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# Female Entrepreneurship: Can Cooperatives Contribute to Overcoming the Gender Gap? A Spanish First Step to Equality

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**Abstract:** To date, entrepreneurship research has rarely focused on cooperatives. Recent research has suggested there is a positive association between cooperatives and women's entrepreneurial activity based on the assumption that this model is especially suitable for women's expectations and is favourable to their economic entrepreneurial development. However, few studies have empirically tested these propositions. This research, which analysed data from 264 Spanish cooperatives, confirms these findings. A mixed-methods approach was used. In the first stage, a Delphi study was run with 11 cooperative entrepreneurship experts to ask what factors may be decisive for women preferring a cooperative model. In the second stage, the factors derived from the Delphi study were used in a survey targeting female cooperative associates. The findings confirmed that female cooperative owners perceived this business model to be aligned with their values and best fit their work and lifestyle. This research contributes to the existing social entrepreneurship literature by providing empirical evidence from the Spanish context that highlights the role of women in cooperatives. The findings also emphasize the need for responsive policies and programmes that promote the cooperative model since it promotes female employment and women's entrepreneurial activity even in periods of economic austerity.

**Keywords:** women entrepreneurship; women entrepreneurs; cooperatives; social economy; social entrepreneurship; reconciliation practices

## 1. Introduction

The economic crisis of 2008 and the subsequent austerity measures imposed across the European Union (EU) prompted new self-managed and social initiatives addressing the most pressing social and economic problems [1,2]. In Spain, there was an upsurge of new entrepreneurial ventures, including a larger number of cooperatives. In recent years, cooperatives have noticeably expanded where, surprisingly, many other businesses collapsed during the worst period of the financial crisis [3]. In addition, an increasing number of women are engaging in cooperatives, to the extent that the percentage of women in the workforce of these organizations surpasses by far that of women in the workforce as a whole [4,5]. This issue has grown in importance considering previous research showing that business entrepreneurs are twice as likely to be male, while numbers of male and female social entrepreneurs were similar [6,7].

Regarding this female presence in entrepreneurship, recent research has focused on the role that this activity can play on contributing to overcome the gender gap, understood as the differences between

women and men in terms of their levels of participation, access, rights, remuneration, or benefits (European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE) [8–10]. In this vein, Dalkiran [11] recently highlighted the benefits women receive from the membership of cooperative organizations and concluded that female entrepreneurship through cooperatives can facilitate progress in meeting regional and national development targets. Dalkiran's contribution [11] should be considered a first step in a relatively young academic field—women's social entrepreneurship—which has been primarily based on case studies (see, for example, [12,13]). While his study targeted Turkish cooperatives, Dalkiran [11] argued that similar findings might be attained in other cultural settings. As shown, cooperatives can favour women's entrepreneurship as they are owned and self-managed by their workers. Furthermore, cooperatives might be welcoming organizations for women, as well as drivers of equality. If these organizations can act as a fast track for women to become entrepreneurs, they can be a springboard to female empowerment and economic development.

Despite the growing popularity of cooperatives and their superior resistance to economic downturns [2,14–17], entrepreneurial studies drawing on this business model remain scarce, and Carrasco [18] (p.62) urges future researchers "to better understand the contribution of cooperatives to enable the transformative change required for advancements on gender equality". This study addresses this research gap by examining the main factors that influence women's entrepreneurship by using cooperatives as a business model. This study follows a mixed-method approach. In Study 1, a Delphi technique with 11 entrepreneurship experts was used to generate a list of factors that can influence the decision to join a cooperative. In Study 2, these factors were used to question 99 female cooperative associates from a population of 264 cooperatives based in Galicia, in Spain. This approach was used for several reasons. First, the growth of cooperatives in Europe and Spain is significant and is expected to increase in the coming years [14]. Second, previous women's entrepreneurship research has relied on quantitative methods designed to identify gender differences and perform comparative analysis [19]. The resulting findings are then predominantly descriptive and not adequately contextualized nor sector specific [19]. Third, earlier research in the Spanish context following a "persuasive case study approach" [18] (p. 56) has examined how the cooperative model in the Andalusian context can create employment and empower women. This is of particular importance given that inequalities between women and men are an outstanding issue. Empowerment and self-employment are two effective paths to overcome this gender gap, so cooperatives might contribute to reduce those differences. However, no research has empirically tested the links between cooperative participation and women's expectations, needs, and perceptions of equality and work-life reconciliation practices. Therefore, this study draws on the scarce literature on cooperatives as drivers of women's entrepreneurial ventures and the cooperative activity in Spain to address the following research questions:

- (1) What factors influence women's engagement in cooperatives?
- (2) What exogenous factors favour women's cooperative entrepreneurship?
- (3) What are the links between women's engagement in cooperatives and their (a) social and economic expectations and (b) individual needs?
- (4) What is the perceived value of cooperatives, in relation to female associates' perceptions of (a) equality and (b) work-life reconciliation practices?

