

# Co-operative Membership Models That Empower Women

## Findings from Western Canada

Sasha Hanson Pastran

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## Co-operative Membership Models That Empower Women

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## Executive Summary

This report surveys membership models of farmer co-operatives in western Canada and the impact of these structures on women's participation and empowerment within the co-op. The objective of the study is to identify potential innovations in agricultural co-operative membership models that would give women equal opportunity to actively participate in the life of the organization.

While women have become increasingly active in all levels of co-op operations and governance in western Canada, this study identified a number of structural, cultural, and individual barriers to their equal participation, including:

- ambiguity in the voting conventions for joint and corporate memberships
- ambiguous policies relating to the diversity of co-op leadership that may limit women's participation
- a lack of resources and time for women and young people to allocate towards co-operative governance
- enduring cultural values that limit women's participation to the private sphere

Reforms to co-operative membership models may partially address these barriers. This study recommends four initiatives that may contribute to achieving greater gender equality in co-operative participation:

- integrating gender equity principles into the voting rules for joint or corporate memberships
- establishing diversity goals and representative membership policies for co-op leadership positions
- dedicating resources to address individual needs of potential co-op leaders
- continuing outreach and education efforts to co-op members



## Introduction

This report surveys existing models of farmer co-operative membership in western Canada and the impact of these structures on women's participation and empowerment within the co-op. Currently, co-operative memberships range from individual membership in primary co-ops to organizational memberships in second-tier federated co-ops; the different models influence women's participation in various ways (Fox 2009, 15). While women have become increasingly active in all levels of co-operative operations and governance in western Canada, this study identified a number of structural, cultural, and individual barriers to women's participation that may be partially addressed with reforms to co-op membership structures. The purpose of this study is to identify potential innovations in agricultural co-op membership models that will give both women and men equal opportunities to actively participate in the life of the co-operative.<sup>1</sup>

The research results are based on primary interviews with representatives from regional co-operative associations and agricultural development organizations in western Canada. The project was developed in consultation with and for the benefit of the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) and is relevant to other international development, civil-society organizations, and nonprofit groups that are engaged in gender empowerment work. Specifically, the research results will inform CCA's gender strategy for their Colombia IMPACT project, with the goal of providing recommendations to partners for promoting models of farmer co-op membership that empower women.<sup>2</sup> This research was made

1. In the co-operative context, "active participation" means that members are involved in all functions of co-operatives, including planning, decision making, finance, and management (CCA 2014).
2. This report adopts the CCA's definition of "empowerment," as follows: "Empowerment is about people ... taking control of their lives; setting their own agendas, gaining skills, building self-confidence, solving problems and developing self-reliance. It is not only a collective, social, and political process, but an individual one as well — and it is not only a process but an outcome too" (CCA 2014).

possible through the Carleton Centre for Community Innovation Graduate Fellowship award, under the supervision of Professor Tessa Hebb and with the approval of the Carleton University Research Ethics Board.

After providing an overview of the research methods and case study, the report describes typical membership models and decision-making structures in western Canadian farmer co-operatives. It goes on to identify common barriers to women's participation in these co-ops, as well as examples of practices that have increased the opportunities for women and men to participate equally in their co-operative. The final section summarizes the lessons and best practices that the research offers to other co-operatives for supporting women to become equal and active members of their co-operative. Findings and recommendations will be presented as they relate to and advance CCA's Colombia IMPACT project gender strategy.

## Methods

I collected data for this study through semi-structured qualitative interviews with four women in the western Canadian co-operative movement. I selected participants through snowball sampling based on their roles as current/past female board members, membership engagement co-ordinators, and gender experts in farmer co-ops and other rural co-operative associations in western Canada. Appendix A contains a full list of participants and interview questions. With participants' consent, I took notes during the interviews and, with their approval, used attributable paraphrases in this report. I also applied a content analysis to the interview data to identify patterns as well as deviant data from the sample.

