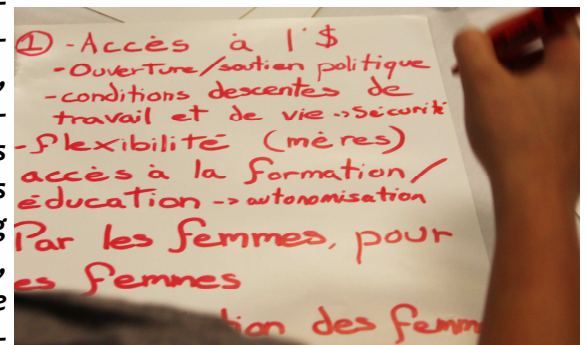
- ◆ Actions in favour of sexual parity in decision-making positions (boards of directors, municipal councils, etc.).
- ◆ Fostering women's leadership.
- ◆ Government involvement; total self-management is mostly impossible.
- ◆ Government programs to stimulate the social and solidarity economy and broaden its reach to extend beyond marginalized and disadvantaged groups.
- ◆ Policies to encourage local buying, responsible buying and environmental protection.
- ◆ Work-family balance policies.
- ◆ Support for women working in traditionally male industries.
- ◆ Higher pay for traditionally

- female occupations.
- ◆ Sex-aggregated data collection and application of gender-based analysis to the social and solidarity economy.

**3) Are women who are involved in the social and solidarity economy networking? If so, how? If not, how can this be encouraged? How could this benefit us? What kinds of things (ways of doing things, experiences, etc.) or topics would we like to share and explore further?**

Yes, women are networking in different ways and at different levels, for example, the cooperative network and social justice groups.

- works.
- ◆ Sharing tools and experiences.
- ◆ Listing initiatives.
- ◆ Mentoring.
- ◆ Use of new communications and information technologies.



- How can we encourage this?
- ◆ Through knowledge mobilization
  - ◆ Communication.
  - ◆ Promotion.
  - ◆ Stressing synergy rather than competition.
  - ◆ Creating informal local women's net-

Networks help to reduce social isolation and offer access to new markets; they facilitate the organization of collective actions and lobbying to defend political demands. They enable us to move beyond marketing considerations and occupy the political sphere. ♀



## The need for systemic transformations

The conference also heard more comprehensive calls for a new economic system and the transformation of the existing systems. The social and solidarity economy is essentially about the production of goods and services to meet human needs and care for the natural world. Women's connection with this economy dates back to ancient times, long before the initiatives and enterprises of the social and solidarity economy as we know it today. We should highlight and value women's

historical contribution to the economy in order to position women as economic actors and protagonists.

Participants were urged to move beyond the position of adapting to the system in order to meet our immediate needs; we must also fight for another economic system— one that is driven by values, practices and considerations that are different from those of the existing capitalist system. An economic system that is inclusive and that

takes into account, not only the cycle of production, but also, the cycle of reproduction. This would involve deep-rooted social change to establish the primacy of a broad concept of social reproduction over the reproduction of capital. In other words, we're being encouraged to replace the notion of a "production line" with the notion of circular production associated with the production and reproduction cycles traditionally engaged in by women. ♀



### A video to hear the voices of women on the ground

Across the planet, women are active in social and solidarity organizations, as workers, members, participants and users. The organizing committee produced a video entitled *Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy* to highlight the contribution of women on the ground and enable them to express their opinions and recount their experiences. In the video you will hear from the following women's groups:

- The Coopérative de couture Batiscan [Batiscan Sewing Co-op], a work cooperative in Sainte-Geneviève-de-Batiscan, Québec.
- Red Prausa, a network of women urban agriculture producers in Pachacámac, Peru.
- Yiriwasso, a federation of shea butter cooperatives in Sanankoroba, Mali.
- Partenaires pour l'insertion sociale par l'économique (PRISE), a social integration factory for people who want to return to the labour market, in Victoriaville, Québec.
- Baan Kredrakarn, a shelter for young women in Ko-Kred Nonthonburi, Thailand.
- Awaj Warmi, a non-governmental organization of women artisans who create alpaca clothing in Sucre, Bolivia.
- Buffets Bouf'elles, a work cooperative that provides a catering service and a café in Trois-Rivières, Québec.
- Abierto Hasta el Amanecer, a work cooperative that provides computer training in Madrid, Spain.

This trilingual video (available with English, French and Spanish subtitles) can be viewed online at: <http://vimeo.com/31213680>

## Other debates

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State funding of the social and solidarity economy was another topic of discussion. Not all participants agreed that governments should be asked to fund the social and solidarity economy (or be urged to fund more). Women who were against this position affirmed the importance of autonomy for this economic sector. Women who advocated increased government support underlined the fact that countless private sector companies are State supported even though they fulfill no social role. Social and solidarity enterprises should at least have access to the same benefits as private sector companies, if they are to be competitive.