The following sections present the theoretical background of this study, including details of the methodology followed by the main research findings. Conclusions, limitations, and both theoretical and practical implications are then discussed in the final section.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Cooperatives as Drivers of Entrepreneurship and Equality

Cooperatives can be defined as anonymous associations of people who voluntarily join to satisfy their economic, social, and cultural common needs and expectations through a jointly owned and

democratically managed enterprise [20]. In these organisations, certain basic values (e.g. mutual aid, responsibility, democracy, equality, and solidarity) coexist with ethical ones, such as honesty, transparency, social responsibility, and concern for others [2,14,21]. Therefore, the cooperative assumes not only the responsibility of bringing economic benefits to its owners, but also of improving their quality of life and that of the larger community in which it is located.

Researchers have hitherto tended to neglect cooperatives because they do not have a clear place in a capitalist system where the private sector is assumed to be the dominant player in promoting economic development [15]. Nevertheless, cooperatives have grown in popularity in recent years because the focus on social outcomes places them in the social economy (SE), one of the priorities for the European Union (EU), and because they display a countercyclical economic behaviour. In this respect, and despite some criticisms [22], the capacity of the social and cooperative economy to react to the effects of the economic crisis on employment and wage adjustment has been acknowledged [17]. Thus, cooperatives are regarded as viable alternatives to unemployment and as a way of re-entering the labour market [16]. In addition, they have shown greater flexibility and adaptability in adverse circumstances than other organizational models, and a superior ability to facilitate access to employment for disadvantaged groups and socially excluded people [23–25].

In addition, since Dees' contribution [26], social agents—who include cooperative's owners or associates—have been regarded as entrepreneurs and agents of change in the social sector, given their innovative profiles and their levels of commitment and responsibility [27,28]. Understanding why women become entrepreneurs has been subject of debate, especially because they are making a considerable contribution to entrepreneurial activity (for a comprehensive review, see [19]). In the same vein, this activity stands out given that it can contribute to female's careers and, in turn, to reduce the inequalities between women and men from a professional approach.

On another note, scholars have argued that the business creation process may vary according to the entrepreneur's gender and that there are demand-side differences in the expectations of entrepreneurial men and women [29–33]. Given that entrepreneurship is embedded in a social context [34,35], recent research has been addressing the external factors conditioning the entrepreneurial activity [19,36,37], granting a special attention to the socio-cultural factors. In this respect, fear of failure has been stressed as one of the most important drivers of entrepreneurial behaviour, especially among female entrepreneurs [30,38,39]. The entrepreneurship literature has suggested that women have a greater fear of failure than men, so they behave more conservatively when they undertake a business venture [38,40]. In this sense, women's preference for the cooperatives' business model over other more traditional corporate structures [41] can be explained by a perception that cooperatives are less risky as they are organisations aimed at cost and profit sharing.

Despite this economic approach, the role of women in cooperatives has been mainly addressed from a motivational perspective. The contributions of Bonet [42,43] and Senent [44–46] are a landmark in this field, since both authors have extensively addressed the link between women and social economy, notably through cooperatives. They argued that some of the principles of cooperatives, such as cooperation, solidarity, fair and democratic management, equal voting rights, self-assistance and self-responsibility, and social responsiveness towards the community are the main driving factors for women in choosing this corporate model. In addition, they noted that female individual circumstances, whether personal, social, or familiar, can underpin these fundamental values.

Among the universal principle of cooperation, the "Volunteer and Open Partnership Principle" prevails to guarantee equality [20]. This means that cooperatives have an open-door policy, so that any individual who accepts the responsibilities of the partnership can become a cooperative member. Under this perspective, Senent [45] noted that the promotion of equal opportunities can be inferred from cooperative principles. Recently, Pérez [47] in a thorough review of the laws governing cooperatives in Spain, pointed out that Spain' legal framework explicitly requires a duty of compliance with this objective. Other scholars argue that women prioritise mutual aid, collaborative work and non-profitable goals over financial gain [12,41,48]. In addition, the "Education, Training, and Information Principle"

implies that cooperatives offer opportunities for education and training for their partners, which suggests that these institutions can favour female empowerment more than other organizations [49]. This view is of interest, as there is growing evidence that participation in entrepreneurial education and organisational training programmes enhances business self-efficacy [50,51]. This in turn, benefits democratic management, as women can actively decide on the scope of the programmes and incorporate their interests and expectations into business development [5,17,52].

Finally, another set of studies on women in cooperatives focused on the relevance of organisation systems averse to discrimination, which allow the participation under conditions of equality [45,46]. For instance, Sánchez [53] suggested that cooperatives can favour the implementation of reconciliation policies, such as flexible timework or parenthood leave, that can act as a motivating factor. These policies relate to the principles of self-management and self-organisation of working time that traditionally characterise cooperatives [45]. Since cooperatives have a set of intrinsic “cooperative” values and operating principles, actions to promote genuine equality can be implemented more easily than elsewhere [45]. As cooperatives pay special attention to collective needs and social problems, they are especially sensitive to issues related to gender equality and the adoption of socially responsible behaviour [54,55]. This sensitivity, in turn, enables the implementation of reconciliation policies [56], which have been proved more important to women than men [57–59], leading to the recommendation of flexible work policies to encourage women’s career advancement [60].

In sum, previous research has suggested that cooperatives have certain characteristics (e.g. collaboration and mutual assistance, democratic participation in management and putting people first) that can be adjusted particularly to women’s needs and expectations (individual adjustment); to their way of working (as a team, with high-quality social relationships) and to women’s priorities (such as reconciliation and equal opportunities). Altogether, one would expect that these factors can have a driving role in female entrepreneurship. So far, however, there has been little empirical evidence of these relationships, which are addressed in this study.