Academic and grey literature fills in gaps in the data. Although the data collection method does not lend itself to generalizable conclusions, it was chosen as an efficient and apt way to learn widely applicable lessons from female leaders with years of experience in Canada's co-operative movement.

## Description of Case

To set the context for the project, this section summarizes key statistics on agricultural co-ops and women in co-ops in Canada. According to a study commissioned by the CCA, there are approximately 1,340 agricultural co-ops in Canada, with more than 325,000 active members and nearly 30,000 employees (Fox 2009, 13). These co-ops generated approximately \$12 billion in revenue in 2009 and collectively own nearly \$4.8 billion in assets (Fox 2009, 13). Very little sex-segregated data is available for

women's participation in Canadian co-operatives overall, yet several studies provide cursory evidence of the status of women in Canada's co-op sector. A 2008 survey of 115 Canadian co-ops, for instance, found that 27 percent of director positions on co-op boards are held by women and more than two-thirds of co-ops (68 percent) have at least one woman on their board (Brown Governance 2008). Although the authors of the Brown Governance report note that there are twice as many women board members in co-ops as in the corporate sector, they also observe that the proportion of women on co-op boards seems to have plateaued at approximately 30 percent in Canada. Another, albeit much earlier, study that surveyed CCA's co-op members found that women make up approximately 30 percent of Canadian co-op management, but they are concentrated at the junior level and their salaries are only 77 percent that of men in co-op management positions (Theis and Hammond Ketilson 1994).

None of the four co-operatives associated with the research participants currently collects sex-segregated, quantitative data on membership, participation, or equity payments, but participants estimated that "about half" of their co-op members and annual general meeting delegates are women. Two interviewees also noted the increasing diversity of their co-op boards of directors in terms of gender as well as other factors such as age, although this was not a consistent finding from all research participants. Overall, the aggregate studies and the study sample suggest that while women make up about half of co-operative membership, they remain underrepresented in co-operative governance and leadership positions in Canada.

## Findings

This study consisted of four, one-hour interviews conducted between July and September 2015, with the intention of learning about women's experiences in the western Canadian co-op sector. Below are the findings from the interviews as they relate to co-op membership models and women's participation in co-ops. After describing the membership models and governance structures of the sampled co-operatives, I analyze the structural, cultural, and individual challenges to women's participation in co-operatives, as well as the strategies the research participants used to overcome some of these issues.