Other ways to support the social and solidarity economy were also mentioned, especially in regard to women's involvement:

- ◆ Mutual savings and credit unions could be an alternative to the costly financing offered by banks.
- ◆ Under certain conditions, the solidarity surety could be a means to facilitate women's access to financing.
- ◆ It was pointed out that other means of solidarity financing were essential, because government assistance is non-existent in many countries and private-sector financing comes with exorbitant interest rates. Microcredit, under certain conditions, could be an alternative to financing through bank loans. One example that was given: a women's bank providing loans at no more than 1% interest. Other participants remarked that the dominant forms of microcredit further impoverish women.
- ◆ Inclusion of the social and

solidarity economy in the overall economic system and in public policies, as are public and private sector activities; one participant described this as the transition from amateurism to professionalism. What remains to be determined, according to another participant, is whether this is supposed to be an ongoing model or a transitional system?

- ◆ Development of artisan cooperatives; the cooperative model is a legal structure enabling women in a particular community to connect with each other.
- ◆ Use of different types of social and solidarity enterprises: cooperatives and non-profit organizations.
- ◆ Taking reproduction and life cycles into account in the input and output of social and solidarity enterprises. ♀

## Women's strength

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In short, women are the ones who are going to make change. Women should take advantage of the tools they have developed, such as mutual savings and credit unions. As citizens, voters and consumers, women have the power to affect governments and influence companies.

Women's main strength lies in their courage and determination to think about the world from a different perspective



than men, and to propose a new vision of our world. Women also need to be present in decision-making bodies, at the centre of governments; they must refuse to be marginalized.

Women subsidize the economy by their voluntary and unpaid labour. This is often illustrated with the following figures: women provide 75% of the labour and get only 10% of the wages and 1% of the world's wealth. When women demand support for the social and solidarity economy, they are only calling for their just share, an equitable redistribution of the wealth. ♀

## A much appreciated session

Seventy-seven people from 19 countries completed the evaluation form at the end of the activity. Here is a summary of their answers.

In general, the activity was much appreciated by participants. The video was very well received; women remarked that we need to have models like the women in the film to inspire us. Other positive aspects: the event's organization, the theme and the quality of discussion. Some appreciated that it was a mixed event (women and men), while others would have preferred to talk among women only. Quite a few participants said that it was a privilege to be able to share perspectives with people from around the world.

The small group format facilitated sharing and discussion. Many participants liked the discussion about the State's role in the social and solidarity economy and the debate on micro-credit. Several people appreciated the discussions about the need to radically change our



perspective on the economy and situate the social and solidarity economy within a systemic perspective (ecology, women's autonomy, ridding ourselves of the accounting model that separates production from reproduction). People mentioned both the variety of definitions, experiences, and perspectives on the subject and the similarities among different world regions. Some said they had trouble distinguishing between the social and solidarity economy and women's autonomy. There is a sense that we need to formulate a clearer and more explicit feminist analysis of the social and solidarity economy. Some people also raised the issue of feminist education and training on economics.

Regarding follow-up to this event, most participants spoke of the importance of networking. Many referred to the idea of creating an international network of women in the social and solidarity economy in order to share knowledge, analysis and tools (by means of e-mail and the Web) and develop links between work on the ground and academic research. The importance of working with others in the same world region, or more locally, to organize activities and discussions, and Internet

### Raise women's visibility in the social and solidarity economy

Too often women are forgotten or invisible in discussions of the social and solidarity economy. To raise women's visibility, participants were given a purple scarf (purple symbolizes feminism in several world regions) to wear at the other events of the International Forum on the Social and Solidarity Economy (FIESS). It was an attractive symbol that generated a lot of comments!



communications, was also mentioned. Some objectives worth pursuing: heightening the visibility of women in the social and solidarity economy (e.g., using sex-aggregated data) and feminist economics. ♀



## Thank you all!

Thanks to everyone who helped make this activity a success: the volunteers, those who helped in the making of the video, especially videographer Marie-Noëlle Arseneau, Fem International (for the scarves), the interpreters and translators, Mariam Touré for the photos used in this document and all the attendees.

Special thanks to everyone on the organizing committee (see photo below\*) for your involvement in this project:

- ◆ Francesca Nugnes (volunteer)\*
- ◆ Fréda Thélusma (Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale - AQOCI)\*
- ◆ Danielle Fournier (Relais-femmes)\*
- ◆ Lise St-Germain (Centre de recherche sociale appliquée)\*

- ◆ Nancy Burrows (International Forum on the Social and Solidarity Economy/Chantier de l'économie sociale)\*
- ◆ Marie-France Benoit (Status of Women Committee of the Confédération des syndicats)\*
- ◆ Lise Gervais (Relais-femmes)\*
- ◆ Linda Gagnon (SUCO-Solidarité Union Coopération)\*

*Not in the photo:*

- ◆ Michèle Audette (Quebec Native Women)
- ◆ Danielle Casara (Conseil régional FTQ Montréal Métropolitain)
- ◆ Francyne Ducharme (Table de concertation du mouvement des femmes Centre-du-Québec)
- ◆ Émilie Grenier (Quebec Native Women)



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- ◆ Chantier de l'économie sociale
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- ◆ Ministère de la Culture, des Communications et de la Condition féminine
- ◆ Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN)
- ◆ Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ)
- ◆ L'Intersyndicale des femmes

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This report, and all the tools produced for "Women at the Heart of the Social and Solidarity Economy" are available in English, French and Spanish at:

<http://www.relais-femmes.qc.ca/publications/11>

<http://reliess.org/fjess/related-activities/?lang=en#women>