## 2.2. Contextualization of the Research

The environmental conditions of the cooperative’s location largely affect its economic viability [61]. Context does matter [19,62–64], in particular the formal, legal and financial requirements to constitute a company can be decisive for choosing a specific type of organization [13,64,65]. Moreover, women’s entrepreneurial endeavours seem to be especially sensitive to specific cultural, legal and economic frameworks [19]. As a result, several external factors can motivate the decision to go into business through a cooperative [66]. Among the exogenous factors favouring cooperatives entrepreneurship are the support required to start a new project, the available funds, government programs (supporting cooperatives versus other business initiatives), and the social acceptance of collective employment rather than self-employment [67].

In Spain, the popularity of cooperatives has been growing since the 1990s, endorsing the general discourse enhancing social economy from policymakers in international institutions, mainly at the EU level. Spain is a country with a long co-operative tradition, and in fact it is one of the world’s most dynamic countries in terms of rate of creation, which is higher than other European countries [15]. Regarding this point, Diaz-Foncea and Marcuello [68] noted that the Spanish rate of creation of cooperatives per year (more than 200) notably exceeds those from other European countries, such as United Kingdom (132 per year), France (138), or Finland (62 per year). Moreover, the Spanish government has traditionally enhanced the cooperatives, especially during the recent financial crisis [21,69]. Despite this public support, the number of cooperatives decreased by 12.5% in the decade between 2009 and 2018. However, the number of cooperative’ workers increased from 298,013 to 322,880 (Spanish Business Federation for the Social Economy, CEPES, 2019), which suggests a concentration process rather than a destruction one. More than 80 per cent of Spanish cooperatives are worker-associated cooperatives, with an average turnover at €1.3 million and estimated direct employment of 210,000 people (mostly as members and working partners). These organizations cover

all economic activities, with greater presence in manufacturing and services industries, social services, health, healthcare, and education.

In this context, the number of cooperatives in Galicia has increased by more than 3% since 2010 [70]. Moreover, this region has a long-term tradition on cooperatives [71], and the Galician government has reinforced this trend by ensuring public policies to promote these organisations. Thus, Galicia is the first region to have a legal framework on social economy (SE), which includes cooperatives and cooperatives that contribute by more than 5% to Galicia's GDP [70]. This rate places this region among the most important in the Spanish cooperative sector and configures a suitable scenario to address the research questions. Building on previous literature on women in cooperatives and the characteristics of the Spanish context, this research aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What factors influence women's engagement in cooperatives? (2) What exogenous factors favour women's cooperative entrepreneurship? (3) What are the links between women's engagement in cooperatives and their (a) social and economic expectations and (b) individual needs? (4) What is the perceived value of cooperatives, in relation to female associates' perceptions of (a) equality and (b) work-life reconciliation practices?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Approach

The suggestions of Henry et al. [19] were followed in the design of this research. In their comprehensive review of the research on women's entrepreneurship they underlined that quantitative methods designed to highlight male–female differences predominate, and that a comparative male/female analytical framework prevails. They also found that most research papers on this topic are not sector-specific and highlight that demonstrating how entrepreneurial experiences can differ depending on gender is insufficient. To address this shortcoming, a sector-specific case study focusing on a women-only sample was employed. This decision was made because it is appropriate to investigate nascent and under explored areas of research, such as the case for women with respect to owned cooperatives, through a qualitative and semi-exploratory research process [72]. Accordingly, two distinct but related qualitative and quantitative studies were designed. The first study is qualitative and followed a Delphi design to obtain insights about the factors influencing women's entrepreneurship through cooperatives. To further answer the research questions and test the face validity of the factors emerging from the Delphi study, the second study collected data through an online survey which purposefully targeted female members in cooperatives. The survey contained the factors that emerged from the Delphi study.

A mixed methods approach combining the Delphi method with a larger scale survey is particularly useful to establish a higher degree of accuracy regarding specific and contextualized issues requiring further exploration [73–75]. Furthermore, this methodological approach was successfully used both in other studies of cooperatives and social entrepreneurship orientation, addressing conceptual and sectorial issues [76–81].

#### 3.2. Study 1

Previous research argued that the Delphi analysis can be used for predictive purposes and to explore a topic with unavailable prior information [82–84]. This method combines the advantages of group techniques (different people and points of view, creativity, innovativeness) but without the limitations imposed by the group's pressures. We decided to use this technique as our main objective was to explore an issue without statistical data, and which requires reflection and group analysis.