### Membership and Governance Structures in Western Canadian Co-operatives

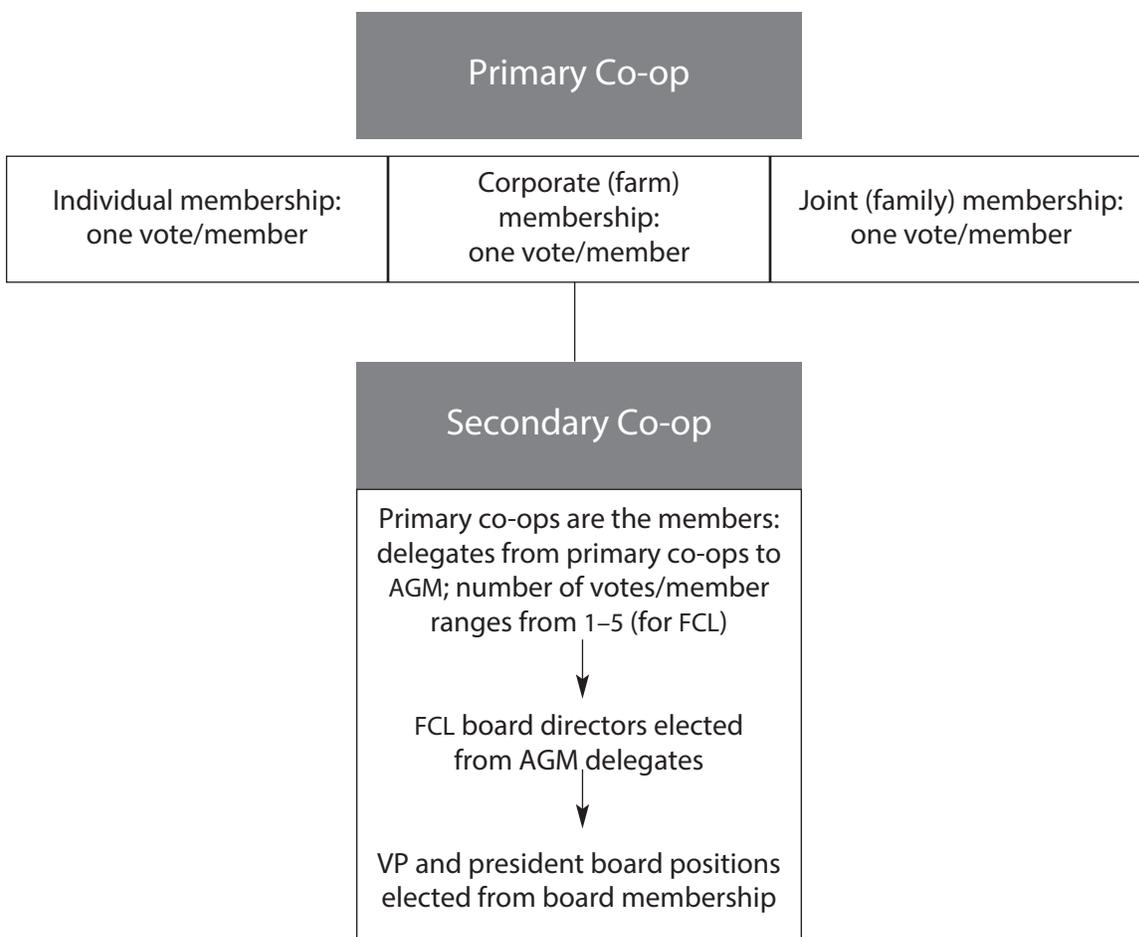
The four western Canadian farmer and retail co-ops represented in the survey sample typically employ mixed membership models with combinations of individual memberships; joint memberships that are shared between two heads of a household; and corporate (organizational) memberships. Central Plains Co-op also offers low-cost youth memberships, which convert into individual memberships after the member turns eighteen years old. The membership for Federated Co-operatives Limited (FCL), a second-tier co-operative, is made up of 212 retail co-ops across Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool (SWP) co-operative membership model became somewhat unique in 1996, when it began trading a portion of its members' dividends as shares on the Toronto Stock Exchange before fully converting to a corporation in 2005 (Fulton and Lang 2006). Since many of the co-ops surveyed were more than fifty years old (Fox 2009, 16), none of the participants could confirm if different membership models were considered at the time their co-operative was incorporated.

Co-operative governance operates under the principal of democratic member control, which ideally translates into the active participation of members in the electoral and policy decision-making processes of the co-operative. Flowing from this principle, co-operative members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) for decisions at annual general meetings (AGMs) in most primary co-operatives, including in the farmer and retail co-ops surveyed in this study. The one-member, one-vote rule is the norm whether the membership is for an individual, a family (joint membership), or a corporate member, and there is typically only one membership fee for all types of memberships. In a joint membership, both parties are registered with the co-op, and any shareholder of a company can represent the corporate membership. In the case of joint and corporate memberships with multiple parties, therefore, each vote is allocated to only one of the parties of that membership.