When constituting the panel of experts, the mandatory guidelines for Delphi's application [74] were followed. A purposive-balanced sample of experts was created, taking into account their different perspectives. Thus, cooperative experts in Spain were first identified by their academic and business expertise in this domain, and then personally invited by the authors. To ensure a broad range of views

towards women's entrepreneurial endeavours and cooperatives one sought to include participants from a sample of experts in the field of cooperative entrepreneurship, including academic researchers, public policymakers, and entrepreneurs in cooperatives. Accordingly, 11 experts (six women and five men) were approached. Then, the experts were asked about what factors may be decisive for women preferring a cooperative model to become entrepreneurs. The Delphi method involves a series of consecutive questionnaires where the former results are provided to respondents after each round of data collection. Anonymity was guaranteed to prevent group thinking, and respondents received the questionnaire via email. They had all the time needed to answer its respective questions. In contrast to other techniques (e.g., focus group) the Delphi method is more accurate and less subject to social biases (e.g., dominance, acquiescence, conformity) because it requires anonymous inputs and successive rounds through which participants can add, clarify, and revise the information exchanged [85]. Also, because the Delphi method emphasizes the information produced through consensus, it is particularly useful to generate a list of factors perceived to influence women's engagement in cooperatives. Therefore, Delphi's results provided a list of factors together with their relative importance. Four main factors were identified, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Study 1: Items grouped by categories.

PC Alignment to cooperative principles	1.	The cooperatives provide mutual aid at different levels: economic, social, and cultural.
	2.	Fair and democratic management, and right to vote on equal terms.
	3.	The cooperatives enhance education and training.
	4.	Primacy of people over capital, prioritisation of social values over economic and financial results.
	5.	Participation in equal conditions.
	6.	Personal adjustment to principles of cooperatives.
IND Individual perception	7.	The cooperative is a model that favours familiar reconciliation and provides affirmative action to enhance shared responsibilities.
	8.	The model adjusts to individual decision-making processes.
	9.	Interest in work relationships.
	10.	Interest in personal relationships.
	11.	The cooperative allows business initiatives that respond to individual needs and expectations (reconciliation, job stability, and democratic participation).
	12.	The model is aimed at people's economic and social needs.
	13.	Perception that collective employment is more beneficial than individual employment.
EQ Equality	14.	The cooperatives favour women's inclusion.
	15.	The cooperatives are organised according to principles against discrimination.
EXO Exogenous Factors	16.	Access to advice and support at the beginning of the entrepreneurship process.
	17.	Access to funding.
	18.	Availability of public support.

The first categories (of greater relevance) included aspects related to the primacy of people in considering results, reconciliation and equality, and items relating to the fit of cooperative principles with individual expectations, as well as certain exogenous drivers (such as unemployment). The other factors included items relating to the philosophy underlying the cooperative model and some of the results relating to the individual results focus, as well as the access to funding sources (one of the exogenous factors).

We recorded the answers given by experts. As shown, after two Delphi rounds, we found 18 answers to our main questions regarding the factors that favour female' preference for cooperatives. Then, we included these 18 answers as questionnaire items into the survey aimed at be sent to the participants. Therefore, the factors resulting from the Delphi method were then used in a first version of the questionnaire that was pilot tested with five cooperative women in order to determine its readability and adequacy. Several amendments were made following the feedback received. The final version was designed to avoid method biases and ascertain the comparability of results between different profiles of potential respondents [86,87], with special attention to the length of the questionnaire, the estimated time for completion, the clarity of the concepts, the items complexity or ambiguity, and the scale anchors. The items were also sorted randomly to minimise the risks of priming and social desirability [86].

### 3.3. Study 2

An online survey was developed to further examine the factors influencing women's entrepreneurship through cooperatives. As shown in Table 1, the survey included 19 items pertaining to four categories: (1) the philosophy underlying the cooperative model; (2) the individual needs and expectations addressed by the cooperative model; (3) equality of opportunities; and (4) external drivers for joining a cooperative. Respondents were asked to name the importance attributed to each item answer following on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) No influence to (7) Very great influence. In addition, the survey contained demographic data (age, sex, and geographical location) and some control variables (the type of cooperative and year of access to membership status). A question about whether or not the respondents had considered another option instead of joining the cooperative was included as well as an open field for suggestions.

An initial database search identified 264 cooperatives created in Galicia since 2010, which formed the target sample of this study. The Galicia region was selected because it is one of the most important provinces in the Spanish cooperative sector, and is such a suitable scenario for the research questions, thus extending recent research in Spain [18,71]. Cooperative representatives were all invited to participate in this research, but eight cooperatives were not available. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. A total of 110 usable responses were obtained, representing a response rate of 42%. However, as the study focuses on the perceptions of female cooperative members; the final sample was limited to the replies of 99 female associates (representing a response rate of 37.5%). Table 2 provides the descriptive information about the cooperatives which survey respondents were from.

**Table 2.** Study 2. Medium size cooperatives and female participation in the sample.

Type of Cooperative	Workers (Mean)	% Women
Agrarian	18	48%
Consumer and users	102	51%
Work-associated	5	65%
Housing	8	53%
No answer/do not know	7	8%

The participants' age averaged 37.95 years (SD = 10.9); and on average, they had spent 5.22 years (SD = 7.08) at their cooperatives. On whole, women represented 48% of the cooperatives' workforce. Most respondents (76%) were involved in work-associate cooperatives and 46.6% were engaged in agrarian collectives. Several participants (38%) acknowledged having made an initial analysis to identify the formula chosen to become entrepreneurs. However, only 28% were sure about the cooperative model, while another 25% admitted having carried out an initial analysis, but under the premise that they were going to become entrepreneurs by using this organizational model. In sum, 53% of the respondents recognized a positive predisposition towards an entrepreneurial venture through this corporate model.

#### 4. Results

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations of the scores awarded to each of the motivating factors. As can be observed, all the items have a high score, above four points (out of seven) on average. Regarding the standard deviation, the highest scores correspond to the exogenous factors. Therefore, it can be inferred that the importance each person gave to these factors had high variability, which was probably inevitable given their subjectivity.

**Table 3.** Study 2: Mean and standard deviation for the 18 motivating items.

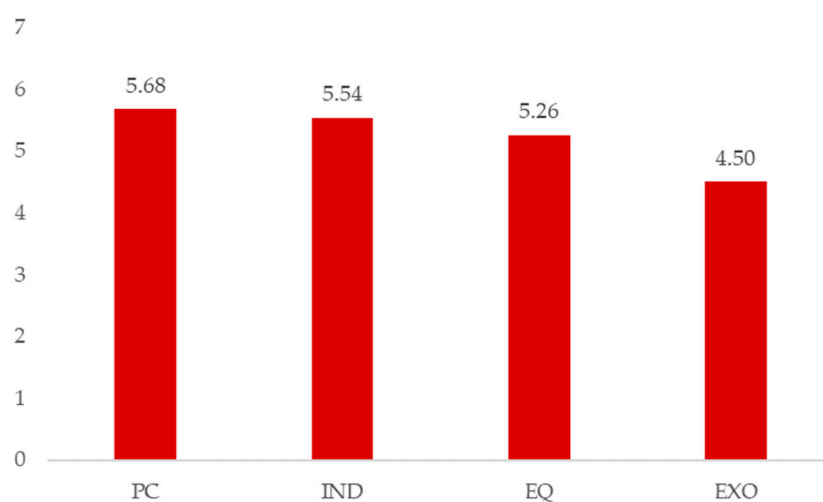
	N	Mean	SD
COL	99	5.14	1.76
GD	99	5.94	1.67
ED	99	4.58	1.78
PP	99	5.92	1.48
PART	99	6.09	1.35
AJPC	99	5.91	1.20
CONCIL	99	5.25	1.93
AJTD	99	6.10	1.40
CRRL	99	5.47	1.47
CRRSS	99	5.35	1.58
NECPEP	99	5.72	1.67
NECECO	99	5.52	1.55
EMPCOO	99	5.45	1.66
IGU	99	5.26	1.81
NDISC	99	5.23	1.74
ASES	99	4.69	1.85
FINANC	99	4.07	1.91
FACIL	99	4.49	1.97

COL: cooperation; GD: democratic management; ED: education and training; PP: people's primacy; PART: Participation in equal conditions; AJPC: adjustment to principles of cooperatives; CONCIL: reconciliation practices; AJTD: adjustment to making decisions; CRRL: quality of human resources management; CRRSS: quality of social relationships; NECPEP; adjustment to individual expectations; NECECO: adjustment to economic and social needs; EMPCOO: perception that collective employment offers better conditions; IGU: equality; NDISC: non-discrimination; ASES: availability of consulting services; FINANC: availability of financial aid; FACIL: availability of public aid to create a cooperative.

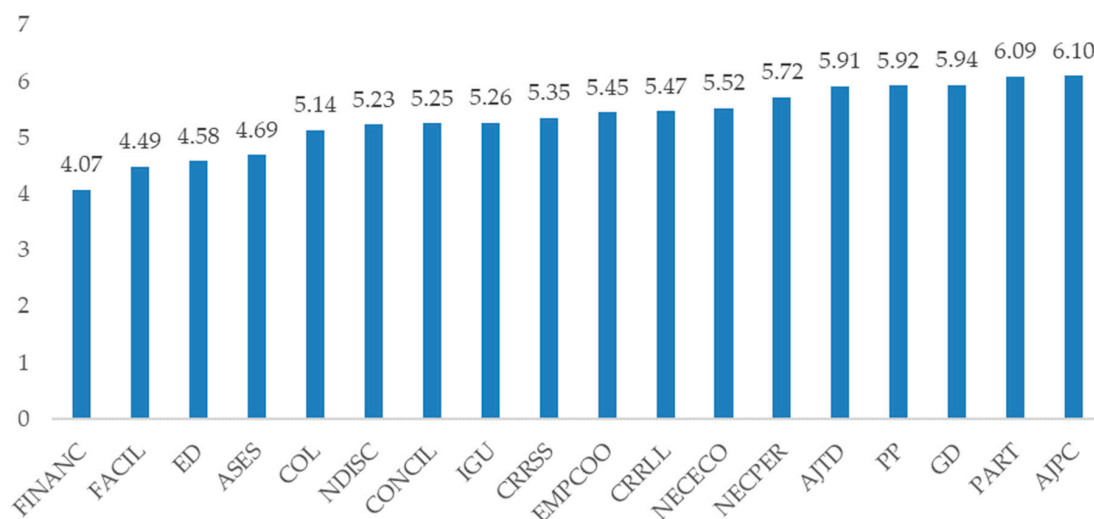
Figure 1 shows that the adjustment to the principles of cooperatives and the participation in conditions of equality were the most valued factors when opting for this particular model, while the exogenous factors (i.e., access to financial sources, institutional aid, initial counselling, and access to education and training), scored least.