FCL's democratic structure operates differently because it is a second-tier co-op whose membership is comprised of primary co-operatives. The retail co-ops participate in FCL's governance by sending delegates to the organization's annual general meeting. The number of delegates ranges from one to five, depending on the value of the individual co-op's pur-

chases from FCL. At the AGM, the delegates elect the board of directors according to fifteen geographically demarcated electoral districts. The fifteen directors then elect a president, a vice-chair, and five region chairs from amongst themselves (FCL 2009). Western Canadian membership and governance structures are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Co-operative Membership and Governance Flow Chart



Women in Co-operative Governance:  
Challenges and Strategies towards Equal Participation

*Structural Barriers Related to the Models of Co-operative Membership*

One of the factors in the sampled membership models that may limit women's equal participation is the allocation of one vote for joint membership in primary co-ops. The data on this model showed that it facilitated at least partial gender segregation along traditionally female and male spheres in rural life. Interviewee Jocelyn VanKoughnet, who is on both FCL's and Carman Co-op's board of directors, observed that while there was an overall balance of women and men at Carman Co-op's AGM, voting tended to break down along gendered lines. If the decision related to the grocery store, for example, women voted more often because they do the majority of the shopping in the community, whereas the men are more likely to vote on matters related to the co-op's agricultural business. This theme of gender-segregated decision making ran through all of the interviews, although several participants noted that the situation is changing rapidly as women become more involved in agricultural business and in leadership positions within their co-ops and communities. Although not generalizable, these observations suggest that the ambiguity around negotiating votes in the joint membership structure sometimes results in a gendered pattern of participation in co-ops. To mitigate the challenges of assigning one vote to multiple parties in a joint membership, research participants reported that farm couples often have both a farm/corporate membership and individual or joint personal memberships. One person then votes with the corporate membership, while the other votes with the individual/joint personal membership. While this ensures that each party can vote, ambiguity remains with regard to how these votes are allocated.

At the secondary co-op level, women's participation may potentially be limited by the fact that there is no requirement for AGM delegations to proportionally represent the diversity of their primary membership. This has obvious consequences for the pool of potential leadership positions in the secondary co-op. FCL does not currently have any specific guidelines for the delegate selection process, nor does the organization provide any particular criteria regarding the composition of the board other than the mandate for board members to represent their geographical district. In fact, none of the participants in this study identified

any codified or explicit diversity and/or gender-based goals in the membership or governance policies of their co-ops, but at the same time, they also had no particular enthusiasm for the idea of gendered quota mandates or other formal equity policies. Instead, respondents emphasized the importance of informal efforts to ensure diverse and representative co-operative governance through targeted recruitment of women to run for leadership positions on co-op boards and in management.

### *Cultural Barriers to Women's Equal Participation in Co-operatives*

In addition to the structural challenges outlined above, interviewees observed that traditional, male-dominated, rural cultural values also acted as a barrier to women's equal participation in their co-operatives. As an illustration, Ferne Nielsen described the condescending and dismissive treatment she received when she attempted to break the gender norms of her day by engaging in co-operative governance. She was told to "be quiet" after expressing concerns about SWP's financial position at the AGM; she was treated with mistrust when she first attempted to secure a loan from her credit union to buy land in her own name; and she was initially denied a membership in the SWP because her husband already possessed one. Despite these challenges, Nielsen eventually became the first and only woman to be a director, and later the vice-president, of the SWP in its more than eighty-year history.

Ferne Nielsen's pioneering role in the western Canadian co-operative movement is deserving of focused attention for the lessons her story can offer about overcoming cultural barriers to women's participation in co-operative governance processes. As a young woman, Nielsen struggled to find confidence in her technical and leadership abilities, yet she felt driven, and dedicated herself to learning the skills required for co-operative leadership. In her words, "The onus is on women to step up and be the best person they can on the board." She actively combatted what she saw as unjustifiable opulence in the "old boys club" of the SWP board of directors. Nielsen explained that although women may have been scrutinized more than men on traditionally all-male boards, her strategy was to approach this skepticism about women's leadership in co-op governance with a strong commitment to the values of integrity, accountability, and service. Her intent was to reinforce co-operative values that may become muted with strongly entrenched and nondiversified power structures. And indeed, Nielsen noted a cultural shift in the later years of her co-op career, when

she was treated with the same respect accorded to her male colleagues as a board member and vice-president, albeit after years of “proving herself” as a competent female leader.