The analysis of each individual item revealed that the ones with the highest score related to the perception of the relationship between the cooperative model and the impulse that drew participants to a model that favoured equality, such as in its adjustment to a particular way of making decisions and personal alignment with cooperative principles. As noted earlier, the items linked to the cooperative principles obtained the highest score in driving women's decision to engage in cooperatives. As can be seen in Figure 2, personal fit to cooperative principles was the most valued item. Other values inherent to cooperatives, such as the ability to participate in equal conditions or democratic management, obtained slightly lower scores. The exogenous factors obtained the lowest scores of all.





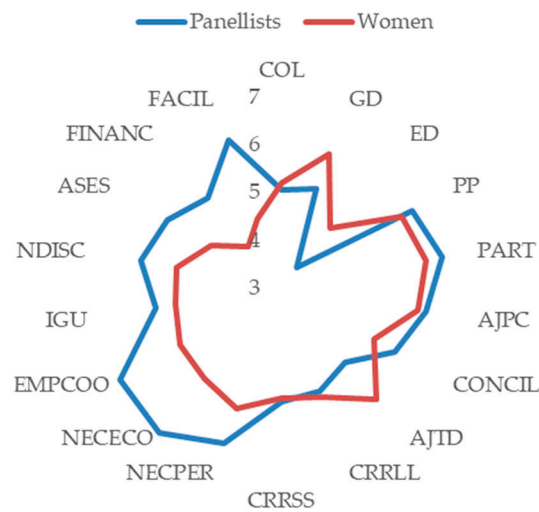
**Figure 1.** Mean and standard deviations for the main motivating factors. Items: PC—the philosophy underlying the cooperative model; IND—individual needs and expectations of the participants; EQ—perceptions of equality; and EXO—external drivers.



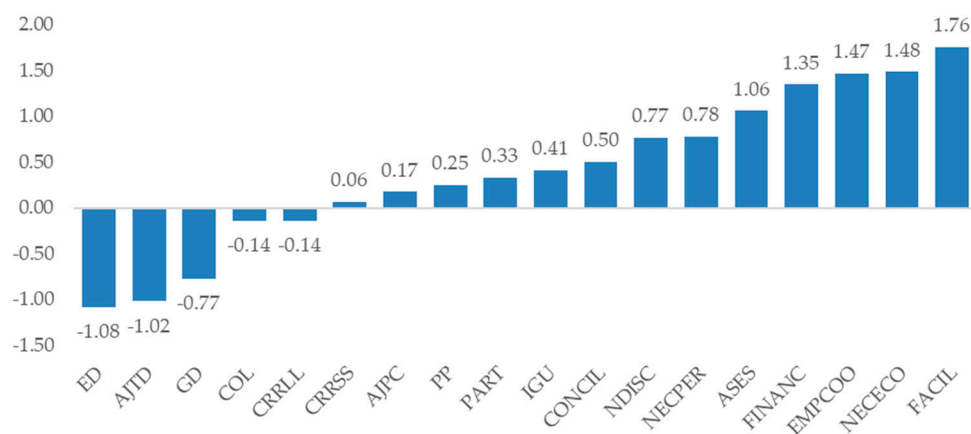
**Figure 2.** Individual scores by item for Study 2. COL: cooperation; GD: democratic management; ED: education and training; PP: people’s primacy; PART: Participation in equal conditions; AJPC: adjustment to principles of cooperatives; CONCIL: reconciliation practices; AJTD: adjustment to making decisions; CRRLL: quality of human resources management; CRRSS: quality of social relationships; NECPER; adjustment to individual expectations; NECECO: adjustment to economic and social needs; EMPCCOO: perception that collective employment offers better conditions; IGU: equality; NDISC: non-discrimination; ASES: availability of consulting services; FINANC: availability of financial aid; FACIL: availability of public aid to create a cooperative.

In comparing the results from the survey to the expectations of the experts reported in the Delphi study, one can observe a few qualitative differences as shown in Figure 3.

As shown, all factors are somewhat influential, according to the results of both groups. However, the group of experts scored higher in all items than the women who answered the survey, except for the person-fit to the cooperative principles, in which the average scores granted by women in cooperatives exceeded those from the panellists. Figure 4 offers a deeper insight into the individual score of each item. In general, the experts attributed higher importance to most factors and this difference of opinion increases as the women’s scores become higher.



**Figure 3.** Results from Study 1 (Delphi) vs. scores of Study 2 (female cooperatives). COL: cooperation; GD: democratic management; ED: education and training; PP: people’s primacy; PART: Participation in equal conditions; AJPC: adjustment to principles of cooperatives; CONCIL: reconciliation practices; AJTD: adjustment to making decisions; CRLL: quality of human resources management: CRRSS: quality of social relationships; NECPER; adjustment to individual expectations; NECECO: adjustment to economic and social needs; EMPCOO: perception that collective employment offers better conditions; IGU: equality; NDISC: non-discrimination; ASES: availability of consulting services; FINANC: availability of financial aid; FACIL: availability of public aid to create a cooperative.



**Figure 4.** Individual difference of means between Study 1 (Delphi) vs. Study 2 (female cooperatives). COL: cooperation; GD: democratic management; ED: education and training; PP: people’s primacy; PART: Participation in equal conditions; AJPC: adjustment to principles of cooperatives; CONCIL: reconciliation practices; AJTD: adjustment to making decisions; CRLL: quality of human resources management: CRRSS: quality of social relationships; NECPER; adjustment to individual expectations; NECECO: adjustment to economic and social needs; EMPCOO: perception that collective employment offers better conditions; IGU: equality; NDISC: non-discrimination; ASES: availability of consulting services; FINANC: availability of financial aid; FACIL: availability of public aid to create a cooperative.

Overall, experts overestimate the importance of exogenous factors in judging others’ decisions to become entrepreneurs through cooperatives. In this group, they granted a score 29.33% higher than that granted by female cooperative associates. The differences in the scores of the items referring the cooperative as an organisation that favours access to training was also relevant. As can be seen in Figure 4, female cooperative associates value this item, on average, one point higher than the experts. Similarly, the dimension of democratic and participatory management of cooperatives (i.e.,

adjustment to decision-making and democratic management) and the results of collaborative work (i.e., collaboration and mutual help, quality of social relations and relationships at work in the cooperative) scored above the expectations of the experts, although with less noticeable differences. Moreover, the panel of experts seemed to underestimate the perception of the cooperative as a model that enhances educational opportunities.

## 5. Discussion

This paper examines the main factors that influence women's entrepreneurship through cooperatives by employing a mixed methods approach. In the Delphi study a panel of experts identified the main factors driving entrepreneurship through cooperatives, while a survey study collected the opinion of 99 female cooperative associates from Galicia, in the north of Spain. As shown, Spanish cooperatives have positively evolved in recent years and this evolution has been coupled by an increase in the participation of women, especially in work associated cooperatives. This suggests that this organizational model offers professional development opportunities for women, who can find in this formula a vehicle for the development of their projects.

In line with these propositions, and in answering the first research question—What factors influence women engagement in cooperatives?—we found that several features of cooperatives positively influence women's preference for this business model. Some factors were related to women's self-perceived fit to the principles of cooperatives (e.g., cooperation, democratic management and participation on equal terms, the primacy of people over capita, and access to education), as well as their effects (e.g. quality of labour relationships, adjustment to individual circumstances and financial needs). This result is interesting because recent research on Spanish cooperatives showed that they are linked to entrepreneurial quality [66], which therefore suggests that cooperatives can foster women's entrepreneurial quality. In other words, women's engagement in cooperatives that subscribe the cooperative philosophy would naturally attain higher levels of entrepreneurial quality [66], with the consequent effects on overcoming the gender gap.

In answering the second research question—What exogenous factors favour women's cooperative entrepreneurship?—the findings reveal that among the most important exogenous factors is the availability of supplemental provisions in the creation of cooperatives, such as lower capital requirements and tax and/or counselling advantages. These exogenous factors are of interest for future research examining the phenomenon of "opting out". Although this label is usually used to address those women choosing to leave their jobs to stay at home with their family, recent research has noted that it should include women without children who "opt out of the dominant career model" [88]. To them, the engagement in cooperatives might be a valuable entrepreneurial alternative. In practice, this would remove the possible underemployment and loss of income affecting women who try to balance work–family requirements, with the consequent effect of overcoming the gender gap.

As shown, the results of the present research provide new insights into female options besides the traditional career model and gendered corporations. In answering the third research question—What are the links between women's engagement in cooperatives and their (a) social and economic expectations and (b) individual needs?—this research sheds light on an alternative way to accomplish women's personal and professional objectives. The authors of [88] noted that women pursue meaning in their work and control over their labour process, and chase a new definition of success. As shown, the cooperative women surveyed sought a new meaning in their work by putting forward collective results and giving primacy to people over financial gains. They cherished the collective values of participatory and cooperative management. In other words, the accomplishment of the cooperative principles gave them the opportunity to control the work process, and through that implement the arrangements that favour their individual needs. The fact that women who take up flexible arrangements (i.e., part-time or temporary work) are at a disadvantage when it comes to taking up their former job, leading them to side-line their professional development [89], is also of primary importance. The women surveyed trust that the cooperative model offers them a friendly way to progress in a professional career while

avoiding the dysfunctional effects from flexible work-life arrangements, such as underemployment, loss of pay, and long-term pension insecurity.

On another note, and regarding the last research question—What is the value of the perceived cooperatives' organizational culture, in relation to women's perceptions of (a) equality and (b) work-life reconciliation practices?—the findings also suggested that women's perceptions of the adequacy of cooperative principles to their individual preferences and the consideration of the model as a vehicle for real equality precedes the influence of external factors that favoured the consolidation of these companies. This is a key finding, since public policies usually aim at providing arrangements, such as lines of credit, financial aid formalised with venture capital or consulting. Nevertheless, these tools seem to be less effective than the promotion of cooperatives as a friendly model for women's professional development. As shown, cooperatives are perceived as beneficial for the achievement of effective equality between women and men, because they are based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Moreover, the findings showed that women recognize an initial predisposition towards this kind of organizational model, and that the perception of both personal and professional development (respectively through the fit to the personal circumstances and the offer of training opportunities within an equality context) were key drivers in determining the choice of this entrepreneurial vehicle. Therefore, communication programs focused on cooperatives can effectively expand this entrepreneurial model, increase women's empowerment, and decrease the gender gap. The findings emphasize the need for responsive policies and programmes that endorse the cooperative model since it promotes female employment and women's entrepreneurial activity even in periods of economic austerity.