Other interviewees echoed several of the themes in Ferne Nielsen’s story — the cultural and individual challenges to women’s empowerment within co-ops as well as the strategies to overcome barriers to women’s participation. Respondents frequently cited lack of confidence in technical and leadership abilities as a psychological barrier to participation, but also repeatedly identified targeted education and training as an effective strategy to overcoming this barrier, an approach that aligns with CCA’s gender strategy. Participants also emphasized the efficacy of focusing women’s empowerment efforts on “deepening co-operative democracy” by recruiting competent, diverse individuals to run for co-op boards that may be accustomed to election by acclamation. Interviewee Marilyn McKee, an FCL director, noted how difficult it may be to confront old-school male board members of primary co-ops whom she has heard declare “the day a woman is elected to the board is the day I quit.” She noted, however, that peer pressure and isolation have been effective strategies to combat this type of entrenched sexism. Access to land title, credit, and the option of individual co-op membership were also important elements in Ferne Nielsen’s and many other women’s experience. These findings align with CCA’s IMPACT gender strategy and buttress the evidence in support of a rights- and education-based approach to women’s co-operative empowerment.

#### *Individual Barriers to Co-operative Participation*

Participants also identified individual barriers to women’s equal participation in co-ops, including a lack of time and resources to commit to co-op board governance. Marilyn McKee, for instance, estimated that her position on FCL’s board consumed sixty to eighty days per year. Although co-op board positions are compensated financially, McKee noted that the significant time commitment tends to attract economically stable, self-employed, and retired people because others simply do not have the means to balance co-op board governance with their other responsibilities. Another interviewee’s personal experience of how time and resource barriers affected her co-op governance decisions may help to illustrate this point. When, Karen Timoshuk, who is currently a director on the board of Central Plains Co-op, moved to Harris, Saskatchewan, she was asked to run for two credit union boards. Caring for an infant at the time, Timoshuk inquired into childcare provisions for board members. Although both organizations were financially able, the rural credit union

did not offer childcare, while the urban one did. This gave her an incentive to run for the urban board, although ultimately she chose not to after further consideration of the time required for travel. Clearly, variables such as childcare, travel, and time commitment affect individual decisions to run for co-operative boards.

Low attendance at AGMs is a related, broader issue that affects women's participation in co-operative governance. Jocelyn VanKoughnet described how many members view the AGM as a formality, and unless the co-op is in a challenging financial position or set to make a significant change, members do not attend. In her words, "They do not seem to have an adequate understanding of co-operative principles or the co-operative model of governance. In general, people aren't aware of who is on the board or that they can run as members. To many people, the co-op is just a store." Karen Timoshuk added that sometimes co-op boards and management view members as consumers rather than members in their own right. Participants unanimously agreed that member education, outreach and engagement, and co-op youth programs were effective practices for increasing participation because they reinforce what makes the co-operative model different from a corporate business model.

In summary, structural challenges in co-operative membership models and broader cultural and individual barriers affect women's ability to participate equally with men in co-ops. These include a lack of flexibility in the votes for joint membership, traditional values that maintain women's roles in the private sphere, and a lack of resources and time for women and young people to allocate to co-operative governance. The following section will outline strategies and practices to overcome these barriers.

## Recommendations

This section summarizes some key lessons about membership models and effective practices that may increase women's opportunities to participate equally with men in rural co-operatives. In the final section, I align the recommendations from this study with CCA's Colombia IMPACT project gender strategy.

1. There is a critical need for baseline data on indicators of women's empowerment in order to make strategic decisions for increasing their full and equal membership and participation in co-operatives. A lack of gendered information on these indicators in western Canadian co-ops is currently a barrier to effective analysis; increasing the information

could offer significant opportunities for improvement. Gender-disaggregated evaluations is a key component of CCA's IMPACT project gender strategy.