### *5.1. Limitations and Implications for Future Research*

We are conscious that this research has a potential limitation, namely is its focus on women, especially in the survey study. However, it was our aim to explore the issues most relevant to women's engagement in cooperatives, which has been overlooked. Moreover, as aforementioned, the self-reported measures used may have been subject to response bias. Although preventive actions were taken to avoid this, it is a limitation that should be considered when analysing the results. In addition, it was considered a single environment, and consequently, a particular set of institutional aids and policies that frame cooperatives in the Galician region. Although this might suggest that the Spanish government and the provincial authorities have institutionalized an ecosystem favourable to women, future studies may collect cross-national data and target employees who have made use of other external provisions, to establish similarities and differences regarding the effects of different exogenous factors.

Our study makes a significant contribution to the social entrepreneurship literature in extending it to the cooperatives with an analysis of the main factors influencing women's engagement in this organizational model. First, it extends the social entrepreneurship literature to consider women's engagement in cooperatives in Spain. In doing so, this research contributes to broader debates on the inclusivity of social entrepreneurship by considering the extent to which women overcome corporate prejudices, surmount institutional barriers, and make economic and social contributions by enhancing their own human potential. Second, it extends the cooperatives literature to consider the experiences of women working in cooperatives, both in the work and agrarian sectors. In this study, the context of cooperatives in Spain is at the forefront in overcoming the most pressing social and economic problems [14,18]. Third, this study presents empirical evidence of the links between women's engagement in cooperatives and their social and economic expectations and individual needs, thus providing insight into a previously overlooked, but important, organizational model. Fourth, in identifying female views on the equality of opportunities (including training) and work-life reconciliation practices permitted by cooperatives, the research highlights the extent to which cooperatives contribute to overcome the gender gap.

## 5.2. Managerial Implications

The findings of this research also have practical implications for cooperatives, policymakers, female entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurship scholars.

To the cooperatives and policymakers, the findings suggest a set of measures that can boost these entrepreneurial ventures, including firstly the improvement of the knowledge of the cooperative model, since more than half of participants recognized an initial predisposition to this model. This seems to indicate that previous knowledge of the model favours its election. Secondly, it is important to raise the visibility of the cooperatives' practices and principles, as more women can perceive their value in fitting their personal circumstances and expectations. Given that flexible work arrangements and partial work time seem to be the most valued practices to favour work–life reconciliation, the dissemination of these cooperatives' best practices may, in turn, boost women's entrepreneurship through their engagement in cooperative ventures. Furthermore, the findings support the initiatives of policymakers that guarantee gender responsiveness, a critical starting point to ensure that corporate managers are sensitized to diversity, equality, and gender issues. In this respect, cooperatives are a referral model to enlighten how the presence of women in decision-making and ownership positions can be welcomed and act as a driver of equality.

The findings of this study also have implications to female entrepreneurs. In fact, the results support women's decisions to initiate an entrepreneurial venture or "opt out" from a corporate career, as the cooperative model best fits women's expectations and work-life values. To those women who are particularly risk-averse, the findings show that the engagement in cooperatives favours female empowerment, especially through training. This finding is of interest, as there is growing evidence that participation in entrepreneurial education and training programmes enhances business self-efficacy [50,51]. While this is a proposition requiring further examination by entrepreneurship scholars who seem to underestimate the value of the cooperative model to enhance educational opportunities, the findings from this study confirm the importance female entrepreneurs attribute to training and to cooperatives to overcome the gender gap.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper aimed to shed light on a young academic field, namely, social entrepreneurship and cooperatives, and more specifically on the role of cooperatives as gendered organisations. Previous research on this topic has noted that certain characteristics of these organisations seem to fit the needs and expectations of an increasing number of women, who value certain individual priorities (e.g., searching for meaning in life, self-directedness, equality of opportunities) and praise their own way of working. In this study, the relevance of certain factors as driving forces of the choice of the cooperative model has been tested in two ways: from a theoretical approach and a confirmation one.

Firstly, the results from the Delphi panel showed that different agents interested in the sector perceived the existence of four groups of factors that are critical to the choice of this corporate formula: (1) the philosophy underlying the cooperative model; (2) individual female needs and expectations; (3) the perception of a model that favours equality; and (4) exogenous drivers. Secondly, the study with female cooperative associates supported the adequacy of the above-mentioned factors in terms of their role as motivators. All in all, this research shows that Spanish women use cooperatives as an entrepreneurial tool because of their personal fit to the values, principles, and working arrangements underlying the cooperative model, assisting them overcome the gender gap.

Attaining equality of opportunities between men and women is a long and arduous path, so further evidence is needed to claim that cooperatives overcome the gender gap. However, in contrast to other business models, cooperatives attend the expectations and interests of their members and are also perceived as having high regard for business ethics. In this respect, female cooperative associates trust that cooperatives have an equality-responsive role that favours gender issues. Within a context where traditional careers are shifting, social entrepreneurship can be viewed as an "equalizer" across social and demographic groups and a potential pathway for women to break existing glass ceilings. In sum,

cooperatives form an ecosystem conducive to women's economic development and are treasured by female associates as an effective tool to accomplish one of the most important Global Sustainable Goals, that is, equal opportunities regardless of gender.

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