2. As noted above, the ambiguous voting policies of joint and corporate memberships affect women's participation in co-ops. A two-vote system for joint memberships would provide equal opportunities for both heads of household to attend AGMs and to participate actively in co-op governance decisions, although this would break the "one-member, one vote" principle enshrined in Canada's co-operative law so it is unclear if this is a viable option (Petrou 2013). The best practices identified to mitigate this ambiguity were cases where joint memberships in primary co-ops are complimented by individual co-op memberships, which ensures that each party has the option to vote in co-op AGMs. Educating co-op members on gender equity principles when negotiating co-op votes is also recommended, as is removing traditional requirements for co-op membership such as land title, an approach that is, in fact, widely practised in Canada.
  3. There is currently little direction from secondary co-op leadership regarding representative governance, which is a serious structural issue. Second tier co-ops should review their policies governing the selection of AGM delegates and encourage primary co-ops to implement open, transparent, and representative delegate selection processes. This recommendation is especially pertinent to co-operatives that are experiencing challenges in attracting women to attend AGMs.
  4. Low or no cost "youth memberships" for young people, which become full individual memberships once the person is of legal age, might help to address the broader issue of low co-op participation and knowledge and therefore indirectly affect women's participation. Youth memberships would help to engage and educate members by creating a pool of potential participants for co-operative youth programs — programs that enhance leadership skills, co-op knowledge, and co-operative values among youth<sup>3</sup> — and other co-op member benefit programs that, in turn, can have lasting impacts on individual commitments to co-operative development (Intersol 2010). Perhaps a similar model could be applied to women. A "women's membership" would be the same as an individual membership but would be "gender branded" to attract women in situations where female membership is low.
3. For more information on co-operative youth programs, visit <http://sask.coop>

5. In response to individual barriers to participation, co-op boards could explore providing additional resources to support potential board members who may have specific challenges to overcome. Resources could include training manuals, mentorship opportunities, child-care services, travel funds, online meeting options, or a general “enabling fund” to address other individualized barriers to co-op leadership participation.
6. Participants identified outreach, engagement, and education as the most effective strategies for deepening democracy and enhancing participation by both women and men in co-operative governance. This could take the form of information pamphlets to new members, social media outreach and information campaigns, and dedicated member engagement staff. Participants also emphasized the importance of mentorship by women who are already co-op leaders to aid new recruits in navigating the politics and challenges of co-operative governance.

#### Alignment of Recommendations with CCA’s IMPACT Project Gender Strategy

Many of the findings and recommendations in this report have a long history in the CCA’s gender and development policies and align well with the gender strategy of the Colombia IMPACT project in particular. There are clear lessons from the Colombia project that may aid western Canadian co-operatives, as well as learnings for Colombian co-ops from those in western Canada. For example, the IMPACT gender strategy promotes the collection of gender and age disaggregated data on co-op membership, participation in co-operative governance activities, and economic outcomes. Employing this policy in Canada could enhance the capacity of co-op membership models to empower women, and I have recommended gender-disaggregated data collection for western Canadian co-ops.

Western Canadian co-operatives should also recognize the need for and potential efficacy of the formal gender equity policies recommended in the Colombian project. CCA contextualizes this in its IMPACT gender strategy through a detailed discussion of the “triple roles” of women — productive, reproductive, and community work. This study’s findings corroborate the observation that overwork is an ongoing barrier to women’s equal participation in co-operatives. Participants came to conclusions similar to those in the IMPACT project on the strategies to overcoming this barrier, citing the need for men to take equal responsibility for reproductive tasks as more women take on productive tasks outside the home. Parti-

Participants in this study also emphasized building networks of support in rural communities to share reproductive and community governance responsibilities, which is a strength of women in the co-operative movement in Colombia (CCA 2014). Overall, gender equity policies that address barriers to participation in reproductive, productive, and community spheres seem to be an appropriate response in both the Canadian and Colombian context.

Colombian co-operatives can take lessons from the innovative Canadian youth memberships and co-op youth programs, which have proven to increase the participation of both men and women in co-operative life (SCA 2015). The CCA has supported leadership programs for youth in the past, such as the 2012 You-LEAD exchange program between Canadian and Ghanaian young people, as well as long-standing provincial co-operative youth programs across Canada (SCA 2012). This recommendation could be incorporated into the IMPACT project to compliment and strengthen other areas of the strategy that are targeted towards adult co-op members.

More generally, this study provides further evidence to support CCA's assessment that factors such as access to land should not become a barrier to co-operative membership. This was an issue in Ferne Nielsen's case and is also evident in the Colombian context. This study supports CCA's approach — providing financial and technical support for women to hold land title if desired and assisting them to acquire the skills to participate equally and actively in the life of the co-op — which benefits all co-op members.

The recommendations in this report also align with CCA's emphasis on women's mentorship and direct engagement in order to promote women's empowerment within co-operatives. In summary, this study adds further evidence for the efficacy of providing resources, education, and rights-based training for women in order to address the structural, cultural, and individual barriers to their equal participation in co-operatives and communities.

## Conclusions

This report has analyzed the membership models and governance structures of western Canadian co-operatives and recommended innovative solutions that could enhance opportunities for women and men to participate actively in their co-operatives. I have argued that there are structural issues such as one vote for joint memberships and ambiguous policies relating to the diversity of co-op leadership that may

limit women's participation. I have also suggested that traditional cultural values and individual barriers such as lack of time have had a similar effect. These problems can be addressed in a number of ways:

- establishing diversity goals and representative membership policies for co-op leadership positions;
- implementing flexible voting rules for joint or organizational memberships;
- dedicating resources to address individual needs of potential co-op leaders; and
- directing ongoing outreach and education efforts to co-op members.

## Appendix A: Research Participants and Data Collection Method

### Research Participants

Sample gathered through snowball sampling method:

**Karen Timoshuk** — director, board of governors, Central Plains Co-op; former public engagement co-ordinator (western Canada), Canadian Co-operative Association; interviewed 29 July 2015

**Marilyn McKee** — director, Regina region chair, Federated Co-operatives Limited; director, board of governors, Southland Co-operative Association; interviewed 16 September 2015

**Jocelyn VanKoughnet** — director, District 14, Federated Co-operatives Limited; director, board of governors, Carman Co-op; interviewed 18 September 2015

**Ferne Nielsen** — only woman to ever sit as a director and vice-president on board of governors of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool; interviewed 23 September 2015

### Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews around the following set of primary and secondary interview questions:

1. Please describe your co-operative's current membership model and the decision-making process (the timeline, actors, criteria, and deliberations) that your co-operative used to adopt its current membership model.
  - a. Were other models considered? If so, why were they discarded in favour of your existing model?

2. Does your model include diversity as a goal?
  - a. How do you ensure all members of the community are represented?
  - b. Have you needed special programs or goals to achieve diversity in your model?
3. How many women are members of your co-operative?
  - a. If women are not individual members, how are women represented in your co-operative's membership?
4. Please describe women's participation in the activities and decision-making processes of your co-operative. How would you describe the relationship between your co-operative membership model and the level of women's participation in the co-operative?
  - a. Has your co-operative considered the membership model as a contributing factor to women's participation in the co-operative?
5. What would you describe as the barriers to women's participation in your co-operative?
  - a. What steps has your organization taken to reduce the barriers to women's participation in the co-operative?
  - b. Does your co-operative include gender-based analyses in annual evaluations?
  - c. Does your co-operative have gender-based outcome goals?
6. What lessons have you learned that other co-operatives can potentially benefit from in terms of membership models that engage women within the co-operative?

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